



John Muir Correspondence (PDFs)

1899-07-01

Letter from John Muir to [Charles A.] Keeler, [ca. 1899 Jul].

John Muir

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see us as soon as you get back of the wood

THE DIAL
Send me the book you are referring to
I will be glad to receive it
Yours truly
Dr. Merriam

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notice at this time, since the new edition announces itself the fifty-sixth thousand. It differs from its predecessors by the inclusion of forty-eight colored plates after the water-color sketches by Miss Elsie Louise Shaw, uncolored pictures of the same flowers contained in former editions being omitted here, and almost as many new ones being added from the faithful flower portraits of Miss Marion Satterlee. The text stands as it did seven years ago, and the book in its present form leaves little to be desired.

Miss Alice Lounsberry's "Guide to the Trees" and Mrs. Harriet L. Keeler's "Our Native Trees" differ chiefly in the personal equation of the two writers. Both give, with all the fulness desirable, the means whereby component members of American forests can be distinguished one from another, and their names ascertained with the least amount of trouble. In addition to this groundwork, which includes a complete description of the tree in all its details,—bark, leaves, flowers, and fruit,—Miss Lounsberry's book contains a great number of colored and black-and-white pictures and diagrams made by Mrs. Ellis Rowan, and a brief introduction by Dr. N. L. Britton. Mrs. Keeler's work is illustrated by reproductions of photographs direct from nature, most of them of leaves and fruit, but with many drawings of details. It is a work which is less formal than the other, and with more of the literary quality. Quite as instructive, it sets forth the technicalities in popular language, while the photographs of leaves serve a better purpose in the process of identification. Either of the books is a desirable addition to the library.

Mr. Charles A. Keeler is already well known for his delightful writings after the manner of a Californian Thoreau, and "Bird Notes Afeld" will enhance his reputation both as a man of letters and of science. He deals with the birds of the Pacific coast more particularly, and his statement of the differences and resemblances of these with the feathered folk of regions nearer the rising sun makes very delightful reading. Many of his studies have been made in the vicinity of Berkeley, for which the pleasant book of Miss Eva V. Carlin, published more than a year ago, serves as an introduction. He tells of the domestic life of the hummingbird, as follows:

"If you have the good fortune to have discovered an unfinished nest, you may observe the mother bird's methods of work. She settles upon it and rounds it

with her breast. Seemingly with difficulty the head is raised and the long, slender beak arranges here and there a bit of lichen, bark, or cobweb in its proper place on the outside. Thus she works until the compact little structure of softest thistle-down, covered on the outside with small fragments of moss, lichen, bark, and similar materials, is ready to receive the invariable two white eggs. In due course of time the most helpless young imaginable are hatched, to be tended with unremitting care. They soon grow so large that their diminutive home can scarcely contain them until, at last, from the sheer physical necessity of overcrowded quarters, they are forced to essay a flight. Wonderful, indeed, is the domestic life of these smallest of birds, in whose minute frame is compacted so much of intelligence and passion — so much that we fondly claim as human."

In abrupt contrast with this may be taken the paper on "Patrolling the Beach," in which nature in her most ferocious aspect, after a storm at sea, is followed in her work of devastation. The book, which is most attractively designed, concludes with a key whereby the various birds of California may be differentiated and identified, the arrangement being such that no scientific knowledge is required for its use.

"Bird Homes," by Mr. Radclyffe Dugmore, is such a book as every lover of birds must welcome, since it really admits the reader into the privacy of their family life. It is, moreover, an eloquent plea for acquaintance with our tiny neighbors as the best means of preserving them from the cruelties which make us ashamed of the name of human. One or two of the instances Mr. Dugmore cites are quite too harrowing for repetition here. But such a paragraph as this is worth taking to heart:

"I think any woman who had seen a mother-thrush on the nest, with her anxious, wild little eyes looking out in fear of the intruder, could never again wear a stuffed bird as a hat ornament, to be used for a short month or two and then thrown away. For herein lies, perhaps, the chief cause of the partial extermination of our birds, both those that are sombre in color (for they can be dyed to any desired shade) and those that are by nature of brilliant hues. And who gains by this cruel sacrifice to a heartless fashion save the dealers?"

A similar warning is addressed to the boy who begins an egg collection. Instructions are given which will enable the eggs to be taken without inflicting the birds with calamity, but a still stronger argument is made for observing the conduct of the young when hatched. It is to descriptions of this sort, admirably illustrated by instantaneous photographs in reproduction of the birds, old and young, in various stages of home building and family rearing, that the book is chiefly devoted; and no better argument for the use of a camera instead of a

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