10-26-1881


John Muir

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmb

Recommended Citation
https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/jmb/182
IN PLOVER BAY.

Reindeer Farming on the Arctic Shores of Siberia.

Graphical Description of Reindeer Farmers and their Flocks.

Glacier Grooving—Desolate Appearance of the Land.

[Special Correspondence of the Bulletin.]

PLOVER BAY, SIBERIA, August 26, 1881.

This morning a party from the ship went to the head of the bay under the guidance of a pair of Tchonchkis to see a flock of reindeer that they told us was there. The distance, we found, is about eighteen miles from the lower harbor, where the Corwin is at anchor. The day was fine and we enjoyed the sail very much, chiming rapidly along in the steam launch over smooth water, past the huge ice-sculptured headlands and mountains, forming the walls, and the deep canons and valleys between them, sweeping back to clusters of glacial fountains, the naturalist making desolate efforts now and then to obtain specimens of rare anas, petrels, ducks, etc., which were flying and swimming about us in great abundance, making lively pictures of happy, celestial life.

Desolate Appearance of the Land.

The rocks bounding the bay, though beautiful in their combinations and coalescences of curves and peaks, following and touching delicately, and rising in bold, picturesque groups, are, nevertheless, intensely desolate-looking for want of trees, shrubs or vegetation dense enough to give color to certain quantities visible at a distance. Even the valleys opening back from the water here and there, are mostly bare as seen at the distance of a mile or two, and have only faint images of green derived from dwarf willows, and sedges, and beat grass creeping low among stones. Yet here, or in the larger valleys adjacent, where the main tributary glaciers came into the Plover Bay trunk, and others to the northeastward, lie flocks of reindeer, finding sustenance, wild as at home, together with a few wild sheep and bears.

Reindeer Farmers.

On the terminal moraine of the ancient glacier that formed the first main tributary of the Plover Bay glacier, some four miles from the extreme head of the bay, we noticed two small skin-covered huts, which our guides informed us belonged to the reindeer people we were seeking, and that we should certainly find them at home, because their flock was only a little one and found plenty of weeds and grass to eat in the valleys back of them without going far away, as the people had to do who owned big flocks. At two miles' distance, they said, where the valleys are wide and green, with plenty to eat, there is a big flock belonging to some of their friends, so big they cover all the ground themselves, but the flock we were to see was only a little flock, and the owner was not a rich man.

As we approached the shores a hundred yards or so from the huts, a young man came running to meet us, bounding over the moraines, bowing, and greating as though his limbs had been trained on the mountains for many a year, until running had become a pleasant indulgence. He was presently joined by three others, who gazed and smiled curiously at the steam-launch and at our party, wonderingly suspicously, when the interpreter had told our object, why we should come so far and seem so eager to see their dear. Our guide, who, of course, understood their prejudices and superstitions, told them that we wanted a bag, fleet, deer to eat, and that we would pay them well for it—to-bear, lead, powder, caps, shot, calico, knives, etc., told off in tempting orders just as they said they had none to sell, and it required half an hour of courteous negotiation to get them over their suspicions alarms and consent to sell the carcass of one provided we would leave the skin, which they said they wanted to keep for winter garments. Then two young men, fast, strapping, elastic fellows, threw off their upper garments, tied their handkerchiefs emblazoned moccasins firmly across the instep and around the ankle, poised their long Russian spears, which they said they always carried in case they should meet a bear or wolf, and away they sped after the flock up a long, wide glacier valley along the bank of a stream, bounding lightly from rock to rock in easy steps, and across soft bits of muskeg and rough sandy stream with hour hearing undulating signals. Their gait, as far as we could see, was steadily maintained and admirably like and strong, and graceful to their small feet and ankles, and round-tapered hands showing to fine advantage in their driving bursts and moccasins as they went speeding over the ground like trained racers gliding in their strength. We watched them through field-glasses until they were about three miles away, during which time they did not appear to slacken their pace a single moment. They were gone about three hours, so that the flock must have been at least six or seven miles from the huts.

[This page intentionally left blank.]

"Corwin"

Katiusca, October 26, 1881.
Written, Aug. 26, 1881

Pub. Oct. 28

"Corwin"

After I arrived at Nome in the last boat of the season, I made a visit to the "Augusta " and her sister, the "Maid of Alaska," two vessels home from California, and I witnessed the unloading of their cargoes. The weather was fine and the harbor calm. The vessels were well loaded and the crew were busy. The "Augusta " was the first vessel to arrive, and she was followed by the "Maid of Alaska." The former was under the command of Captain J. H. M. Smith, and the latter under the command of Captain J. W. Johnson.

The "Augusta " was a small schooner, about 90 feet long, with a displacement of 500 tons. She was built for the purpose of carrying fish and supplies to the interior of Alaska. The hull was of iron, and the superstructure was of wood. The vessel was well arranged for fishing, and was equipped with a number of boats and nets. The crew consisted of 30 men, and the officers were experienced in the methods of fishing.

The "Maid of Alaska " was a larger vessel, about 120 feet long, with a displacement of 800 tons. She was built for the purpose of carrying fish and supplies to the interior of Alaska. The hull was of iron, and the superstructure was of wood. The vessel was well arranged for fishing, and was equipped with a number of boats and nets. The crew consisted of 40 men, and the officers were experienced in the methods of fishing.

The unloading of the cargoes was well under way, and the crew were busy. The fish were hauled on deck and sorted, and the supplies were unloaded. The cargo consisted of a large amount of salmon fish, which were landed in good condition.

The weather was fine and the harbor calm. The vessels were well loaded and the crew were busy. The "Augusta " was the first vessel to arrive, and she was followed by the "Maid of Alaska." The former was under the command of Captain J. H. M. Smith, and the latter under the command of Captain J. W. Johnson.
much in some specimens as do, "lri Aug. 26, 1881.

Sheep are killed and hung in loose shreds about the heads of some of them, producing a singular appearance, as if they had been fighting a race. The so-called velvet is a close, soft, downy fur, black in color, and very fine and silky, about three-eighths or half an inch long, with a few hairs nearly an inch in length rising stiffly here and there over the general shaggy surface. All the horns and, its branches are covered, giving an exceedingly rich and beautiful effect. The eyes are large, and in expression, confident and gentle. The head, contrary to my preconceived notions derived from engravings, is, on the whole, delicately formed, the muzzle long and straight, blunt and cow-like. The neck is thin, tapering but little, rather deep, and held while standing at ease, sloping down a little, and the large ears have long hair on the under side. The body is round, almost cylindrical—the belly not at all bloated and bent out like that of a cow. The legs are short, but not clumsy, and taper finely into the muscles of the shoulders and hips. The feet are very broad and spreading, making a track about as large as a cow's. This enables the animal to walk over boggy undulations in summer and snow in winter. In color they vary almost as much in some specimens as do cattle and horses, showing brown, black, brown and gray at the same time. The prevailing color is nearly black in summer, brownish white in winter. The colors of the same animals are not so marked as those of the wild. The hair is a rich, full grown, very heavy, with fine wool at the bottom, thus making a warm covering sufficient to enable the animal to resist the keenest frosts and keep the face of a rock or hill.

After walking through the midst of the flock, the boys selected a rather small specimen to be killed. One caught it by the hind leg, just as sleep are caught, and drugged. It backed out of the flock; then the other boy took it by the horns and led it away a few yards from the flock, no notice being taken of its struggles by the companions, nor was any tendency to take fright observed, as would, under the circumstances, have been shown by any of the common domestic animals. The manner above looked after it eagerly, and further manifested her concern and affection by smiling to follow it, and uttering a low, grunting sound.

EXECUTION OF A WILDEBEEST CANCROSS.

After it was slain they laid it on its side, one of the women brought forward a branch of willow about a foot long with the green leaves on it, and put it under the animal's head, then she threw four or five handfuls of the blood from the kneifwound back of the shoulder cut over the ground to the southward, making me get out of the way, as if this direction were the only proper one. Then she took a cup of water and poured a little on its mouth and face on the ground. While this ceremony was being performed all the family were seriously looking at me as it was over they began to laugh and chat as before. The flock, all the time of the killing and dressing, were tranquilly chewing their cud, not noticing the smell of the blood even which makes cattle so frantic.

SALADATION.

One of our party was anxious to procure a young one alive to take home with him, but they would not sell one alive at any price. When we enquired the reason they said that if they should part with one, all the rest of the flock would die, and the same thing would happen if they were so far with the head of one, this excitedly expressed was true, for they had seen it proved many times though white men did not understand it and always laughed about it. When we indicated a very large back and inquired why they did not kill that big one, and let the little ones grow, they replied that that big fellow was strong, and knew how to pull a sile, and could run fast over the snow that would come by-and-by, and they needed him too much to kill him. I have never before seen half so intelligent a company of tame animals. In some parts of Siberia reindeer flocks numbering many thousands may be seen together. In these frozen regions they supply every want of their owners as no other animal could possibly do—food, warm clothing, coverings for their tents, bedding, rapid transportation and, to some extent, fuel. They are not nearly so numerous in the immediate vicinity of the bay as they once were, a fact attributed to several live specimens having been sold to Jesuit traders.