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THE FUR SEALS OF THE PRIBILOFS

by

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Far to the North and marooned in the Bering Sea lie the Pribilofs, on two of the largest of which islands the fur seals spend their summers and rear their young. No charted channels lead visitors to these shores. In fact, visitors are not invited. St. Paul and St. George Islands are guarded as closely as Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, and only those on government business or with a special permit may find admittance.

Sometimes the gray shadow of a Coast Guard cutter trails her smoke along the horizon, patrolling the sea to make it safe for seals. On an early May morning this same cutter has escorted the bleating anxious seal herd up the Pacific coastline after its winter in the South. These are females and young. The males don't roam so far away from their summer islands.

These two green islands with tips of tumbled rocks, quaint Russian villages, and square-domed churches are circled with writhing rings, the Alaska seals at home. Crowded along the wave-washed shoreline, the whole slope seems to be covered with brownish rocks that come to life and wobble. A man approaches an old bull. Suddenly there comes a sound like the muffled chugging of a gas engine, and Mr. Seal puffed up in rage, flops humping toward him like a fellow in a sack race with his feet tied. Wide open mouth lined with sharp teeth, backed by energy that means business forces the intruder to retreat.

"Don't go too near. He'll bite your leg off," called

a guardian of the seal colonies. "An old bull seal selects his home site and his harem and protects them with his life. Anyone who comes near is to him just a rival bull trying to steal his wives."

Each bull gathers about him cows ranging in number from five to a hundred according to his favorable location on the beach and his fighting prowess. At close range the big males are dingy-brown and be-whiskered, while the slim cows are pale tawny, even to gray. Once a lady seal has taken unto herself a husband, she is under his power and dominion for the season. With little sleep night and day for two months, and without a bite of food or water during this time, the bull snorts and flares out frequently at half-grown eligibles lounging in the edge of the water just below the harems. Or he perches watchfully on the highest rocks and with half-closed eyes dramatically shakes threats from his cavernous throat. If his wife shows the least hint of fickleness or attempts to waddle away, he lurches at her with a roar. If this warning isn't sufficient to stop her, he seizes her by the scruff of the neck and hurls her bodily back among his consorts. In size he is five times the weight of any one of his wives, and he has the strength and power to prove that might is right.

And there are the children to be watched, fifty or more all his own. They are sleek, black, round-headed little fellows that lump down into a crevice or pile up in pods till they almost smother each other. Of course, the meek mothers feed them, but the old bull is their real protector. Later in the season when the pups can handle themselves better and have learned

to swim, they congregate in groups a little distance from the harem and the mothers returning from feeding trips at sea, hump along through the wiggling mass hunting their own and tossing aside other hungry youngsters.

It is a populous place. Even the sea is alive with black flippers waving out of the water. Over all is a continuous babel of sounds, the flapping and romping of the half-grown in the water, the bellowing of the bulls and bleating of the cows, wafted to the four corners of the sea by a swinging gale that sweeps these sea-girt and fog-bound islands.

It is nearing sunset and the sands where the three-year olds lie are cool and fresh above the bay. The boulders here and there are worn smooth by heavy bodies and green with guano and dead moss. Here the most valuable fur-bearing animals in the world live and loll. Five or six thousand of them lie happily playing in this one hauling-ground, and on this small island are fifteen more big seal rookeries, each with its own hauling-ground for the fine young seals getting ready for the market. On St. George, twin to St. Paul, are almost as many more seal rookeries.

The male seal usually breeds at the age of six years, while the female brings forth her first pup when she is two years old. Males and females have approximately the same length of life, from twelve to fourteen years.

Of land animals on the Pribilofs, there are but three species, all more or less peculiar to the islands. The blue fox was probably originally brought here by floating ice and has become slightly differentiated from the mainland stock.

Now and then the white coat of the Arctic fox, his fore-bear, is mingled with or dominates his blue coat. The Arctic fox has a winter coat of pure white which changes in summer to dark brown on the back and shoulders and tawny below. Many years ago it was very likely that this was the appearance of most of the foxes living on the Pribilofs. Being isolated for generations on these far-off islands, the white strain has been largely eliminated and they have been described as a separate race. Practically all of these foxes change from sooty-gray in summer to a distinct bluish-gray in winter, thus earning the common name of blue foxes.

The shrew and the lemming have lost their origin and become distinct Pribilof species. The fox and the lemming, and perhaps the shrew, belong to groups which are Arctic in distribution. All the other mammals are aquatic, including whales, sealions, seals, and the walrus. But today only the seals are found on the islands. In early days the walrus was a regular habitant, but now only their great tusks are found buried in the sands of the beaches, relics of an earlier age. From these tusks, called ivory, the natives carve souvenirs and novelties that filter out to the states.

The birds that live here are always on the firing line. There are three species of auklets, of which the choochkie or least auklet is the most abundant. These little sea fowls are plump in body, but not much larger than an English sparrow. The paroquet auklet, a little larger than the least auklet, is called "Baillie Brushkie." The crested auklet, called canooskie (little captain), is well named, because he has a queer crest of feathers that sticks out of his forehead and curves around toward his

nose. All of the auklets find homes in the crevices of the rocks, and a good many fall prey to the hunting foxes.

Four song birds are noticeable on the islands. Bursting up from a field of flowers like a blossom suddenly taken wings, flits the black and white Pribilof snow bunting, scattering a series of rollicking notes. There are no trees for perches, so he trembles aloft above his home and perches as if on an invisible bough with spreading wings, pouring out his song. Wavering earthward like a snow-flake, his song ends thirty feet or so up, his wings close and he shoots down to the cover of the Arctic poppies.

The Alaskan longspur takes up the strain and others join in the chorus. Songs, like smiles and laughter, take these avian people from the flowery feasts of summer through the dry crusts of winter, so closely does the joy of summer tread upon the heels of winter's sorrow and cold.

The beautiful Aleutian leucosticte or rosy finch plays almost the part of an English sparrow in the villages of St. Paul and St. George. He chatters from the roofs and lives about the back door and the barn, but he takes himself off to a crack in a cliff to nest.

Last and least is the little Alaska wren, tiny like our winter wren at home, in size and song perhaps ~~perhaps~~ the most striking bird character of the North. He, too, must find a home in a crevice in the cliff. He is affectionately called "Limmer-shin" (chew of tobacco) by the natives.