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THE LAST YEARS OF THE HEATH HEN

by

Allan Keniston

Those "lost years" of the heath hen or pinnated grouse were on
the Island of Martha's Vineyard.

One of the recorders of its earliest history was William Wood.
In his New England's Prospect of 1635 he mentioned the heath hen
as heathcock. The heath hen, then common from Maine to Virginia
and westward until it merged with its near relative or counterpart,
had a most interesting history. The western bird, the prairie
chicken, still exists.

In later years people came from far and near in early spring to
see the bird and watch its weird mating antics — the strutting,

A "tooting" male heath hen. Photograph from Dr. Alfred O. Grave, The Heath
Hen, Memoir of the Boston Society of Natural History, Vol. VI, No. 4.
percentage of males, with what few females present, devoting their
time to eating. This was commented upon by other observers. No
answer.

The males strutted like turkey gobblers, tail spread high and
forward and wings dragging the ground. Long slender plumes
attached to the upper part of the head normally hung downward
toward the breast. But when in strutting posture these plumes
pointed to the sky like the ears of a rabbit. While the plumes
were up, sacks of skin, one on each side of the neck became inflated,
and, during the process, a sound was made similar to that made
by blowing small blasts of air across the mouth of a bottle.

A "tailing" male heath hen, rear view. From Dr. Alfred O. Gross, The Heath
Hen, Memoirs of the Boston Society of Natural History, Vol. VI, No. 4.

To some the sound was like the call of a mourning dove. These
toots could be heard in the quiet of early morning for great dis-
tances—a mile at least. No sound came from the ankles while
they were being deflated. And at the end of the dance the bird
would stand still and then stamp with both feet, one after the other
in rapid succession.

This so-called mating performance lasted from very early dawn
until sunrise when all the birds would leave the field.

In May 1916 during the nesting season a most disastrous brush
and woodland fire occurred. It burned over most of the breeding
area of the heath hen. Starting near West Tisbury it burned very
nearly to Vineyard Haven, Oak Bluffs and Edgartown. The female
heath hens, incubating the eggs, sat on the nests protecting the
eggs until they died. The males escaped. Some nesting areas must
have escaped the fire as a few broods of the heath hen chicks were
seen in June of that year. And so the heath hen had another chance
to survive.

A heath hen feeding. Photograph by Allan Keniston, spring of 1909.

In 1918 I was appointed by the State Fish and Game Commission
to fill the position vacated by the late Superintendent of the heath
hen reservation. It was my job to see that all plans for the care
and protection of the birds were carried out. That meant planting
fields of corn, sunflowers, clover, and other crops to provide a
food supply for the whole year. The purpose also was to con-
centrate them in the center of the five thousand acre preserve. I
was also appointed game warden to aid in the protection of the
birds wherever they might be found on the island.

Mrs. Keniston and I occupied the house in the center of the
reservation so that we could be on duty all hours. We also had
many callers and visitors who came in search of information about
the heath hen, and to study means to aid in its preservation. I had been interested in wild life since childhood and was very anxious to do all I could to save the birds.

The heath hen was never considered a good table bird except in the early fall. Later, and all winter, its food consisted of acorns of the scrub oak, which are very bitter, and bayberries which were then often used in candle-making. Consequently, after the early fall the birds were never hunted hard, hunters spending their time hunting water fowl which were very plentiful in those days.

Later on, when it became generally known that the heath hen was extict everywhere else in the world but on Martha's Vineyard, they were hunted and killed to be sold to collectors and museums.

Shortly after I moved to the reservation, Mr. Norman McClintock took moving pictures of the heath hen—a series showing the mating antics. He first placed a clock-device which made a ticking sound, like the turning of the crank of the camera, on the dancing ground. The birds became used to the noise and soon paid no attention to it, and so he was able to take the pictures.

The heath hen had many enemies. I will list some of them in the order of their effectiveness.

From my point of view man comes first on the list as an enemy both directly and indirectly. Man hunted the heath hen for food, for money, and for sport. They were easy targets on the ground. And easy targets in the air too, as they did not dodge like a partridge. High in the air the heath hen's flight reminded me very much of the meadow lark's.

Then the summer people came, and they got kittens from the "natives" to catch mice and amuse the children. When the summers were past the summer people returned to the city and the kittens, now cats, were left behind, and took to the woods. This was no hardship to the cats as birds and mice were plentiful. And the cats grew large and into very much wild animals. Without doubt they ate many heath hens and quail. I hunted the cats and destroyed many.

Man again, and this time with his model T Ford. In those days our Island was criss-crossed in every direction by wagon roads. Horses were the power and the wagon wheels cut deep ruts. But those deep cuts were no problem to the model T. The wagon roads crossed heath hen country and the mother heath hen and her brood of chicks used the roads too. Along came a car and the mother bird fluttered on the ground and in the air. The driver watched the mother bird, and the chicks running along in the deep ruts were ground into the earth. And so a whole brood would be destroyed.

Then, last but not least, disease entered the picture. Many heath hens were brought to me sick or dead, even one from the Oak Bluffs golf links. Perhaps man was not to blame for this but one specimen brought in had blackhead, a disease fatal to barnyard fowl and turkeys.

About this time it was decided by the chairman of the State Fish and Game Commission to secure the services of an expert biologist and ornithologist who was also a photographer. Dr. Alfred O. Gross of Bowdoin College was chosen. He came to the reservation frequently the next several years and studied the birds. And he compiled a history of the heath hen which is the final word on the subject. He agreed with me on many of my findings, particularly the destruction of so many females by fire, thus creating a terrible imbalance in the heath hen population between the males and females.

I mentioned one terrible fire. But almost every year there would be two or more fires. Many started by accident. But some were set to burn off the brush so that a bumper crop of blueberries would grow to be sold or "put up." The sad part of that was that spring was the time of burning. Also it was the breeding season.

During the last years of Dr. Gross's visits he brought another naturalist and ornithologist with him — Mr. Thornton W. Burgess. And during the years that I was in charge of the reservation many noted ornithologists besides Dr. Gross and Mr. Thornton W. Burgess came to the Island to see and study the heath hen. It was Mrs.
Keston’s and my pleasure to meet and entertain them.

Among those visitors were Dr. George W. Field, then Chairman of the Massachusetts Fish and Game Commission; Mr. Ludlow Griscom; Dr. John C. Phillips; Mr. A. C. Bent; Mr. Prescott Fayer; Mr. Francis A. Foster; Dr. John B. May; Mr. Herbert K. Job; Mr. John Farley; Mr. Aaron B. Bagg. And there were others.

The last heath hen. Photograph taken March 31, 1908 by Dr. Alfred C. Gross.

The last surviving individual heath hen—a male of course—lived near the home of James Crean on the outskirts of West Tisbury. This bird was captured by Dr. Gross and banded. It came back the next year, 1932, but after that failed to reappear. A hundred dollars was offered to anyone who might find another heath hen. But the money was never collected.

In 1929 I had retired from the service as there was no longer any reason to maintain a heath hen reservation. There were never going to be any more heath hens.

287

VINEYARD JOTTINGS

by

Henry Beetle Hough

Perhaps there is a place for an historical paper about Martha’s Vineyard which has no particular subject, but instead is simply made up of odds and ends. It is a little hard to imagine how such a paper will be received by the readers of the Intelligencer. But from the standpoint of the person charged with research and writing it has definite advantages. The chief one is this: when a Vineyard historian comes across an interesting anecdote, or a new-sounding passage of history, or some disconnected annal, his duty is to seize upon the clue and track it down. But if all these chance clues are to be kept waiting until they can be made into finished papers, with a beginning, a middle and an end, in due form, they will wait a long time.

Hence this paper is offered, presenting nothing but odds and ends, some of which might sometime fit into a complete paper on some phase of Island history, and some of which might be discarded.

It is not generally understood that Martha’s Vineyard had a telegraph cable to the mainland as early as August, 1856. The cable worked, too. When it was put in commission there was a grand festival at Holmes Hole, and the principal speaker was W. L. Burroughs of New Bedford, who had long familiarity with Island communication systems of one sort or another. Some day these remarks of Mr. Burroughs may turn up in a narrative of the Island’s telegraph and telephone history, but for the time being here are some extracts.

Mr. Burroughs alluded to the early methods of signalling used on and about the Vineyard and the Elizabeth Islands, and proceeded to say: “Twenty-one or two years ago (which would have been around 1834 or 5) various expedients were resorted to for reporting to the people of New Bedford the arrivals of whalemen at