

FIRST of MAY

~~11/10/15~~
A-506

*Oh, I must pass nothing by
Without loving it much,
The raindrop try with my lips,
The grass with my touch;*



Pine Barrens tree frog

*For how can I be sure
I shall see again
The world on the first of May
Shining after the rain?*

The first of May dawned with a drizzle. Forecasters had predicted rain. But that did not stop Ed Abbott, the photographer, and me from setting out to observe nature. In New Jersey, damp and foggy mornings often turn into warm, sunlit days. First we went across the dike of the beaver pond to check out a blue-gray gnatcatcher's nest which was in the making. In size halfway between hummingbird and chickadee, this gnatcatcher looks like a miniature mockingbird, with long beak, trim lines and uplifted tail. Male and female are colored alike except for a dark gray streak above the male's eye. Two things make one aware of the gnatcatcher's presence—a thin, squeaky voice and fast, almost constant movement. In fact, the only way I have ever found a gnatcatcher's nest is to first hear the thin cries and then watch the bird dart repeatedly to a certain spot high in a tree, where the nest was located.

This May morning the sun was in our eyes as we looked at the tiny cup, nestled in the crotch of a spindly oak. As we watched, the female flitted to her nest and arranged fresh materials. With deft beak she added bits of spiderweb and lichens to the edge,

after which she sat in the nest, moving about to mold it to her shape. Then off to gather more.

Turning back from the nest-builder, we returned along the dike and drove to Squirrel Haven, where an open space surrounded by woods makes ideal bird-watching territory. While we sat in the vehicle the bluebird pair went in and out of their birdhouse and periodically dropped to pick up insects from the ground. The female had just started to lay her clutch of three to five pale blue eggs, which she would incubate for two weeks. Now they spend time sitting about, warbling companionably, and feeding at leisure.

A pair of charcoal-gray catbirds flitted back and forth, and two brown thrashers ran along the ground catching beetles and worms. The male rubythroated hummingbird had just returned to his territory and zoomed from flower to flower of a scarlet sage set along the drive. Once again he had taken to his perch ten feet up, in a slender dead poplar 50 feet from us. As we watched him flash his brilliant throat in the morning sun a chorus of other birds blessed our ears.

Time to go to work, and we hated to leave. But we vowed to come in the evening for sights and

sounds of other creatures. So dusk found us on the wooded shore of Muddy Bog, listening for the endangered Pine Barrens tree frog and others who had begun to call on warm nights. Pine Barrens frogs, less than two inches long, are a brilliant green and trimmed in lavender and orange. During May and early June they call all around Muddy Bog, clinging to blueberry bushes or perched on dead branches of pines, usually at about human eye level or below. It is easy to spot them with a flashlight, and they continue to call with the light shining on them. During each call their black throats puff out like bubble-gum.

The smaller Gray tree frog calls at the same time, but his brown throat matches the rest of his body, which is mottled brown and gray to imitate the rough bark of dead trees. The Pine Barrens' call is a loud "Quank!" and the call of the Gray is a birdlike twitter.

We found several of these two species, and Ed took many photos. None of the frogs seemed perturbed, but kept calling with great enthusiasm in the glow of the flash. Coming out from the wooded bog we stepped onto a path lighted by moonbeams, and the cries of whippoorwills escorted us home. □ □