

RESCUING AN ISLAND—*The struggle to preserve a piece of untouched wilderness off the coast of Maine as a wild life sanctuary and a nature camp dedicated to Conservation.*

By MILLICENT TODD BINGHAM

DUST storms and devastating floods are compelling our attention nowadays to the might of natural forces. These calamities are called Acts of God, the implication being that they are wayward visitations of disaster against which man is powerless. They are of course nothing of the kind. But they are focussing attention on problems of conservation. I should like to focus it still further—on one concrete, direct attack upon these problems, an experiment carried out last summer on an island off the coast of Maine.

In Muscongus Bay, paralleling the shore, looms the long dark outline of Hog Island—three hundred and thirty acres of untouched wilderness. It is roughly a mile and a half in length, half a mile wide, and at the northern end separated by only a few minutes' row from the mainland. Ninety feet in height at the highest point, it is covered with dense forests of pine, spruce and balsam. Here and there, between two rocky points, a spring of clear water overflows across a little crescent beach. The granite ledges of which the island is built crop out along the bare crest. Into the shade of the sweet-smelling balsam woods below, the botanist is lured by deep moss and beds of ferns. In June, lady's slippers and the faintly perfumed twin bells of *Linnaea borealis* blossom in the shade, to be followed later in the summer by multi-colored mushrooms and the spectral Indian pipe.

Growth of the idea

As with most enterprises, there is, back of the Hog Island experiment a personal story. It falls roughly into three parts: First, a long period of years during which the island was cherished in its primitive state—a period of incubation for an idea. Four years ago that period came to an end in a sudden catastrophic event—an event which ushered in the second period, one of effort in trying to find some way by which the island could not only be preserved as a wild life sanctuary, but utilized also for the advancement of knowledge concerning the wilderness and the life teeming within it. That goal reached, the third period opened with the establish-

ment in June, 1936, of the first Audubon Nature Camp for Adult Leaders.

The narrative begins when, in the summer of 1908, my father and mother made a visit to Hog Island while cruising along the coast of Maine. My father, David Todd, was for thirty-six years Professor of Astronomy at Amherst College. My mother, Mabel Loomis Todd, a woman of varied interests and accomplishments—artistic, literary, civic, social—cared most of all about the world of nature, particularly about the preservation of forests and their wild inhabitants.

Wild life imperiled

As it happened, a short time before their visit, a forty-acre strip had been cut over. Piles of dead brush and stumps gave to it an air of desolation. There were rumors that the whole island-forest might be similarly ground to pulp. My mother was shocked. She determined to do what she could to prevent it.

It seemed that title to the land rested in the names of many different property holders on the mainland opposite. These transverse strips would have to be assembled, a difficult undertaking. The owners could not always agree among themselves as to the limits of their various holdings and were on the verge of litigation in several instances. But titles were eventually quieted and Hog Island, except for a peninsula of about thirty acres at the northern end, owned by a man and his wife who ran an "Inn and Bungalows" there for summer boarders, became the undivided property of two persons. My mother owned three-quarters and a friend of hers bought the remaining undivided quarter—not to live on, but as an investment. That quarter was subsequently sold. But we had come to stay. We built a camp in the forest and have been exploring its secrets ever since, each of us from a different angle.

My grandfather, Eben J. Loomis, astronomer and poet, friend of Henry Thoreau, imparted wisdom about the ways of nature to us all. My father observed the heavens through a little telescope set up on our pier on starry nights. He wrote a book at the island, *Astronomy, Science of the Heavenly Bodies*. My mother studied

flowers, ferns and mushrooms. Her last piece of literary work was finished at the island—re-editing her *Letters of Emily Dickinson*, first published in 1894. She wrote little articles about the spiders and cobwebs, the mosses and periwinkles, and was completing a book entitled *The Epic of Hog* at the time of her death. For me, the birds and the physiography of the region—"the meaning of the landscape," as that science has been described—have been engrossing. My grandfather taught me to recognize the common birds before I could read or write. My earliest memory is of sitting in the crotch of a bough overhanging Rock Creek, near Washington, D. C., while he told me stories of the small inhabitants of the banks and surrounding woods. My affection for the out-of-doors began while I was still too young to understand.

Those who love nature usually begin young. In childhood, responses to natural objects are instinctive. If a child's attention is drawn to wild creatures, his acquaintance with them broadens as the years go on. He understands them. They are his friends for whom, as toward other friends, he feels affection.

It is curious about nature lovers. They are well named. For there is in every one, even in naturalists who make the study a scientific life work, an emotional quality—an instant response to the first note of a Bluebird in early March before the arrival of other migrants, or to a fringed gentian discovered by chance, which in a sheltered spot, has managed to survive the autumn frosts. This emotion can no more be described to those who do not feel it than the transfiguring effect of a Beethoven symphony could be conveyed to a person who is tone deaf.

"My heart leaps up when I behold
"A rainbow in the sky."

is not a sentimental figure of speech, but a statement of fact. Enthusiasm engendered by such feelings carries far. It has been characteristic of the Hog Island venture from the start.

Vigilance

But to return to our story. After the Inn and Bungalows were closed in 1919, except for temporary occupants, we lived alone upon the island. My mother protected it in every way she could, from fires left by careless picnickers, from persons cutting masts or Christmas trees or digging for relics in the prehistoric kitchen-midden—for Hog Island was a spot favored by the Wawenock, a tribe of the Abanaki of the Algonkian group, who were here when the first white man came. In 1910 she posted the island against shooting and continued to do so as long

as she lived, trying to preserve its wild life—deer, hare and game birds—long before it was the fashion to do so. She was determined to protect the island from exploitation. How this could be continued in perpetuity we often discussed, but never settled.

On October 14, 1932, while packing to leave for the season, my mother died. For Hog Island her death marked the end of an era.

If I say that after my mother's death three-quarters of the island belonged to me I do not feel that that is strictly true. When I walked through the woods and listened to the Thrushes, the cry of the Osprey circling overhead, or the boom of the Great Horned Owl at night, I could never feel that I owned such a place. It seemed, rather, the property of all who cherished it and who wished to preserve it for others who would cherish it likewise in years to come. But that was hardly a practical point of view. So I began to wonder how I could make such a dream come true.

For Nature lovers everywhere

First, there was the thirty-acre peninsula with the Inn and Bungalows, now falling into decay. The owners wished to sell. I asked them to give me time to find the right kind of purchaser. This they kindly consented to do. Meanwhile, my dream was widening in scope. Instead of trying to find a private buyer, why not make the buildings a camp for students of nature? They could use the rest of the Island as a laboratory. Here was a wilderness area with well-defined natural boundaries and within a short distance of the mainland. It would be an ideal field station for biological research. I began by trying to interest local Maine groups, bird clubs and societies of natural history. The replies I received were unanimous in commendation of the idea and equally so in reporting that they had no funds. So I turned to other organizations whose interests embrace a wider territory, such as, for instance, the Federation of the Bird Clubs of New England. I met with the same response everywhere. It should be borne in mind that these efforts were made during the years 1933 and 1934. Trying to raise money for any purpose whatsoever at that time was to invite failure.

In the fall of 1934 the owners of the peninsula wrote that they must sell. They were convinced that the "bird people," as they called my hypothetical purchasers, were not interested in the proposition. There was, in fact, "nothing to it." Besides, there weren't any birds on the island anyway except a few Crows.

One winter evening I was speaking of my dilemma to a friend of ours, Dr. James M. Todd of New York. Without my asking him, Doctor Todd volunteered to help me out. He would buy the Inn and Bungalows, he said, and give it to any organization that would use it! It is impossible to describe the effect that his offer had upon me. It was a turning point. I was walking on air.

To find such an organization would be, I thought, an easy thing to do. But it proved to be quite the opposite. After months of endeavor I realized that it would cost so much to fit up the buildings that nobody could afford to accept Doctor Todd's generous offer. It was at this point that proposals from a lumber company and a lobster pound filled me with dismay. Would a business proposition be the only way out? Was this, after all, to be the future of Hog Island?

The last chance

Then came a day in the spring of 1935. The owners of the peninsula could wait no longer. They had decided to cut off their trees. Something must be done, and done at once. Sure at least of finding understanding, but with no formulated request in mind, I went to the American Museum of Natural History and asked for the renowned ornithologist, Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy. He listened to my story. After a moment or two he went to the telephone, called up the National Audubon Society, and arranged an interview for me with the newly elected Executive Director, John Hopkinson Baker.

A day or two later, clasping the familiar little packet of snapshots under my arm—young Herons in the nests of their tree-top rookery, a squirrel perched on the corner of our table as we sat at luncheon, a seal balancing on a rocky ledge—I went to Mr. Baker's office. I shall never forget that interview. I began in the usual way: "I have a beautiful wooded island on the coast of Maine. It has been protected from shooting and other depredations for the past quarter of a century. On one end of it there is a group of buildings owned—" At that point he jumped in.

"Just what I want," he said.

Within five minutes he had developed the idea of a camp for teachers of nature study. He stated its purpose. Only by securing a sustained, genuine interest in nature on the part of children, he said, can we hope for a grasp of the acute need for conserving our natural resources before it is too late. And only by training teachers and other youth leaders in an under-

standing and appreciation of nature can children's native interest be developed.

Mr. Baker had not only caught my idea before I had uttered it, he ran away with it. Teachers and other adult students were to come in groups of fifty for five periods of two weeks each throughout the summer. If they could not only be filled with enthusiasm, but helped to formulate sound plans for their work as well, the children's interest would be salvaged. Interest is the driving power of education. In this case, it is a question not so much of arousing interest as of capitalizing it. Most children are interested in birds and animals. If wild creatures can be made friends with early in life, these concrete friendships will usher in the abstract concept of conservation unconsciously but inevitably. And the study and enjoyment of nature will become a hobby which will provide for them more real satisfaction than many things which are not there for the asking.

I listened speechless as Mr. Baker developed his plan. Half dazed by the rapidity with which the activities of the imaginary camp had shaped themselves in his mind, I left his office, dived into a subway and made for Doctor Todd's house by the shortest route. He rejoiced that at last the plan seemed about to materialize.

But alas! Another obstacle appeared. Mr. Baker would not accept Doctor Todd's gift of the point and buildings, much in need of repair as they were, and upon which a good deal of money would have to be spent, without assurance that the Society would have the right to use the entire island for purposes of study. Accordingly, I sought out the owner of the undivided quarter to ask whether he would join me in allowing the island to be used for such a purpose. But I could not see him. He was desperately ill, so ill indeed that he could promise nothing. In fact, he was in need of money for doctors and hospital expenses and his property had already been put in the hands of a real estate agent. That quarter of the island would have to be purchased somehow, and at once.

Sanctuary established

To come to the point, with my mother's life insurance money I bought that undivided quarter of the island which she had not owned, thereby enabling me to lease the entire island—except Doctor Todd's point which he proposed to give outright—to the National Audubon Society on a dollar-a-year basis. By using the money she had saved it became a true memorial to her. The deal was closed within a few weeks, and the Todd Wild Life Sanctuary was established.

The third period, to which what has been said is but introductory, begins with the opening of the first Audubon Nature Camp for Adult Leaders, in 1936.

An island at work

When I arrived at the island on the nineteenth of June, the camp was in full swing: groups gathered about the nest of a Parula Warbler, watching the parents go in and out of their nest in the hanging moss, oblivious of the circle of onlookers; other enthusiasts wading out into the water unconscious of their appearance, intent only upon following their instructor to a precarious spot where some shallow-water forms of life were to be seen in action. A boat-load was just returning from the outer islands. Other individuals were darting about in an open space brandishing long butterfly nets, and still others were coming out of the forest, single file, with ferns, lichens and mosses to be identified.

"What?" I exclaimed to the Director. "Are all these groups specializing in different subjects?" "Oh, no," he replied, "they are all studying every day the various aspects of nature, one after the other, because these must be understood in their relationships."

Some students were working early and late fitting up a museum in the old ship-chandlery over the water, a living museum, where life histories were illustrated: a section of an ant hill between two panes of glass revealing the ants busily at work in their corridors; crickets in an appropriate environment; and a snake cage. Just outside, underneath the float, was a collection of rare living marine organisms. In the museum, too, was a calendar of the birds already observed, together with a map, its harvest of red and white thumb tacks marking the sites of nests and the spots where singing males of certain rare species had been heard. There were biological family trees; labeled parts of a lobster's jaw; dried specimens of lichen, ferns and flowers, all arranged on sheets of paper tacked against the wall.

The whole camp exhaled an atmosphere of wonder—the beginning of wisdom.

Here was my forest wilderness, a laboratory of eager students who were not only enjoying it, they were taking it, bit by bit, studying and classifying its resources, making it yield its secrets! And yet with it all, the wilderness remained a wilderness. The solitude was as untouched as ever.

I recalled those years during which I had been trying to convince somebody, anybody, that the island was a good place for a nature camp, and how I had been told over and over again that

there were not enough people interested in nature in the whole United States to support such a project. Each time that I heard it could not be done, I turned my thought toward those silent, moss-carpeted forests. I listened to the Thrushes in the gathering dust. I saw those magic midsummer nights and the slowly engulfing tide—the tide at the full, the moon at the full—when each stroke of the oars left a cloud of light deep down in the water, and ripples in the wake of the row boat etched the surface with luminescence ploughed up from beneath, sparks on the surface blending with the reflected universe of stars. I seemed to be watching the migration of Warblers high up against the disc of the moon, or listening at noonday to the chant of *Vireo solitarius solitarius*, voice of the northern wilderness.

Ah, I thought, if only the island could be saved it would do more for us than we could possibly do for it.

I think I know how a novelist feels when he says that his characters write the story for him. The compulsion, he says, comes from them, not from him. They *have* to act as they do. So it was with Hog Island. Always it was the island which gave me heart. Its mere quiet existence supported me in the knowledge that I was right.

Wide influence

When a thing actually comes to pass the effort expended in making it do so is lost sight of—ploughed in, so to speak. If successful, the result merely seems inevitable. This is what has happened in the case of the first Audubon Nature Camp for Adult Leaders. With a total capacity for the five sessions of about 250, there were, during this opening season, 223 in attendance. Of all ages from seventeen to seventy, they came from twenty-three states, two Canadian provinces, and one foreign country, Switzerland! The number included not only teachers in elementary, high and normal schools, professors and students in colleges and universities, members of the U. S. Departments of Labor and Agriculture, leaders in the Boy and Girl Scouts and the Camp Fire Girls, counselors in summer camps for children, members of Garden Clubs and Societies of Natural History, but representatives of a score of miscellaneous occupations as well. There was even one Brooklyn fireman who came for his vacation because he is thinking of abandoning his present profession in order to become a Forest Fire Warden.

Between the twelfth of June and the ninth of September each person spent from two to six weeks of intensive study. From 6:30 in the morning, when they were awakened by an in-

structor imitating the calls of birds, until sunset they were in the field—either on the island, or on the nearby mainland—studying birds, mammals, insects, salt and fresh water invertebrates, all forms of plant life, even a little geology and astronomy. Many of them found their stay a revelation. Some had never before seen the ocean. Trips by motor-boat to the islands and barren pinnacles of rock in the outer bay and beyond enabled them to observe nesting colonies of sea birds—Cormorants, Gulls and Terns, Petrels and Guillemots—while close at hand the nests and family life of many species of land birds, some of them not found elsewhere in the vicinity, were also studied.

In the evenings there were round-table conferences and illustrated lectures in the museum either by members of the staff or by well-known educators and naturalists who, attracted by the novel experiment, had come from all parts of the country. The director and other members of the staff were peculiarly fitted for their tasks, and were possessed of an enthusiasm lavishly communicated to their students.

For the teachers, of whom there were more than a hundred, special help in techniques of presentation was given, and each one was equipped before leaving with a practical program adapted to his specific requirements.

Most important of all, however, every person in the camp gained a new point of view toward Conservation. They were taught the complex interdependence of all forms of life, both animal and vegetable, and learned in consequence that one form of wild life should not be exterminated—or protected—at the expense of others, without full knowledge of the consequences. Upsetting the balance of nature established before man entered the picture is a precarious undertaking. It usually ends in disaster, not for the environment only, but for mankind as well. Even today, ignorant of results which are sure to follow, we continue to perpetrate deeds of violence, sometimes ironically enough, in the name of Conservation.

And so, it seems, Hog Island has become not only a focus of interest, but a center from which radiate new ideas and new enthusiasm for the preservation of the out-of-doors, indeed, of our whole heritage of natural resources. Similar camps may be established in other parts of the country, each the center of its own geographical area. If so, the popular point of view toward Conservation will gradually be transformed. For by activities such as those of the Audubon Nature Camp an enlightened attitude of mind will be fostered in the children of today who, as leaders of tomorrow, will have not only the power to act, but because of this attitude, the power also to act wisely.