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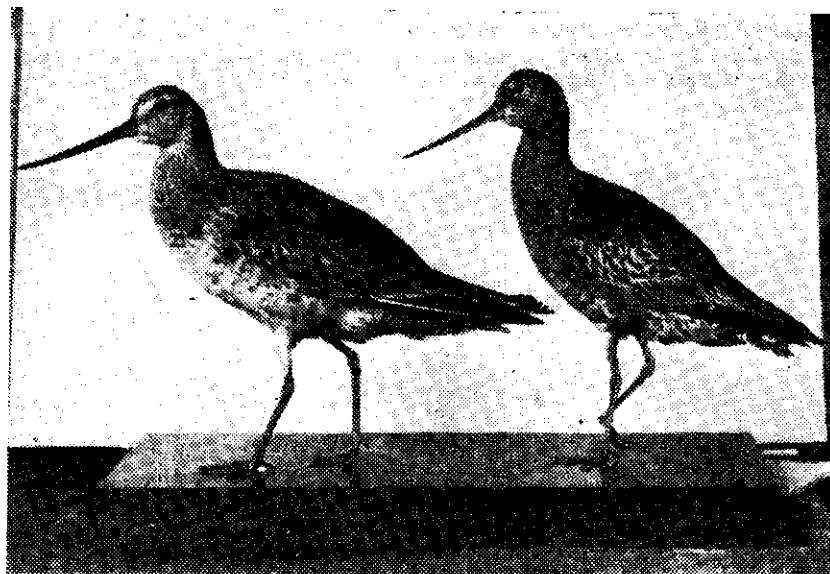
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## WILD LIFE AND WAYS

# A DAY AMONG THE MIGRANTS

(Written for "The Listener" by DR. R. A. FALLA)

TOWARDS the end of February, and through the month of March, there is a good deal of excitement and activity amongst thousands of birds which are preparing for the annual migration to the Northern Hemisphere. It passes unnoticed in the main because the birds themselves are inconspicuous and drably coloured, and their haunts are tidal mud-flats, estuaries, and brackish lagoons—areas which are otherwise deserted.

The name of one of them, the Godwit, has become somewhat legendary and most books about New Zealand make some reference to the annual migration of this bird to and from Siberia. Most New Zealanders have at least read something of this marvellous flight, of the Maori legends connected with it, and the various theories which seek to explain why the birds migrate at all and by what means they find their way over such amazing distances. At the moment it is not my intention to deal with this aspect of the story, but merely to describe a field day spent on Lake Ellesmere, which is one of the South Island feeding grounds much frequented, not only by the visiting waders from Siberia, but by many resident native water birds as well.

The lake itself, as most people know, is a very shallow but extensive lagoon south of Banks Peninsula, separated from the sea by a narrow bank of sand and piled-up shingle. At irregular intervals in the past the sea has burst through at the southern end, often enough to give a permanent brackish quality to the water of the lake. For the benefit of the surrounding farmland it has also been customary to make an artificial channel at the outlet from time to time, but this always closes up again. Normally the tides have no effect, but on such a vast expanse of shallow water—107 square miles—the wind that happens

to be blowing makes amazing differences to the levels. Thus a northerly wind will inundate many acres of flat at the southern end and conversely a southerly will flood the northern areas about Motukarara and Kaituna. It is this fluctuating of the water that provides such a remarkable feeding ground for birds that can swim, paddle, or wade. It means, of course, that the naturalist who plans to pay a visit to observe birds needs to be a practical weather prophet with a good knowledge of the peculiar habits of the lake as well as of the ways of the birds.

## A Lake in February

I was fortunate on a recent trip late in February to have the expert guidance of E. F. Stead, whose long acquaintance with the district and skill as a naturalist have made him our foremost authority on migratory shore birds. I may say that I have made many previous expeditions to the lake with disappointing results, as often as not striking the wrong part of the lake shore for the particular weather at the time. The last trip was made with no indication of wind from anywhere, but the northern end of the lake was decided on.

It was a bright morning and very still, and when we arrived on the flats birds could be seen in all directions on exposed spits and shallow bays. Most of them, however, were very far distant, and as the air was still their cries could be faintly heard. Black swans, Canadian geese, and numerous duck provided most of the deeper sounds; there was plenty of the raucous screaming of gulls, faint yelping of stilts, and closer at hand the chip-chipping note of numerous Banded Dotterel.

But we were not out to look at the birds that can be seen all the year round.

Time was getting short for observing the migrants which leave in March, and on such an ideal feeding ground we had hopes of seeing a number busy feeding