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THE EARLY INDIAN WILDFOWLER OF VANCOUVER ISLAND

By G. D. SPROT

EVER SINCE, as a small boy in Scotland, I set my first bird snare, and netted the ivy-clad walls surrounding the stables and gardens of my home for sparrows, I have been interested in the many devices employed for the capture of birds in the several countries that it has been my good fortune to visit.

Such observations as I made, were made I must admit, only on those occasions when I actually came in contact with, or was informed of, some ingenious weapon or method of netting or trapping, so that on my arrival on Vancouver Island in 1908, and without making any very diligent search, I presumed that although other and more primitive Indian devices for securing birds must have at one time or another existed, they were certainly not to be found in use at the present time, for the Indian of to-day seemed perfectly content with drifting idly into a bunch of duck in a fir-bough covered canoe, and "browning" them forthwith with powder and shot in that dull and uninteresting manner of the modern pot-hunter.

However, my interest was later aroused, when one day whilst in search of shore-birds near the mouth of the Chemainus river I came across two tall poles standing two hundred or more yards apart; one on dyked-off land, standing high and dry; the other on the tidal flat beyond. This pole was considered a danger to stock and was unfortunately cut down by the farm owner in February, 1928. It was quite sound. On examining the more accessible of these two poles, I found it to be of Red Cedar (*Thuja plicata* Don.), about 70 feet high, and about 42 inches in circumference at ground level. Owing probably to its former periodic immersion in salt and fresh water alternately—the salt no doubt toughening the fibres of the wood whilst the fresh water insured a freedom from Teredos—this pole was well preserved, but on account of drainage and the subsequent settlement of the soil, it has developed a lean of several degrees from the perpendicular; the pole to seaward of the dykes however stood perfectly erect. At first sight of these poles I might well have remarked as did

Vancouver when he first sighted similar ones in 1792 on the shores of what is now the State of Washington, "They did not contribute the least instruction of the purpose for which they were intended," had I not suspected that purpose from what I had already read and witnessed of flight-nets in other climes. On enquiry from the owner of the land on which these poles stand, I was informed that they are just as they were when he, the owner, first came to the country in 1862. I was also informed that the butts of others had been found along the line, but nothing was known of when they had been in action last. There seems no doubt therefore that these two poles were erected at least seventy if not perhaps a hundred years ago, and had then taken part in supporting the mighty nets that entangled the many ducks and geese that eventually found their way to the larder of the Chemainus Indian.

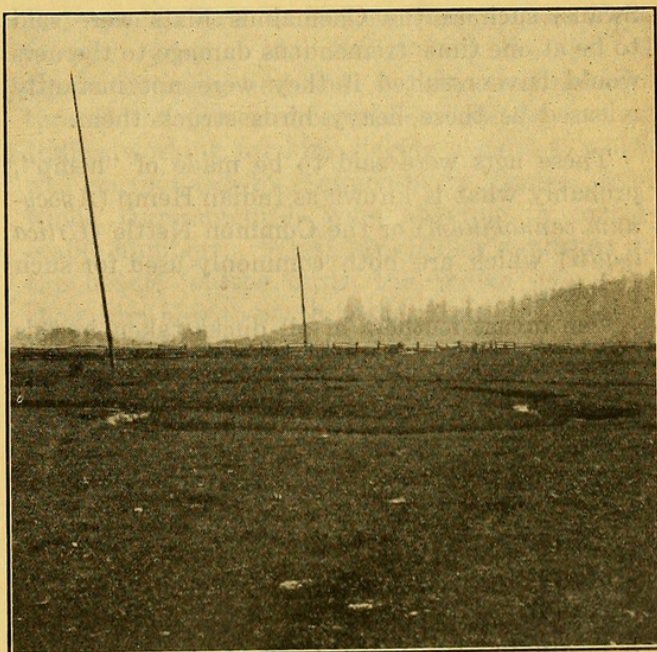


Plate 1—Showing the two poles as they stood prior to 1928.

It appears that the Indians of Vancouver Island employed several distinct methods of handling nets in the capture of ducks and geese, and I give these here under separate headings, and just as they have already been described by

the early explorers themselves, or, as in the case of the Chemainus nets and "Drop net" just as described to me by Mr. F. Price of Duncan and Mr. J. H. Hillier of Ucluelet, leaving readers to picture for themselves the wild night scenes that must have accompanied such practises.

THE FLIGHT NET

Mr. F. Price of Duncan who is well acquainted with the Chinook jargon, kindly obtained for me the following information concerning the handling of the Chemainus nets, from an old Indian of that district. "Ropes were run through bone rings, which latter were fixed to the tops of the poles so that the nets might be sharply lowered as the ducks swept into them, by an Indian posted at the foot of each pole and hidden by a circle of brush."

As far as I can gather from the writings of others, the nets of other tribes at all times remained erect, and the birds striking them "fell to the ground", "became entangled", or "were shot down by arrows". This dropping of the net does not appear to have been mentioned before, unless Wilkes' remarks "by which they are thrown to the ground" might be interpreted as meaning the dropping of the net, which seems doubtful, but there may have been good reason for the Chemainus Indian adopting such a method, for in those areas much frequented by Geese and Swans, such as the Chemainus Flats were said to be at one time, tremendous damage to the nets would have resulted if they were not instantly released as these heavy birds struck them.

These nets were said to be made of "hemp", probably what is known as Indian Hemp (*Apocynum cannabinum*) or the Common Nettle (*Urtica lyallii*) which are both commonly used for such purposes.

The breast feathers of all ducks taken in this manner were mixed with the feathery remnants of the flowers of the Spirea (*S. discolor* Pursh.), also probably Fire-weed or Willow Herb (*Epilobium angustifolium*, L.) as was largely used by other tribes. These when worked together made what must have been very light and no doubt very warm blankets.

The only other record that I have been able to find of the use of flight-nets on Vancouver Island is in Hill-Tout's *British North America*, 1907, in which we are told that the nets used by "one of the Vancouver Island tribes was of wide mesh, and the birds entangled were captured or shot down by arrows." The original author of this statement is unfortunately not referred to. The Chemainus poles already mentioned, being co-

nected with this method remain, however, sufficient proof that the practise certainly existed on the Island. It is very doubtful whether the Vancouver Island west coast Indians ever used the flight-net or we should certainly have heard of it from one or other of the many navigators who visited there. As I am unable to trace any other authentic account of the use of such nets on Vancouver Island, it is probable that the practice died out earlier here than elsewhere in the Sound area, for Paul Kane witnessed similar nets in action as late as 1859 on the Washington shores of the Straits of Juan de Fuca and almost opposite Victoria, B.C. He informs us that a net was stretched in a narrow valley to intercept the duck as they flew in from the sea, adding that a "smoky fire is made at the bottom of the net which prevents the duck from seeing it, and when they fly against it they become confused and fall down." Other poles in the vicinity of Orcas Island were seen by E. T. Coleman in 1869, but there is nothing in his account to show whether they were then in use or no, so that for the present we must consider Kane as the latest writer to witness the nets in actual use and probably one of the very few whose description is really first hand. There are several descriptions by others, but not as eye-witnesses.

Wilkes in 1841, Dr. J. Scouller in August, 1825, and Vancouver in 1792, all describe the same lot of poles—at Dungeness on the Washington shores, and of these Vancouver is the only one who gives a really detailed description of them which description is also accompanied by an excellent engraving, but knowing nothing of their purpose he imagined that the circles of blackened stones that he found between them were for cooking purposes, on account of their similarity to the "cooking places" of the South Sea Islanders. Paul Kane explains their use when he speaks of "smoky fires to hide the nets" and Wilkes tells us that "fires are then lighted which alarm the birds and cause them to fly against the nets by which they are thrown upon the ground."

THE DIP NET

The Indian method of securing Brant at Fort Rupert, on the northeast coast of the island has been well described by Dr. Hasell in the *History of Fowling*, as follows:—"A dark, wet, still night is chosen in the winter when the Geese are feeding on the beds of *Zostera* in shallow water. Two Indians go out in a canoe, one in the bow armed with a torch of resinous pine splinters known as a 'Gun-Stick', ['Gun' is probably a misprint for 'Gum', the name in general use at the present

day.—G.D.S.] and a large net like a landing-net on a pole; the other sits in the stern and paddles the canoe in the direction of a flock of Brant. As soon as the canoe has got in amongst a flock the torch is suddenly lighted and as suddenly extinguished. The birds at once get up and fly about a short distance but settle again as soon as the light disappears. The Indians mark the direction taken by the birds, and follow them, again paddling noiselessly into the flock. The torch is again lighted and extinguished with the same result. After this manoeuvre has been repeated some three times the Geese become bewildered. When the torch is lighted they do not attempt to fly but stay and gaze at it. They are then quickly scooped out of the water by the Indian with the net”.

THE DROP NET.

Mr. G. Fraser of Ucluelet tells me that about twenty years ago he was forced by rough weather to take shelter with some Indians at Toquart on the west coast of the island, and that they brought in during the night some fifty ducks and geese, which they told him had been taken in a net stretched between two canoes. Mr. J. Hillier, also of Ucluelet, informs me that about that time—twenty years ago—he had on several occasions seen the Indians working the net, and he described to me the mode of capture thus:—“Two canoes were used, each manned by three Indians; one in the bow kept burning a fire of finely split Gum-wood, number two worked the net, whilst number three handled the paddle. The canoes would go out into Toquart harbour on a dark, stormy night at a time when the geese were going north, for on such nights they frequented this sheltered harbour in large numbers. As the canoes approached the geese, a blanket was held up behind the fire by the man in the bow. Seeing only the fire, the geese would huddle together, when the canoes would pass, one on each side, and drop the net over them.”

I have been unable to trace any written reference to this two-canoe method, and I therefore presume it to be, perhaps a more later day improvement on the single canoe hand-net described by Jewitt and others as being used entirely on the west coast of the island and which was dropped over the birds in the same manner. The manner of approach when using the single hand-net was similar in every detail to that recounted by Mr. Hillier. The net measured about 10 feet by 4 feet. Jewitt gives this net as made of bark (see Plate 2).

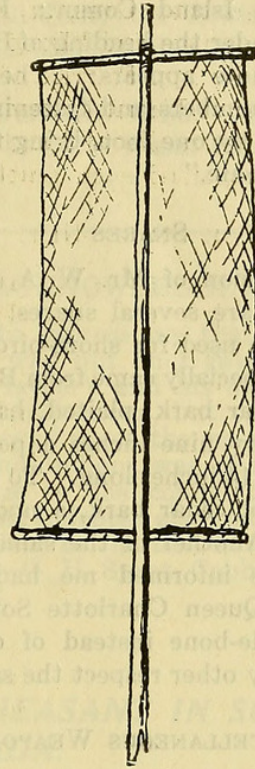


PLATE II.—Single-handed Goose-net from Nootka.

BIRD LIME

Not to be outdone by their elders, the younger generation of Indians sought out the large wood slug (*Limax*) and by coating twigs with its slime, they would catch the Rufous Hummingbird (*Selasphorus rufus*). Mr. Hillier tells me that at about the same time that he witnessed the capture of the geese, already described, he had an Indian working for him digging a garden, which was surrounded by Salmon-berry bushes, over which Hummingbirds were hovering in considerable numbers. When Mr. Hillier remarked on the beauty of the birds, the Indian offered to show him how to catch them. Looking about in the grass he soon located a slug and stroking its back with a stick until it was well covered with slime, he selected a slight and prominent limb of a nearby bush, then smearing the slime over it, he backed away and in a very short time a bird settled thereon and was held fast. Mr. Hillier informs me further that the one coating was sufficient to catch a number of birds before he broke the twig off. Dr. Hasell also mentions this method of taking Hummingbirds, adding that the Indian youths “catch these aerial gems solely for the purpose of teasing them, threading a horse-hair through their nostrils to prevent their escaping”.

In a list of birds from Vancouver Island by Dr. Wood of H.M.S. *Hecate* (British Columbia

and Vancouver Island Comm.; R. C. Mayne 1862, p. 417) under the heading of Hummingbirds the following note appears: "The Indian boys snare them in numbers and fastening a dozen or more to a stick by one foot, bring them off alive to the ships for sale."

SNARES

In the possession of Mr. W. A. Newcombe of Victoria, B.C., are several snares, which he informed me were used for shore-birds. One that interested me especially came from Barclay Sound. A length of cedar bark, plaited, had inserted in it at about every nine inches a portion of dogfish spine about 14 inches long. To this is attached by threads of cedar bark, a noose of twisted human hair. Another of the same type, which Mr. Newcombe informed me had come from Storm Island, Queen Charlotte Sound, had the springs of whale-bone instead of dogfish spine, but was in every other respect the same.

MISCELLANEOUS WEAPONS

The bow and arrow were, of course, in general

use at one time, by the Indians of Vancouver Island.

The bows of the Cowichan Indians, of the east coast, were of the same width throughout, rounded on one side, with the tips curving forward; flat on the reverse side. The bows of the west coast Indians of the island are wide in the centre narrowing towards the tips, being "originally characteristic of the west coast Indian." (Vide F. Boas, *The Kwakiutl of Vancouver Island*, Jessup, N. Pac. Exp., Vol. 5, Part 4, p. 513.) Several types of arrows were used. Plate 3, Fig. 1, shows a type used by the Cowichan Indian with spiral feathering. Plate 4, Fig. 1, shows an arrow-head of stone. Figs. 2 and 3 show two types of wooden heads, dull pointed for stunning birds.

A four-pronged spear (Plate 3, Fig. 2, from Cowichan) was also used for duck, probably on such occasions as have already been related, when a light was used in a canoe or for securing duck around the flight-nets. The duck were held within the prongs, the feathers catching on the barbs and detaining them. This spear was from 10 to 12 feet long over all.

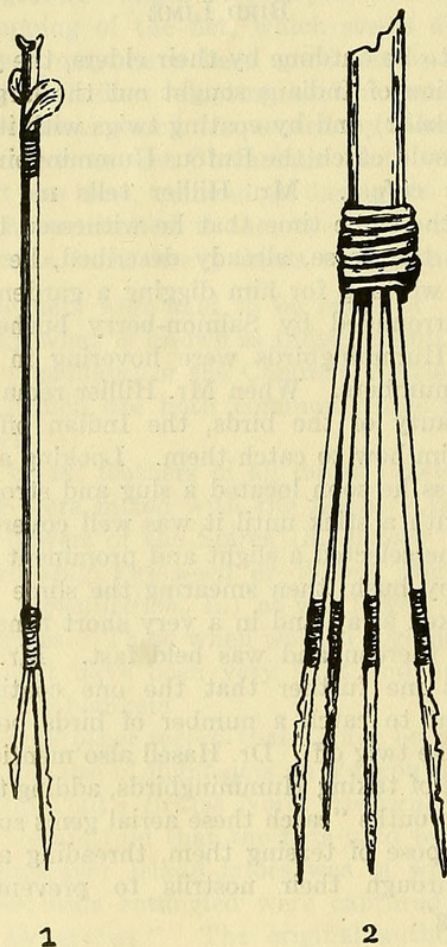


PLATE 3. FIG. 1. Duck Arrow.
FIG. 2. Duck Spear.—Both from Cowichan.

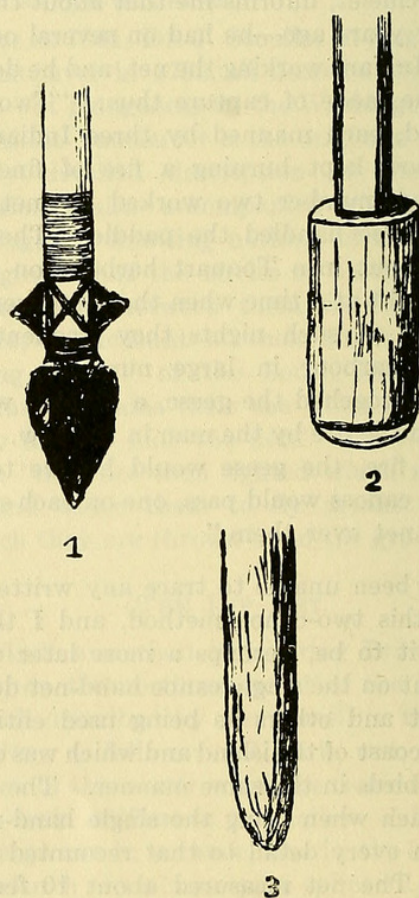


PLATE 4. FIG. 1. Stone arrow-head.
FIG. 2-3. Wooden arrow-head.

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I desire to express my thanks to Mr. W. A. Newcombe who not only gave me the full use of his late father's and his own personal notes, library and collections, but with his knowledge and understanding of the manners and customs of the Island Indians was of the greatest assistance to me in the compilation of these few notes. I am indebted also to those whose names already appear in the text as contributing valuable notes.—G. H. Sprot, Cobble Hill, Vancouver Island, B.C.

NOTES ON THE INTRODUCTION OF THE PHEASANT IN SOME OF THE PROVINCES OF CANADA.

By HOYES LLOYD.



PHEASANTS, particularly the English Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus colchicus* and the Ring-necked Pheasant *P.C. torquatus* and intergrades, have long been in the process of introduction in various parts of Canada and in a few localities they have become thoroughly acclimatized and afford an addition to the game bird supply. The story of the introduction of the Pheasant in British Columbia is apparently long and complicated and as those who are more competent to deal with the subject are endeavouring to record the details I will not presume to speak of its introduction here. A few notes have come into my possession respecting the introduction of pheasants elsewhere in Canada and I am publishing these in *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* for the purposes of record. Possibly this action may encourage others who have additional information on the subject to make it available for natural history readers before the passage of time obliterates memories and casual records on this important subject.

SASKATCHEWAN

Mr. F. Bradshaw, Game Commissioner, Regina, Saskatchewan, has furnished me with the following notes:—

"Mr. James Harrison of Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan, secured fifty pheasant eggs from the Province of Ontario in March, 1925. Thirty-eight birds were hatched out, three died and thirty-five were liberated and came

through the winters of 1925 and 1926 in good shape. During the summer of 1926 a few nests were seen in the Valley, also quite a number of young were to be seen in the town. During the past winter very few of these birds have been observed. About two weeks ago (January, 1927), Mr. Shute, Provincial Game Guardian, Fort Qu'Appelle, saw two female birds near the station at Fort Qu'Appelle, and on February 2nd, he saw two more female pheasants about six miles north and east of Fort Qu'Appelle. Mr. Harrison states that he has not seen any pheasants for a long time."

ONTARIO

I am indebted to H. W. Hunsberry of Jordan Station, Ontario, for the following information respecting the introduction of the pheasant in Ontario,—

"Mr. August Fleischman of Buffalo, N.Y., who spends his summers at his home in Niagara-on-the-Lake introduced these birds to the Niagara District in 1897 having secured two pairs from a dealer in New Jersey.

"Mr. Oliver Taylor of the same town (Niagara-on-the-Lake) a warm friend of Mr. Fleischman's had the personal supervision over the rearing of the young birds and as soon as they were large enough to look after themselves, they were liberated in beautiful Chateauguay Park adjoining the town and that small bevy was the beginning of the thousands which now roam the Niagara Peninsula.

"The first open season for pheasants in the Niagara District (County of Lincoln) was from October 15th to November 15th, 1910. Thou-



Sprot, G. D. 1928. "The Early Indian Wildfowler of Vancouver Island." *The Canadian field-naturalist* 42(6), 139–143. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.338916>.

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