

PETER KALM
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A leading botanist of the eighteenth century, and student of Linne, Peter Kalm (1716-1779), is known in this country mainly for his extended visit to North America. Kalm spent over three years in the British Colonies and Canada and published a detailed record of his observations. This account, "En Resa til Norra America", has been translated into English and is frequently quoted since Kalm was a keen observer with scientific curiosity on many subjects.

He was born in the province of Angermanland, Sweden, now a part of Finland and studied at the Universities of Upsala and Abo. He came to America in 1747 and travelled widely during his sojourn here. His journal, in addition to its natural history content, has numerous comments on American life and customs. Although references to bird life are not too frequent in Kalm's North American account, his observations are for the most part quite accurate. Hence we are indebted to him for some of the best eighteenth century descriptions of birds in New York State.

Kalm made two trips through New York State. During the summer of 1749 he travelled from New York City to Montreal, the trip requiring about seven weeks. Most of the journey was made by water, via the Hudson River, Lake George and Lake Champlain. In late June he was near Fort Ann and records, "The Whippoorwill cried all night on every side." The next day he writes, "Immense number of wild pigeons have their nests in the trees here". On his return from Canada in October, while on Lake George, "Bustards (Geese) and a few ducks lay in large flocks, hundreds of them rose into the air as we approached".

In the summer of 1750 Kalm again journeyed across New York State, this time westward to Niagara Falls, in his words, "through the land of the Iroquois." As a result of this trip we have an early account of the death of birds being swept over the falls, in more recent times spoken of as "The Niagara Swan Trap." He reached Oswego in mid-August and proceeded by boat to Fort Niagara, then under French control. Kalm presents a detailed description of the falls at Niagara and the destruction of waterfowl there. In speculating on this phenomenon he writes, "either because their wings become wet, or the noise of the fall astonishes them and they know not where to go in the dark." He seems to have reached the sensible conclusion that the birds are gradually carried into the swift water above the falls, and, being unable to rise are swept to their death.

Kalm returned to Sweden in 1751 taking with him a large collection of seeds and plants. He was the original collector of ninety species of American plants described by Linne. Following his return he continued as professor of botany at the University of Abo.

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