



## A Natural Water-Garden

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

THE low, flat country lying between Almirante Bay in western Panama and the Costa Rican border is intersected by innumerable lagoons of sluggish flowing or stagnant water, occupying old beds of the Changuinola, the Sixaola, and other smaller rivers that flow down from the high mountains in the south. When the flood waters cut a new channel for themselves, as they not infrequently do, the former stream bed is left as a lagoon filled with still water. Most of these lagoons have extremely tortuous courses; they form a perfect labyrinth in which the voyager in his dugout canoe may easily go astray, if not familiar with all their turns and twists.

The vegetation along these lagoons is lush and heavy. The shores are lined with giant canes ten or twelve yards in height, heliconias and shell-flowers, each of whose ample leaves would suffice to cover the family dining table; and, in places, especially near the seashore, with silico palms in almost pure stands, their huge fronds, forty or fifty feet in length, arching gracefully over the dark waters like gigantic ostrich plumes. On the higher ground bordering the waterways were once flourishing plantations of bananas and cacao, but most of these have long been abandoned and have grown up into tall, second-growth woodland, the home of howling monkeys,

coatimundis, peccaries and tapirs. Herons, egrets, coots, jacanas, gallinules, kingfishers and birds of many other kinds swarm along the channels; great alligators lurk in the shallows; and now and again a big tarpon breaks the surface, its broad scales shining silvery in the sunlight.

In the shallows along the shores and across the stiller reaches of the lagoons float innumerable plants of water-hyacinth, *Piaropus azureus*, with showy clusters of big blue blossoms, each with a yellow eye; and of water-lettuce, *Pistia stratiotes*, whose flowers are small and inconspicuous. We found the surface of one of the shorter lagoons completely covered over with these two water plants. The taller, dark green water-hyacinth had been drifted by the wind into long, gracefully curving rows; and all the space between was occupied by the lighter green of the floating water-lettuce, whose hairy leaves lay close above the surface. It reminded me of a quaint, old-fashioned formal garden, in which the flowering water-hyacinth took the place of well-trimmed boxwood hedges, and the water-lettuce formed the velvety turf—lawns over which only the long-toed, spur-winged jacanas could walk without wetting their feet. And the wind was the playful gardener who had planned and who had executed the fanciful design.