



MARSH MELODY

By Kristen Hines



WINNER OF FLORIDA PEN WOMEN
Children's Books

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by Kirsten Hines

A band of fiddler crabs gather in grass-like sedges at the edge of the marsh as the tide returns to sea.

A flock of pelicans approach and pass, their wings gliding silently.

The sedges swoosh, a whispered melody.

A great egret stands still in the shallows, waiting and watching for a breakfast fish.

The sedges swish again.

It is the fiddler crabs that swish and swoosh the sedges, an off-stage tuning as they pace among the strands. They are anxious for their own breakfast in the freshly drained sand.

The fiddlers scan the sandy flats. The flats are hushed and empty, a silent stage full of opportunity.

A monarch butterfly flutters to a nearby saltbush, landing silently among the blooms. Another lands beside.

The audience has arrived.

The fiddlers weave through the sedges. Their tiny bodies play the stalks like strings on a violin. The swishing sounds increase to crescendo – swish, swoOSH, SWISH.

The fiddlers push past the sedges and spill out onto the flats.

They start slowly, adagio, making sure the sandy stage is theirs alone. Click... Snap... Click...

Faster now, accelerando. Click.. Snap.. Click..

Faster and faster the tempo speeds to allegro as the fiddlers claim the floor.

The males snap their large claws in concert, showing off as they time the beat. Click. Snap. Click.

The scuttling of their feet across the wet sand and the gurgling of their bubbled breath add new harmony. Tip. Tap. Burble. Gurgle.

The crabs spread across the flats in one formation after another. Click. Snap. Click.

Like a marching band, they strike a pose then shift the rhythm to choose a new direction. Snap. Click. Snap.

WHOOSH. CLANG. Boat-tailed grackles arrive like the crash of a gong.

Faster! Presto! Snap.Snap.Snap.

Louder! Fortissimo! CLICK. CLICK. CLICK.

The fiddlers scramble in all directions.

The boat-tailed grackles waltz across the floor, conducting the crabs into tight formation.

The band darts. The grackles chase.

TAP. A crab is clipped by a beak. It escapes.

PLUCK. Another is not so lucky.

The grackle holds its catch tightly.

The other birds stop to watch.

Shhh, pianissimo. The fiddlers sneak toward the safety of the sedges. tip. tap. tip.

The sedges swish sadly as the fiddlers disappear among the stalks.

The swishing sound accompanies the solo clicking of the captured fiddler's claw. SNAP.
CL I c k. s n a p.

The percussion slows then stops, ritardando.

The grackle's CAW fills the air.

The birds strut along the flats. Their dissonant calls clash across the marsh, replacing the fiddlers' tune.

The fiddlers hold their silence. One whole rest, then another.

The grackles grow impatient and WHOOSH. They leave.

The flats are silent. The marsh is silent.

But only for a moment.

The crabs gather at the edge of the sedges. Swish. Swoosh. Swish. The fiddler ensemble stirs a new symphonic tune.

Author's Note –

I thought of this story as I walked through the marsh at St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. It was a still and silent morning and so the sound of the sedges swishing struck me as unusual. What was making them move? When I got down on my hands and knees, I saw a gathering of fiddler crabs in the sedges.

Fiddler crabs use their front claws to sift through sand and mud to eat algae and tiny pieces of plants mixed in. When the tide rises, it brings new algae and plants from the sea and leaves them behind when the tide goes back out. The crabs likely hid in the grasses when they heard me coming, but they wanted to return to the flats for breakfast. As the crabs paced, the sedges moved and it sounded like a whispered song.

I sat quietly and the crabs returned to the flats to feed. As I watched, I was amazed as they created new sounds. Their tiny feet tip tapped, scraped, and splashed across the wet sand. They gurgled as they breathed tiny air bubbles. The male crabs clicked their large claws to impress the lady crabs. The longer I watched and listened, the more it felt like a concert in the marsh.

Glossary of Musical Terms:

Accompany – play background music for the lead

Beat – basic unit of time in a song

Dissonant – notes that sound like they clash when played together

Dynamics – volume of the music; how loudly or softly it should be played

Crescendo – gradually louder

Fortissimo – very loud

Pianissimo – very quiet

Ensemble – musicians that play together as a group

Gong – large metal plate that is hit with a mallet to make a sound

Harmony – two or more notes played at the same time

Melody – generally the most obvious and catchiest part of a song

Percussion – an instrument that is struck or tapped to make a sound

Rhythm – timing of a song in terms of its regular, repeated patterns

Solo – features the playing of a single performer

Tempo – pace or speed of a song; how quickly or slowly it should be played

Accelerando – gradually faster

Adagio – slow

Allegro – fast

Presto – very fast

Ritardando – gradually slower

Tuning – the practice session heard on a stage just before a concert begins as all instruments match to the same note

Violin – an instrument played by pulling a bow across strings to make them vibrate

Whole Rest – a period of silence lasting an entire beat of the music

Glossary of Natural History Terms:

Boat-tailed Grackle – Birds that hunt for food while walking on the ground. The black males have long tails, females are brown.

Brown Pelican – Large birds that dive for their food, filling their large bills with fish.

Great Egret – Tall, white birds that use their sharp bills to stab fish for food.

Marsh – Areas of low land often covered by water.

Monarch – Distinctive orange and black butterflies that travel thousands of miles across North America to summer as far north as Canada and winter as far south as Mexico.

Fiddler crab – The males of this small crab have one larger claw that they snap and wave to attract females.

Flats – Areas of open mud and sand that are covered by the sea when tides are high.

Saltbush – A bush with small cream to yellow flowers that attract monarch butterflies.

Sedge – Grass-like plants that commonly grow in marshes around the world.

Tide – The daily rise and fall of the ocean.