

CLOSING HISTORY OF THE GUADALUPE CARACARA

By CLINTON G. ABBOTT

There is sentimental as well as scientific interest in a vanishing or extinct species. With what tender accuracy was every bone recorded of the last Passenger Pigeon, whose ancestors had been rudely hawked in the market at five cents a dozen! How carefully, at the present time, is every activity of the sole surviving Heath Hen observed, though formerly the main attention to this species was doubtless as a prospective ingredient of the pot-pie.

Sentiment, therefore, has probably played some part in my interest in the Guadalupe Caracara (*Polyborus lutosus*), although the main influence has unquestionably been the fact that the San Diego Society of Natural History owns three skins of this now extinct bird, of which comparatively few specimens are in existence anywhere. For this proud possession, San Diego can thank the fact that it is a seaport and is situated in the southwest corner of the United States—nearest point in our country to Guadalupe Island, Mexico, former home of this caracara.

Before it was too late to get them I have obtained and here record the remarks of some people who have seen the Guadalupe Caracara in life. I have also made an attempt to list the existing skins. H. S. Swarth wrote me that the California Academy of Sciences formerly had an excellent series of *Polyborus lutosus*, but that they were all destroyed, together with the accompanying records, in the San Francisco fire of 1906. The birds whose skins I have been able to find now extant were taken by only five persons, namely: Edward Palmer, field collector, who secured twenty-four birds in 1875; W. E. Bryant, one-time Curator of Birds at the California Academy of Sciences, two of whose birds, taken in 1885 and 1886, remain; A. W. Anthony, field collector, who secured one bird in 1896; Harry Drent, goat hunter, who brought four birds alive to San Diego in 1898, of which one has been preserved; and Rollo Beck, field collector, who secured nine birds in 1900.

Of this total of thirty-seven recorded specimens I have found the present locations of thirty-four. Two of Palmer's birds and one of Beck's are still unaccounted for, the others being distributed as follows:

U. S. National Museum, 14 (all, including the type, taken by Palmer).

Tring Museum, England, 5 (all taken by Beck)*.

San Diego Society of Natural History, 3 (all taken by Palmer).

American Museum of Natural History (Sanford collection), 2 (1 taken by Palmer and 1 by Beck).

British Museum of Natural History, 2 (both taken by Palmer).

Castle Museum, Norwich, England, 2 (both taken by Palmer).

Thayer Collection, Lancaster, Massachusetts, 2 (both taken by Beck)*.

Carnegie Museum, 1 (taken by Anthony).

Field Museum, 1 (taken by Bryant).

Museum of Comparative Zoology (Brewster collection), 1 (taken by Drent, skinned by Holzner).

Park Museum, Providence, 1 (taken by Bryant).

In the original description of *Polyborus lutosus* (Ridgway, U. S. Geol. and Geog. Surv. Terr., 1, 1876, p. 459) twenty specimens are recorded as being in the U. S. National Museum at that time, collected by Dr. E. Palmer, all with collector's numbers, but only six with dates of capture (five on May 10 and one April 11). All were taken in 1875. Dr. A. Wetmore informs me that fourteen of the series

*Since the preparation of this paper was started, a large proportion of the Tring Museum collection of birds, presumably including the five specimens of Guadalupe Caracara, has been purchased by the American Museum of Natural History; and the two Thayer collection birds have been given to the Museum of Comparative Zoology.

still remain in the National Museum. Of the other six, the records show that two were sent to J. H. Gurney in England in 1882, one was sent to the Mombusho Museum in Tokyo in 1877, one was sent to Graf von Berlepsch in 1882, and one was sent to O. Salvin in 1876. "One more was apparently sent in exchange," states Dr. Wetmore, "but we have no record or entry marked off in the catalog."

The Gurney birds are those now in the Castle Museum, Norwich, and the Salvin bird is one of the two now possessed by the British Museum. Although Count von Berlepsch's collection went to the Senckenberg Museum, Frankfort-on-Main (see Auk, XLVII, 1931, pp. 381-382), no specimen of *Polyborus lutosus* can now be found there. The present curator wrote me: "Because of the fact that Berlepsch was not particularly interested in birds of prey I would not be surprised if at some time he had exchanged the specimen you are seeking for something else."

The skin that went from Washington to the Mombusho Museum is apparently lost forever, destroyed—like the caracara specimens at the California Academy of Sciences—as the result of an earthquake. The Director of the Tokyo Science Museum writes: "The specimen you require might have been sent in 1877 from the Smithsonian Institution to the Mombusho Museum. However, I could not find any record or specimen after the terrible earthquake we experienced in Tokyo, 1923, when we lost numerous valuable specimens and their records altogether. Now the Tokyo Science Museum, formerly known as the Mombusho Museum of Tokyo, is opened in a new building in Uyeno Park."

I have learned by correspondence that there are no specimens in the following collections: Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, Berkeley; Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences; J. H. Fleming collection, Toronto, Canada; Free Public Museum, Liverpool; Paris Museum of Natural History; Zoological Museum of the University of Berlin; and Natural History Museum of Vienna.

Turning our attention to the three birds in San Diego, which are without original data, I find an entry in the minutes of a meeting of the San Diego Society of Natural History held August 20, 1875 (less than a year after the foundation of the Society) as follows: "Donations were received of vultures and an owl from Guadalupe Island by W. W. Stewart." We can no longer find the owl (presumably a Burrowing Owl), but the vultures were beyond doubt the three caracaras. We have the evidence hereinafter presented that they were collected by Dr Palmer, and the W. W. Stewart may have been in some way connected with "Mr. Harry Stewart of San Diego," who is recorded as Dr. Palmer's assistant (Bull. Calif. Acad. Sci., 2, 1887, p. 281). Since Dr. Palmer's Guadalupe bird collection, the bulk of which went to the Smithsonian Institution, was made in the spring of 1875, but little time elapsed before the three caracaras came into the possession of the San Diego Society of Natural History, in August of the same year. At my request, Daniel Cleveland, a charter member of the San Diego Society of Natural History, placed in writing, before he died in 1929, what he knew of the three caracaras. Under date of May 17, 1928, he wrote:

"Your favor of the 15th inst., relating to the skins of the Guadalupe Island eagle now in our Museum, was received yesterday. I have a very distinct recollection of the circumstances relating to our acquisition of these skins. I knew Dr. Edward Palmer, from whom these skins were received, very well. He was, and for many years had been, a professional collector of natural history material, mostly for the Smithsonian and U. S. Gov't institutions. He made several visits to San Diego. He was much more closely associated with me than with any other person at San Diego, and I accompanied him on a few of his collecting trips in the neighborhood of this city.

"About 1875 Dr. Palmer spent several weeks at Guadalupe Island, and returned to San Diego with much scientific material, including, as I recollect, about a dozen skins of the Guadalupe eagle, which he knew to be a rare bird in process of extinction. Largely influenced by his friendship for me, and at my suggestion, as I believe, he donated the skins of this bird now in our possession.

"About 1897, a fisherman captured six of the living eagles on the island, and brought them to San Diego, where he kept them in a large cage, and where, as I remember, all of them died within about a month. The man professed to want to sell these birds, but demanded \$150 each for them, and refused all offers for less. I was very anxious to purchase a pair of them, but could not afford to pay the price demanded. So the man's greed resulted in our failure to rear some of these birds in captivity and in his own loss from his failure to sell the birds."

Frank Stephens, now in his eighty-fourth year and still an active member of the San Diego Natural History Museum staff, recorded for me his memory of this last-named incident, which differs as to the number of caged caracaras, as follows:

"A man whose name I forget, caught one alive and had it in a cage here in San Diego for a time. He tried to sell it but could not find a buyer at the price he asked, and rather than take a small price killed the bird, cut off its wings and threw the body in the bay. Some boys found it and took it to Frank Holzner who retrieved the wings and made a study skin of the specimen." The present whereabouts of this skin, definitely recalled by Stephens as having the wings "sewn on," is unknown. The only Holzner-made skin on record is that in the Brewster collection at the Museum of Comparative Zoology. Its label reads: "Collection Frank X. Holzner, female immature, San Diego, California, March 18, 1898, brought alive to lab., skinned for mounting, ovaries enlarged, 2 eggs nearly developed." Dr. Barbour, in conveying this information, states that "the wings were never cut off. There is no sign of anything of the sort."

Recently, A. M. Ingersoll, another member of the San Diego Society of Natural History, has given me a valuable newspaper clipping written at the time the live caracaras were brought from Guadalupe Island. Unfortunately the source and date of the clipping are unknown, and our searches through files of San Diego papers in an attempt to secure this information have been unsuccessful. It reads: "Harry Drent, a goat hunter, who returned from Guadalupe islands in the schooner Francine, with a load of goat skins, also brought up with him four very rare birds. They are called the Guadalupe carcar, and the species is almost extinct, as only three more are now on the island.

"The way I captured the birds,' said Drent today, 'was by a trick I learned while in South Africa. The first bird I winged with a shotgun. I then made him a prisoner, and staked him near a large boulder. I then took a string, fastened it to a stick, and made a loop similar to a cowboy's lariat. I then hid myself behind the rock, knowing the other birds would come to the captive. I threw the rope and captured a second bird. I then made him a prisoner with the other. By this method I secured four out of the seven birds on the island. . . . The birds that I captured are the first of the kind that have been taken alive. I have been offered \$100 for the four, but I will not sell them. I have written the Smithsonian Institute, and am confident I shall secure a high figure. The birds are easily domesticated, but will not allow strangers to go near them. I have them all named, and each one will come to me when called. I feed them raw meat. They have heads similar to those of eagles, the feathers are of a brownish hue and they are about the size of a small eagle.'"

In conversation with me, Ingersoll supplemented the clipping with his personal

recollection of these caracaras. He said that although he understood four birds were brought from the island, there were, when he saw them, only two, of which one was much larger than the other. They had been taken by Drent to a saloon on Fifth Street near G, and at first were in their cage in the back room, but then chicken-wire was put across the show window and the two birds were placed there. They attracted lots of attention and had a peculiar characteristic of lowering the head, something like a Barn Owl, and swinging it from side to side. Thereafter they were taken away from the saloon, on account of their dirty habits, and later on one of the birds escaped and was caught and killed in a chicken coop near the waterfront. The bird was taken to Frank Holzner, who mounted it and had it on exhibition in his taxidermy shop, then on Fifth Street near B. This shop later burned, and the specimen was consumed. Frank Holzner told Ingersoll that of all his possessions he was sorriest to lose the caracara. I have attempted to learn from the San Diego Fire Department the exact date of this fire but find that the records do not go back that far.

If Ingersoll's recollection of the destruction of this specimen and Stephens' recollection of the bird with sewn-on wings are correct, it must have been still a third of Harry Drent's live birds that eventually found its way to Cambridge, Massachusetts—unless there is a possibility that more than one lot of living caracaras was brought from the island.

The history of the two caracaras of Bryant's taking I have learned by correspondence. Through Rudyerd Boulton I am informed that the Field Museum specimen carries three labels: (1) Collection of W. E. Bryant, 1691, female, Guadalupe Island, Jan. 15, 1885; (2) Cory Collection, 6405, same data; (3) Field Museum of Natural History, 75381, same data. This specimen is listed in Bryant's paper on Guadalupe Island (Bull. Calif. Acad. Sci., 2, 1887, p. 283), but is there recorded as a male. Mr. Boulton states, however, that in an author's reprint of the article the sex of specimen 1691 and also some others has been changed in red ink from male to female, the correction having probably been made by Bryant himself. Director W. L. Bryant writes that the Park Museum bird (mounted) was collected by W. E. Bryant on March 16, 1886. It came to Providence with the Manly Hardy collection, and Outram Bangs stated in correspondence that he recollected that Hardy bought it from Charles K. Worthen.

Frank Stephens has kindly written down for me what he knows of the three specimens owned by the San Diego Society of Natural History and their acquisition. His notes are as follows: "About 1888 A. W. Anthony went with me to the Chamber of Commerce and showed me a case of specimens belonging to the San Diego Society of Natural History. Among other specimens were three Guadalupe Caracaras. After the Carnegie library was built, this case, including the caracaras, was moved to the Carnegie library, where it remained several years. After I became secretary of the Natural History Society I took the caracaras home and put them in a case where I could fumigate them. When I gave my collection to the Society in 1910 I moved the lot, including the Society's caracaras, to the Society's Museum in the Hotel Cecil. None of the caracaras had any data. Dr. Palmer lived a year or two in San Diego and we made a collecting trip together in May, 1889. In conversation with Dr. Palmer he told me that he had given the Society the three caracaras. I believe he visited Guadalupe Island but once—in April and May, 1875. Dr. Palmer had been a 'contract' surgeon in the army, but was in private life when I knew him. He sent more or less of his collections, birds and plants, to the National Museum, among them the Guadalupe Caracara from which Robert Ridgway described the new species *lutusus*." I might add that, as a result of the exposure to light result-

ing from the open display of the specimens mentioned by Stephens, they are somewhat faded.

The history of the Palmer-taken caracara now in the American Museum of Natural History is thus given by Stephens: "In the spring of 1877 I visited Mrs. Roberts, then living near National City. She was a nature lover and had quite a number of specimens of various kinds most of which she had gotten together herself, including some mounted birds mounted by herself. Among the birds was the skin of a caracara which she said was collected by Dr. Edward Palmer and given her by him, as was also a Guadalupe Junco. As she did not seem to care much for them, apparently because they were not mounted, I offered to exchange a mounted albino burrowing owl for these two skins. She accepted the offer and I took the skins home with me to Campo, where I was living at the time. The caracara is now in the American Museum, and the junco is in the San Diego Natural History Museum."

A. W. Anthony, who also lives in San Diego, has related to me the circumstances surrounding the capture, on September 20, 1896, of the caracara which bears his label in the Carnegie Museum. He said that this bird was not taken by him personally. He was in a boat anchored off Guadalupe Island and had two assistants, brothers, by the name of Gaylord, who were helping him get natural history specimens. One was collecting botanical specimens particularly, and the other, Horace A. Gaylord, was helping Anthony with bird specimens. They returned from the island with the caracara now in the Carnegie Museum. From what we now know, the species must have been nearing extinction at the time this specimen was secured. Anthony recalls that it was a piece of good luck that the bird was obtained, since Gaylord at first believed he had not hit the bird, as it flew off apparently uninjured. However, after a while it dropped and Gaylord was able to retrieve it.

Gaylord's own entertaining account of the capture was published in the *Nidologist* (iv, January, 1897, pp. 41-43). An excellent list of other bibliographical references relating to the Guadalupe Caracara, including observations of its habits in life, appearance of its eggs, etc., is given by Dr. Grinnell in his "Distributional Summation of the Ornithology of Lower California" (*Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool.*, 32, 1928, p. 113).

The closing chapter of scientific contact with living Guadalupe Caracaras was unwittingly written by Rollo H. Beck. He recently stated in a letter to me: "Although I had no idea of it at the time it seems probable to me that I secured the last of the Guadalupe Caracaras on Guadalupe Island on the afternoon of December 1, 1900. Of 11 birds that flew toward me 9 were secured. The other two were shot at but got away. The 11 birds were all that were seen, but judging by their tameness and the short time that I was on the island I assumed at the time that they must be abundant. All of the skins but one went with my Galapagos material to Lord Rothschild in England. One skin which I kept for a while went finally to the Thayer Museum."

Like Beck, any person could hardly have suspected, upon seeing a flock of 11 of these island caracaras, that they might be the last, or almost the last, of their kind on earth. But history has proved such to be the case. Subsequent collectors have searched in vain for these conspicuous scavenging falcons. As is to be expected, rumors occasionally stir; but, beyond any question of doubt, they are extinct.

San Diego Society of Natural History, Balboa Park, San Diego, California, September 15, 1932.