

Gleanings from the Journal of William Brewster

Robert H. Stymeist

January 3, 1881 "Pig Rocks" off Swampscott, Mass.

Tringa maritima — Wishing to investigate the alleged occurrence of the Purple Sandpiper in winter off Lynn, I took the train to-day and after making some inquiries of Mr. Welch, I hired a dory and a fisherman to row it and started from Swampscott for the Pig Rocks. The day was a favorable one for the season and the sea was comparatively smooth but a chill wind swept over the water and made the trip anything but a pleasant one.

The Pig Rocks lie about four miles from Swampscott up the coast. They are a little over a mile from shore and in the open ocean. When we reached them the tide was nearly at its highest and we found exposed two oblong rocks about 100 yards apart and of nearly uniform size and shape. The sides rose nearly perpendicularly from the water to the height of perhaps fifteen feet and their nearly flat tops were covered with snow. Each was perhaps twenty yards long by ten in width. At low tide they are said to be surrounded by a considerable expanse of ledges which are of course covered with the usual shiny growth of sea-weed. These I could see under the water and the tops of the higher portions occasionally showed for an instant to be covered the next by the rolling swells.

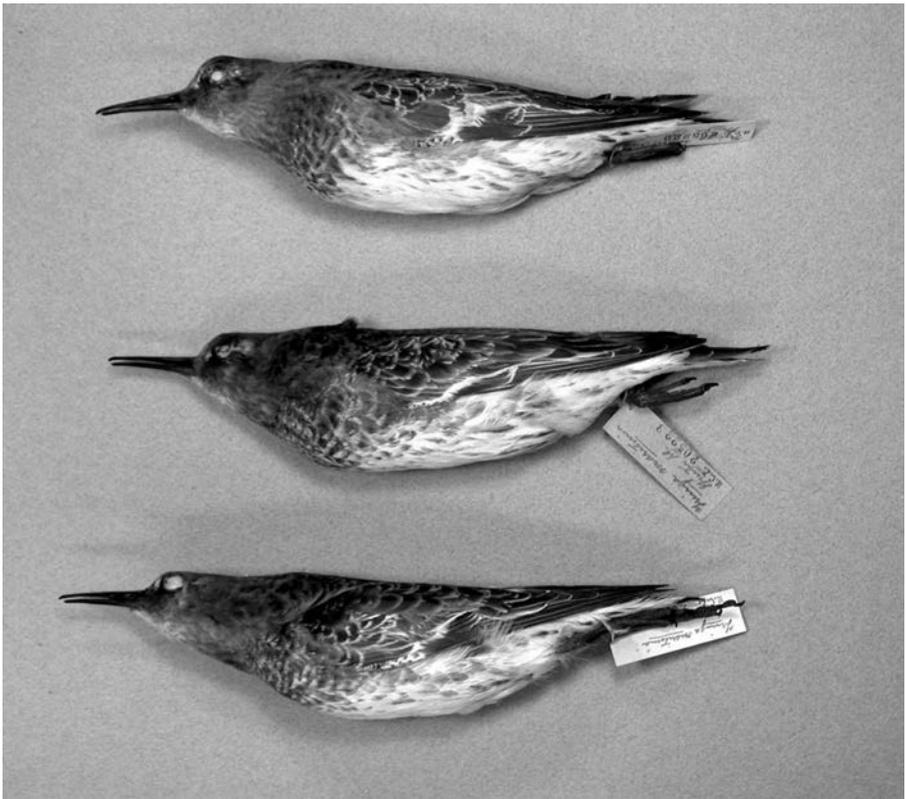
Upon the first rock we found nothing but a Black backed Gull which stood on the snow capped crest, outlined against the sky and of course took wing long before we were within gun range. As we approached the outer or eastern island however I saw something move and closely scanning the rough and nearly vertical wall of granite made out a number of Purple Sandpipers huddled together near the top where they were sheltered from the cold wind. My boatman afterwards said that he should have taken them for English Sparrows as they clung to the rough surface very much as Sparrows will cluster about the angles of a roof on a blustery day. Occasionally one or another would stretch his wings above his back and then deliberately refold them again, otherwise they seldom moved. It was to me a most interesting sight and one to be remembered, these boreal Sandpipers perched high above the water with a snow-drift above them and the icy surges incessantly sweeping past beneath or breaking in glistening spray on one of the outlying ledges. Their stronghold had indeed been well chosen for it is rarely smooth enough in the winter for boats to approach the spot. It is probable that they never leave their rocks except during heavy easterly weather when the surf breaks over the summit of the rocks and nothing can be there for a time.

After watching them a little while, I fired into them and secured seven with two barrels. Eight only were left and these after flying about for awhile lit on the other island when I followed them and secured three more. The remaining five there became so shy that we could not readily approach them and as the wind was fast freshening we started for the shore.

These Sandpipers flew swiftly in a close bunch and generally just over the crests of the waves. Once or twice they tried to alight on some of the ledges that were beginning to be uncovered by the falling tide but the surf always seemed to frighten them and they would swirl away again after just standing for a moment with opened wings. They uttered a short 'quit' when flying which closely resembled the note of the Sanderling. When perched on the gray rocks they looked nearly black. On one occasion when they had lit in a bunch on a flat ledge at the base of one of the rocks they scattered as we approached and apparently began to feed. I noticed that they walked in a slow, deliberate manner and indeed all their movements seemed sluggish. Upon dissecting several of them I found their stomachs filled with small shells several of which were whole.

In Lynn Harbor were great flocks of Old Squaws and a gunner who had some decoys out was apparently having good shooting at them. I was forcibly struck by the close resemblance which the male Old Squaw bore when flying to the Passenger Pigeon. 

Journal of William Brewster, pages 186-187 Volume 2. Reprinted with permission from the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.



PURPLE SANDPIPERS, COLLECTED BY WILLIAM BREWSTER AS DESCRIBED, FROM THE MUSEUM OF COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY.