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BIRDS OF TURNEFFE AND NORTHERN TWO CAYS, BRITISH HONDURAS

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In May, 1862, Mr. Osbert Salvin, the eminent English ornithologist, visited a number of the outer cays of British Honduras. During the fortnight he was among the islands he collected on Turneffe and Northern Two Cays and, as far as I can ascertain, these have never been revisited by any ornithologist prior to an excursion there by me and my wife in January, 1954. Since Salvin had been primarily in search of water-fowl, my interest was centered on land birds.

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DESCRIPTION OF THE CAYS

On the continental shelf off the mainland of British Honduras, within the 100-fathom line, are most of the coastal cays of the Colony. Of this group the largest and most northern is Ambergris Cay on the border of the

State of Quintana Roo, Mexico; the southernmost is South Cay about 35 miles east of the settlement of Punta Gorda.

Separated from these coastal cays by a rather narrow but deep (over 200 fathom) channel are situated the Turneffe Cays contained in a barrier reef about 33 miles in length by 11 miles in breadth at its widest. From the sea Turneffe appears as a solid land mass and is so shown in many atlases. However, the land consists of a group of cays surrounding 2 extensive lagoons, the larger one in the south. Apparently all of the cays of Turneffe are less than 3 miles in width and the land area is therefore very limited.

There is no high ground on Turneffe, the cays being barely above sea-level. The foliage consists mostly of mangroves (*Rhizophora*), but there are also numerous sapodilla trees (*Sapota*) and a few hibiscus (probably *H. tiliaceus*); coconut palms have been planted on various cays. The indigenous fauna is very limited, except for water-fowl. An iguana-like lizard (probably *Ctenosaura*), drab in color with black bars across the back, was noted on several occasions near Rendezvous Point at the northern end of the atoll.

About 30 miles east of Turneffe, separated by a wide and deep channel, are the Northern Two Cays at the northern end of Lighthouse Reef, which encircles a number of small cays. Northern Two Cays consists of one large cay about 5 miles in length and a minute cay on which a lighthouse has been built. All my records from Northern Two Cays pertain to the larger island, a low swampy area much like Turneffe. I must admit that my visit to Northern Two Cays, like that of Salvin's many years earlier, "proved rather a failure", for there were even fewer indigenous land birds here than on Turneffe. The only other native vertebrates seen were some iguana-like lizards, sooty black, but otherwise like those mentioned above, and a small black lizard, probably of the genus *Anolis*.

ITINERARY

We left Belize on the launch "Lolette" on January 20, 1954, anchoring for the night at Grand Bog Creek, off southwestern Turneffe. The following day landings were made at Besente Point in northwestern Turneffe. On January 22 Northern Two Cays was visited, but we returned to Turneffe to pass the night. On January 23 we landed at Cockroach Cay off northeastern Turneffe, and later collected at Rendezvous Point and elsewhere in northern Turneffe. Besente Point was revisited in the morning of January 24 and later that day we returned to Belize.

AVIFAUNAL AFFINITIES

Up to the time I visited the outer cays of British Honduras only 3 of the indigenous birds known from there could be considered as comprising an Antillean element in the avifauna; viz. *Pandion haliaetus ridgwayi*, *Columba leucocephala*, and *Elaenia martinica chinchorrensis*. I thought that a study of the avifauna of Turneffe might add others, since there are additional West Indian species found on the interesting island of Cozumel off the coast of Quintana Roo, Mexico. However, I not only discovered no further Antillean species, but on Turneffe was able to add 5 (all collected) that were undoubtedly derived from the adjacent mainland of Central America; viz. *Centurus dubius*, *Tyrannus melancholicus*, *Vireo ochraceus*, *Vireo magister* and *Icterus cucullatus*.

On the other hand, several of the migrant North American wood warblers encountered were species that winter for the most part in the West Indies; but, as I have maintained (cf. First Suppl. Check-list Birds West Indies, Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila., 1951, pp. 17-18), these should not be considered as comprising an Antillean element. They are merely North American species that deliberately avoid the mainland of Central America presumably to escape intense competition.

ANNOTATED LIST

***Pelecanus occidentalis* subsp.**

Frequently observed at Turneffe and Northern Two Cays. It is of course impossible to say whether all of the individuals seen were *P. o. carolinensis* Gmelin; some may well have been the smaller West Indian *P. o. occidentalis* Linnaeus. The species was said to breed on Saddle Cay (Lighthouse Reef), according to Salvin.

Brown pelicans had previously been reported from Turneffe by Salvin.

***Sula leucogaster leucogaster* (Boddaert)**

Three of these boobies were observed by Salvin between Glover's Reef and Cay Bokel, the southernmost of the Turneffe Cays. He stated that this booby was said to breed on Mauger Cay, the northernmost islet of this group.

There is a colony of *Sula s. sula* (Linnaeus) on Half-Moon Cay, one of the cays of Lighthouse Reef that is now a bird sanctuary. This colony was flourishing as long ago as 1862, according to Salvin.

Phalacrocorax auritus floridanus (Audubon)

Since Salvin reported a nesting colony and collected skins and eggs (now in the collection of the British Museum) of this cormorant at Man-of-war Cay, Turneffe, it seems likely that the species breeds also on islets off the coast of eastern Mexico, although Blake considers *Ph. a. floridanus* merely a winter resident of that country. No cormorants were seen during our visit, probably since we did not enter the interior lagoons.

Fregata magnificens Mathews

Frequently observed at Turneffe and Northern Two Cays. Salvin located a breeding colony at Turneffe.

Ardea herodias subsp.

One observed at Northern Two Cays.

Casmerodius albus egretta (Gmelin)

Two observed at Turneffe, where Salvin reported finding "old nests."

Egretta thula thula (Molina)

This heron was not noted by us, although Salvin reported a breeding colony on Man-of-war Cay, Turneffe.

Hydranassa tricolor ruficollis (Gosse)

A specimen in juvenal plumage collected at Turneffe by Salvin is in the collection of the British Museum.

Florida caerulea (Linnaeus)

Seen more frequently than any other heron at Turneffe and Northern Two Cays. The species is not mentioned by Salvin.

Butorides virescens subsp.

One observed at Northern Two Cays was either *B. v. maculatus* (Boddaert) or a winter resident of one of the North American races.

Cochlearius cochlearius zeledoni (Ridgway)

One observed at Turneffe by Salvin.

Nyctanassa violacea subsp.

One seen at Northern Two Cays.

Eudocimus albus (Linnaeus)

A nesting colony was discovered at Turneffe by Salvin.

Pandion haliaetus ridgwayi Maynard

Common at Turneffe, where two nests were seen, one apparently occupied. A nest was also observed on Northern Two Cays.

Rallus longirostris subsp.

While "squeaking up" land birds on Northern Two Cays I noticed a Clapper Rail standing motionless some 20 yards from me. On raising my gun the bird ran rapidly into high grass and although I fired into this I unfortunately failed to obtain the specimen. The bird may have been *R. l. grossi* Paynter, described from a single female from Cayo Centro, Chinchorro Bank, *R. l. belizensis* Oberholser, described from a single skin from Ycacos Lagoon, British Honduras, or *R. l. pallidus* Nelson, of coastal Yucatán and Quintana Roo, known from only two specimens.

According to men working on the coconut plantations of Northern Two Cays, this bird is well known under the name of "Twopenny Chick" and occurs on many of the mangrove cays off British Honduras. I suspect that an adequate series of specimens from these cays will not show any racial differences serving to separate them subspecifically from those inhabiting the Chinchorro Cays. There is considerable individual variation among West Indian races of this species.

Charadrius wilsonia wilsonia Ord

Two nests of this plover found by Salvin on Grassy Cay, Turneffe.

Arenaria interpres morinella (Linnaeus)

Taken by Salvin at Turneffe.

Bartramia longicauda (Bechstein)

Collected by Salvin at Turneffe.

Actitis macularia (Linnaeus)

One seen at Northern Two Cays.

Crocethia alba (Pallas)

Collected at Northern Two Cays by Salvin.

Sterna dougallii dougallii Montagu

A number observed at Grassy Cay, Turneffe, by Salvin.

Sterna albifrons antillarum (Lesson)

A colony found nesting on Grassy Cay, Turneffe, by Salvin.

Thalasseus maximus maximus (Boddaert)

Very common about Turneffe and Northern Two Cays in January, but not reported from either locality by Salvin in May.

Thalasseus sandvicensis acufavidus (Cabot)

Although Salvin obtained a specimen of this tern between Half-Moon Cay and Saddle Cay (Lighthouse Reef), he had no definite record of this

species from Northern Two Cays, merely remarking that "'gulls,' as they are called (*Thalasseus aculeatus*), had not yet assembled" there.

Salvin visited Southwest-of-all Cay (Glover's Reef), where 2 species of noddies (*Anous stolidus* and *A. minutus*) were nesting in great numbers. I was told that this colony had greatly diminished in size. Since this islet is the only known nesting grounds of *A. minutus* in the entire Caribbean area and the only locality whence *A. m. americanus* (Mathews) has been reported, it would seem advisable to establish a bird sanctuary here.

***Columba leucocephala* Linnaeus**

Salvin and I both found this widespread West Indian species on Turneffe. I was told it also inhabits Northern Two Cays, but I did not see it there.

***Anthracothorax prevostii prevostii* (Lesson)**

Two were seen at a blossoming *Hibiscus* on Turneffe, but although I waited over an hour they did not reappear and no specimen was collected. This hummingbird has been reported from certain cays of Lighthouse Reef and Glover's Reef by Todd and from "the tiny north cay," Chinchorro Bank, by Griscom. A closely allied race (*A. p. gracilirostris*) inhabits the Bay Islands of Honduras where I collected specimens in 1936.

I suspect that the description and illustration of a female of *A. p. prevostii* in Blake's "Birds of Mexico" (p. 250) represents the immature plumage, for fully adult females of *A. p. gracilirostris* Ridgway, and *A. p. hendersoni* (Cory) are evidently andromorphous (cf. Bond, "First Suppl. to Check-list Bds. West Indies [1950]," Acad. Nat. Sci. Philadelphia, 1951, pp. 11-12).

***Amazilia rutila rutila* (De Lattre)**

Common on Turneffe, where it was collected, and on Northern Two Cays. It has been reported from Half-Moon Cay by Salvin.

With the possible exception of *Dendroica petechia bryanti* this cinnamon-breasted hummingbird appeared to be the most abundant bird on the cays visited. On the Bay Islands of Honduras the little green *Chlorostilbon mellisugus canivetii* (Lesson) outnumbers every other species.

***Ceryle alcyon alcyon* (Linnaeus)**

Observed at Turneffe and Northern Two Cays. The larger *C. t. torquata* (Linnaeus) is found in considerable numbers about the mangrove swamps near Belize, but does not appear to have invaded the cays.

Centurus aurifrons dubius (Linnaeus)

Several seen and heard on the Turneffe Cays. They were quite noisy early in the morning, but were quiet during the heat of the day. A male collected in a coconut grove on Cockroach Cay resembles examples from Yucatán.

Centurus is the only genus of woodpecker that has become established on the Bay Islands of Honduras, where 3 endemic forms occur; viz. *C. aurifrons insulanus* Bond, of Utila, *C. aurifrons canescens* Salvin, of Roatán and Barburat, and *C. rubricapillus tysoni* Bond, of Bonaco.

Tyrannus melancholicus chloronotus Berlepsch

An abundant and conspicuous bird on the mainland of British Honduras, and fairly common on the Turneffe Cays; also reported from Chinchorro Reef by Griscom. A specimen was collected at Cockroach Cay.

Although I never was particularly reminded of *T. dominicensis* when I have encountered this kingbird (the same subspecies) in Grenada and Trinidad, the individuals I saw and heard at Turneffe were reminiscent of that common West Indian species, for they were remarkably similar in behavior and voice,—so much so that I now doubt and wish to retract my sight record of "*Tyrannus dominicensis*" between La Ceiba and Puerto Castilla, Honduras (Auk, vol. 54, no. 1, 1937, p. 102).

A characteristic West Indian species (*Elaenia martinica chinchorrensis* Griscom) is known to occur on certain of the outermost cays of British Honduras. I have examined a specimen of this form in the British Museum from Half-Moon Cay (Lighthouse Reef), and Mr. W. E. Clyde Todd informs me that there are 2 specimens from Middle Cay (Glover's Reef) in the Carnegie Museum at Pittsburgh. This bird may occur sparingly on Northern Two Cays which have not been well explored, but I doubt if it is found on Turneffe. Elsewhere the subspecies is known only from Great Cay, Chinchorro Bank, where Griscom obtained a specimen.

Mimus gilvus leucophaeus Ridgway

Observed at Rendezvous Point, Turneffe, by me and recorded from cays of Lighthouse Reef and Glover's Reef by Salvin.

Another species of Mimidae (*Melanoptila glabrirostris* Selater) has been recorded from Lighthouse Reef and Glover's Reef by Salvin. I did not encounter it on Northern Two Cays nor on the Turneffe Cays, although I believe I saw a pair in a dense swamp near Belize.

Vireo ochraceus semiflavus Salvin

Two of these vireos were seen and another heard in low shrubbery on Turneffe. An adult female was collected at Rendezvous Point. The only song heard resembled a rapid *wi-wi-wi-wi-wi*, much like that of a white-breasted nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis* Latham), but very different from normal songs of North American white-eyed vireos, although I once heard an individual of *V. g. noveboracensis* (Gmelin) emit a similar kind of song.

V. o. semiflavus is very different in appearance from *V. griseus*. It is smaller but with a longer and paler bill, more extensively yellow under parts, and with greyish rather than whitish irides. In the field the irides appear darker than they are, as they do in forms of *V. crassirostris* (Bryant) of the West Indies. As in *V. crassirostris* and certain other West Indian species of this group there are 2 color "phases," one in which the under parts are strongly suffused with yellow. The Turneffe female is one of the brightly colored examples and closely resembles a male in breeding condition that I collected on Utila Island, Honduras. Four other males and a female that I collected on Utila have the under parts but lightly washed with yellow.

I feel confident that the Central American *V. ochraceus* is more closely related to certain West Indian forms of this complex than to the North American white-eyed vireos (*V. griseus*).

Vireo magister magister (Lawrence)

Seen more frequently than *V. o. semiflavus* on the Turneffe Cays and usually observed higher in the trees. No singing was heard during my visit. A male was collected at Besente Point.

This species is a permanent resident in all parts of its range, although closely related forms of *V. altiloquus* of the West Indies and "*V. flavo-iridis*" of Mexico and Central America undergo long and perilous migrations to South America.

Mniotilta varia (Linnaeus)

Observed at Turneffe and Northern Two Cays.

Parula americana subsp.

Noted at Turneffe and Northern Two Cays. An immature female was collected at Turneffe.

Dendroica petechia bryanti Ridgway

One of the most abundant birds on Turneffe and Northern Two Cays and the only resident wood warbler. The species has also been reported from Half-Moon Cay by Salvin.

***Dendroica magnolia* (Wilson)**

I have sight records of this North American wood warbler from both Turneffe and Northern Two Cays, and frequently heard the characteristic, wheezy alarm notes that I have associated with its breeding grounds in the coniferous forests of eastern North America.

***Dendroica tigrina* (Gmelin)**

One shot at Rendezvous Point. No others observed. This species winters for the most part in the West Indies, but has been recorded from the Yucatán Peninsula, Chinchorro Bank and from the Bay Islands of Honduras (Roatán).

***Dendroica caerulescens* subsp.**

An immature female was collected at Rendezvous Point, Turneffe. According to Blake, there are only 2 Mexican records of this species (both from Cozumel Island), which winters for the most part in the West Indies.

***Dendroica coronata* subsp.**

Observed on Northern Two Cays.

***Dendroica virens* subsp.**

One shot for identification on Northern Two Cays.

***Dendroica dominica* subsp.**

A fine adult individual observed on Northern Two Cays.

***Dendroica palmarum palmarum* (Gmelin)**

One observed at close range in northern Turneffe. Griscom found this warbler "the commonest of the winter resident land birds" on Great Cay, Chinchorro Reef, but it winters principally in the Bahamas and western portions of the Greater Antilles.

D. discolor (Vieillot), another North American warbler that winters for the most part in the West Indies, should occur on the outer cays of British Honduras, for it has been noted on Cozumel Island and Great Cay (Quintana Roo), as well as on Bonaco, one of the Bay Islands of Honduras.

***Seiurus noveboracensis* subsp.**

Common on Turneffe and Northern Two Cays.

***Geothlypis trichas* subsp.**

Noted in northern Turneffe. Also seen on the mainland near Belize and Roaring Creek, on one occasion in company with *Chamaethlypis poliocephalus palpebralis* Ridgway.

Wilsonia citrina (Boddaert)

An adult male seen on Northern Two Cays.

Setophaga ruticilla subsp.

The commonest of the North American Warblers on Turneffe and Northern Two Cays, but very few adult males were observed.

Quiscalus mexicanus mexicanus (Gmelin)

Common on the Turneffe Cays and abundant on Northern Two Cays. Recorded from Half-Moon Cay by Salvin.

The squeaky notes of this grackle reminded me of Antillean grackles of the subgenus *Holoquiscalus*.

Icterus cucullatus masoni Griscom

Apparently fairly common on the Turneffe Cays, whence 2 males were collected (wing 87.5-88 mm.). Although the breeding season was not at hand, the soft warbling of this oriole was heard on a number of occasions in the mangrove swamps. This form had been recorded from Ambergris Cay (adjoining the Mexican State of Quintana Roo) by Griscom, but is not known from any of the cays of Lighthouse Reef and Glover's Reef.

Since orioles of this species from Cozumel (*I. c. cozumelae* Nelson) and from the islands of Mujeres, Holbox and Meco (*I. c. duplexus* Nelson) are recognizably distinct from those of the mainland, it is possible, although improbable, that those from Turneffe represent an undescribed subspecies. Acquisition of adequate material is necessary before one could reach any conclusion on this point.

Dolichonyx oryzivorus (Linnaeus)

Collected on Northern Two Cays by Salvin. The regular migration route of the bobolink to and from its wintering grounds in South America is by way of the West Indies. Although not included by Blake in his "Birds of Mexico" (1953), the species has been recorded from Cozumel, and there are specimens in the British Museum from that island.

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