THE AUK:

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF

ORNITHOLOGY.

VOL. XXXI. APRIL, 1914. No. 2

AMONG THE BIRDS OF THE EASTERN SUDAN.

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Plate XIII.[1]

LOOKING back on our short collecting trip into the eastern part of the Sudan, the Blue-Nile basin, it is remarkable how strongly the first few days of the trip stand out in memory. The novelty of great spaces, of the groaning, toiling camels, of the burning noons and delicious nights, soon dissolves into an everyday existence, and one week becomes almost exactly like the next; so exactly, in fact, that after a month or more one ceases to remark on the weather and almost forgets he is living out of doors. A feeling rather steals over one that this is not the open air, but a great glass house, steam heated and weather proof.

Behold us then launched suddenly from the dusty train into the brilliant moonlight at Sennar. It was Christmas Eve, and all day long the train had been crawling away from Khartoum, over dusty durrah fields, at an average rate of just twelve miles an hour. Amidst great confusion we detrained our nine camels, giving three of them an opportunity to escape, which, camel like, they soon took advantage of.

In a large thorn enclosure we stowed away our luggage, made our beds and turned in. Supper was a brief affair that night. The full moon glared down upon us, a striped hyena gave his very

[1] Female *Caprimulgus eleanoræ* Phillips, three quarters natural size.

CAPRIMULGUS ELEANORAE PHILLIPS

musical call, and from the sky above came the clamor of hundreds and it seemed thousands of European Cranes. Off in the distance was the confused sound of the village, donkeys, dogs and drums all jumbled together and softened into a weird sort of chant.

During the night we fought off the many hungry dogs, but not until they had stolen all our available lunch for the coming day. It was cold by 4:00 A. M., and we were out early, trying to warm up. At dawn we took our guns and strolled off into the great fields of durrah grain, then mostly harvested. For miles around Sennar there is hardly a tree left, the Blue-Nile flows drearily through a deep channel with high mud banks, with great sand bars and beaches at their bases. The current is swift and the water clear, coming as it does from the mountain region of Abyssinia, but by January this river is usually too low for steamboat navigation. Birds were about these fields in great numbers, but not of many kinds. First must come the cranes which winter all the way from Khartoum to Rosseires. They are mostly the Grey Crane of eastern Europe, *Megalornis grus grus,* but there are some of the smaller Demoiselle Cranes and a few African Crowned Cranes. No books had given us any idea of the enormous numbers of cranes on the Blue-Nile. It was by far the most notable bird sight of the region, and pleasing because unexpected. These cranes spend the night on the river sands in flocks of hundreds and always far away from any cover, so that they are perfectly safe. They feed inland mostly where there is cultivation and never seem to pass along the same flight lines. Their wariness is remarkable and it was pleasant to see such a safe retreat for these splendid fowl. I wondered why bird fanciers were made to pay ninety to one hundred and twenty-five dollars for a living pair, but no doubt on their breeding range they are scattered and hard to trap. By the end of February nearly all of these cranes had moved away from Sennar.

Other birds we saw that first morning were doves in endless numbers, their calls resounding in every direction. Here we obtained *Turtur isabellinus,* which we did not get again. Other turtle doves were very abundant, and the little long-tailed Cape Dove was seen everywhere, walking about the path in front of us, always very tame. This attractive bird is now imported alive

into America in large numbers. Shrikes of two kinds were common and a large blue hawk, *Melierax metabates*, was very conspicuous. This, the commonest large hawk of the country, is very sluggish and quite tame. Once, riding along a trail we passed one sitting in a low thorn tree, when to our astonishment he came crashing to the ground and lay there completely paralyzed. When we picked him up he offered no resistance and seemed perfectly limp, although he still grasped a freshly killed sparrow in his talons. On dissection we could find nothing diseased about this bird except possibly a small hemorrhage back of the ear. This was the first time we had ever seen a bird struck down from apparently natural causes, but he might have sustained a blow previously.

The most noticeable small birds around Sennar were Stone-chats, the common Isabelline Wheatear, a migrant, and the White Wagtail, also a wanderer.

We have delayed too long around Sennar and must get southwards, and can only pause to mention a few of the striking birds. The traveller up the Blue-Nile notices a fairly sudden entrance to the more African, or more tropical birds, though the bare scenery of leafless thorn forest is far from tropical in appearance. About El-Mesherat, or a little before, one gets into patches of dense bush near the river, with elephant grass, baobab trees, a few palms and here and there wild fig trees whose glorious foliage of dark green leaves gives the sun smitten traveller a dense shade all through the dry season. Hidden in these trees are the wary green Fruit Pigeons. Bird life, numerically at least, is remarkable in the bush about here. Dense swarms of plain colored Weaver Finches, mostly of two species and now of course in winter plumage, whirl about with a perfect roar of wings, looking like swarms of bees. No one can imagine the size or density of these flocks, which at first are really startling as they hurtle over one's head. We thought that one well directed shot would often kill a hundred. Imagine the feelings of an Arab when one of these flocks takes possession of his durrah patch, for it spells ruin in a short time. The children are all put to work with strings and movable scarecrows to frighten birds away, and they are kept busy all day long. The hanging nests of weaver finches are a conspicuous feature of the Sudan landscape, and sometimes a small thorn tree will hold twenty or thirty of them.

In the neighborhood of Karkoj and El Mesherat (latitude about 13 N.) we began to see Green Monkeys in the taller trees, and here and there the beautiful little Oribi, an antelope which will survive long after the great animals of the eastern Sudan have been crowded out. About in this latitude also, Hornbills of two species become common, though the small red-billed one, *Lophocerus hemprichi* is much the more plentiful. Prominent in the memory of those burning hot noons is the rising call of this bird, "Weet, weet," repeated till it reaches a crescendo, when the performer straightens up, opens his wings and bobs up and down. This is almost the only sound heard through the heat of the day, when bird life is hushed and the natives are fast asleep in their conical straw huts.

The large Brown Hornbill is a very different bird. He is wild, usually seen singly, and inhabits high trees where he emits a loud anvil-like note, at first single, then double, and accompanied by a flapping of the wings. There is another sort, the great Abyssinian Ground Hornbill, which is rare and we did not see it.

A shy and very beautiful bird of the Blue-Nile is the Red-breasted Bush-shrike, whose crimson underparts gleam through the thickets like a living flame. These birds have responsive notes, the male and female always combining in producing one call. I cannot do better than quote from Dr. G. M. Allen's notes on this subject. "Usually one bird gives a loud rich-toned whistle, "a-wheeo" the first syllable very faint; the other bird instantly replies with a harsh 'churr,' given either at the same instant, or following so closely that it is hard to distinguish the exact moment. Sometimes I have heard two different birds respond to a single bird whistling. More rarely the 'wheeo' is given in response to a call from the other, a harsh 'churr churr.' The two birds of a pair usually keep close together." Dr. Allen thought that the male gave the first note, the whistle.

As one gets south, parrots become much more plentiful. They are of two sorts. A long-tailed kind, the commoner, ranges pretty far north wherever there are large trees, and breeds high up in holes, even in January and February. They crack the nuts of the Laloab tree, a fruit much used by the antelopes and also very good to quench one's thirst. This parrot and its nearly related but larger Indian cousin are both seen breeding at large in the

zoological gardens in Cairo. The short tailed Meyer's Parrot with orange spots on the bend of the wings, is a small and very lively bird, exceedingly hard to collect, and only common in the southern part of our region.

It is hopeless to try to give any idea of the large number of species which we encountered in the two months, January and February, and a poor time of the year it was at best. In the way of game birds the Helmeted Guinea-fowl stands first, though in gameness he certainly stands at the foot of the list. This bird is seen all over the eastern Sudan, often in incredible numbers, and I can truthfully state that I encountered one flock containing a thousand head, a great bluish mass of moving fowl which ran ahead of me, occasionally rising by the hundred and alighting again. Flocks of a hundred or more were too common to be remarked upon. This species seems to live by sheer force of numbers, its stupidity is notorious, and it is preyed upon by all the small and very numerous carnivores, by the abundant hawks and by long lines of string nooses set by the Arabs. An English resident told me he had never seen its nest and A. L. Butler makes the same statement in 'The Ibis.' He thinks it must nest only in the rainy season, when travel is very difficult and the whole country is a sea of mud. In January, there were still some very young looking birds mixed in with these big flocks.

The francolin of the country is *Francolinus clappertoni*, a rather large and handsomely marked partridge which occurs mostly along the strips of heavy elephant grass near the river. In the morning it gets out onto the open edges of the grass and rises briskly and rather quietly, like a pheasant. It might make quite a good game bird, but its flesh, though white and fine looking, is rather a disappointment, for like that of the guinea fowl it is tough and dry. Perhaps if the birds could be hung in a cool place the result would be different.

The river birds of the Blue-Nile and its tributary the Dinder are not numerous, for there is very little food on the sandy, shifting shores. That patriarch of all birds, the Whale-headed Stork, or Shoe-bill is only found on the White Nile, and the great Goliath Heron we did not see at all, though it does occur in the eastern Sudan, more commonly perhaps in the summer season of flood.

The only common heron was a plain, grey looking species, *Ardea melanocephala*, which fed on insects in the great, open, damp "meres." These "meres" are a common feature on the Dinder River, where they attract great herds of game, holding as they do, water and succulent grasses till late in the dry season. With these herds of game enormous flocks of Little Egrets associate, and a lone old buffalo bull would often have a number perched on his back. The stomach of one of these Little Egrets contained lizards, locusts, and to our surprise, a butterfly.

We saw the curious Hammer-head Stork, an ugly and lonely looking bird quite often, and always by himself, and there was a Night Heron which we did not get.

The Egyptian Goose brings up thoughts of the departed great, for he figures so often on the tombs of the early dynasties as to have a real historical significance, while his egg had in those times a religious meaning. Apparently he was domesticated by the early Egyptians, but if so, this art was lost very long ago. Hayne, in his book on domestic animals, discusses this point and quotes St. Hilaire's account of an attempt in France to add this bird to our poultry. The attempt extended over a number of years, 1839 to 1845, and was partly successful, inasmuch as the birds increased in weight and grew lighter in color, while their breeding and laying time began to be extended. Nothing permanent, however, was accomplished and this species is now only an ornament and not a very desirable one either, for its temper is very uncertain and it is often dangerous in a collection of smaller water fowl. This goose exists at present in Egypt and on the Nubian Nile only in little scattered troops, while its great stronghold is the lower White-Nile. On the Blue-Nile we saw it in scattered pairs and little flocks. Its flesh is tough and dry.

There are scarcely any other water fowl on the Blue-Nile, except the curious Comb Ducks; but wading birds, mostly of common migratory species, are numerous. Among the resident shore birds the most attractive by far is the very common little Egyptian Courser, *Pluvianus ægyptius*. I think this is the prettiest shore bird I have ever seen, very tame, with flight like a Spotted Sandpiper, and the most beautifully marked and crested head, and a spotless chest crossed by a broad black band. This is the famous

"Crocodile-bird" of the Greeks, and in Arabic it is called the "Crocodile Watcher." It is doubtful whether this bird ever really feeds inside the crocodile's mouth. The sand bars are alive with these little fellows, and they feed busily around the very jaws of the huge reptiles with absolute unconcern. They are said to bury their eggs.

The common resident plovers are the African Thick-knee or Stone Plover, and the handsome Spur-winged Plover. These latter are conspicuous Lapwings with white faces, black breasts and black head caps.

We made a special point of collecting large numbers of nightjars and bats. As often as we had time we would take our guns at sunset and wander down near the river for the evening flight, when we were camped in a suitable spot. For the bats we tried to get an open piece of bare sand where we could find them in the dark, but for the nightjars we picked out open spots in the tall elephant grass. This was a delightful time of day. The glare of the afternoon was over, the last line of women and girls filed back to the village with waterjars gracefully poised on their heads, huge flocks of weaver birds were settling for the night, whirring down by thousands and disappearing in the tall grass with much chirping and rustling, the last doves were flying back after their evening drink, while the wind dropped steadily to the universal calm of the winter night. Every once in a while a flock of weavers would rise out of the grass with a dull roar, only to settle immediately, and often the first night-hawk of the evening would frighten them into a panic as he sailed over their roosting place. When it was almost dark the grass region would become alive with two species of nightjars, the long-tailed and the Egyptian. The numbers of these birds about Mangangani was really remarkable. The former has a single clucking note and is the commoner of the two. We often sprung it in the woods in parties of three or four in the daytime. It is a very handsome bird with a tail in the male ten or eleven inches long, a broad white bar across the primaries and another across the wing coverts. The female has a shorter tail. The Egyptian nightjar is a pale colored short-tailed species. The third kind is the famous standard winged species, in which the male has a pair of elongated raquet tipped primaries, reaching twenty-one inches in some cases. The

Arabic name "Abudjenah," or "The father of the four wings" well describes the appearance of the male in flight. Heuglin says that these ornamental plumes are at first perfect feathers, but by December the barbs on the basal part of the shaft begin to drop out. This process continues until April, when nothing is left but the bare shaft. In our specimen of February the shaft is bare except for the terminal two inches.

We found this species rare and very local. Each male seems to have a separate feeding range which he works night after night. They come out very early from the bush and cease their flight earlier in the night than the other kinds.

At Fazogli we were fortunate in securing an entirely new species which I called *Caprimulgus eleanoræ*. (Plate XIII.) It is a large, dark and finely marked nightjar, most nearly related to an Indian form, *C. monticola*. Africa is rich in *Caprimulgidæ* and there may remain a number of rare species still undiscovered.

I must omit most of the smaller birds in this account, but a few may be mentioned. We found a little colony of a plain-colored swallow at Fazogli, breeding in burrows dug in the ground. This bird, *Chelidon griseopyga*, is apparently rare, for Butler does not mention it in his various papers on Sudan birds, and the British Museum Catalogue only recorded three specimens. The burrows of these birds, which I cannot find have ever been noticed before, were some ten feet long and six to ten inches below the surface of the open plain. The nest of one we dug out was made of straw, and three feet from the blind end, containing partly fledged young on January 25. Whether this bird digs its own burrow in this hard baked loess is still an open question; but I think this probable. So far as I know, only one other swallow, *Hirundo pucheti* from the Congo, nests in this manner. Its burrows (Ornis 1885, p. 587) were supposed to be those of animals. They were three feet long and were found at an obtuse angle, the angle holding the nest and being at the deepest part.

We got four kinds of bee-eaters, one, the magnificent red-breasted *Merops nubicus*, is the most glorious of its kind. It is very large, with a long, pointed tail, habits like a swallow and a breast and back which seem to reflect the glory of the sunset. These birds were scarce till we reached the Dinder River, and we lamented our

inability to shoot one, for they flew very high and we never could find their roosts. One day Dr. Allen was riding along the road, mounted as usual on a small, gray donkey, his gun across the saddle-bow. A flock came flying over, the collector raised his gun, fired, replaced his gun, caught the bird in his lap, wrapped it up and dropped it into his bag, without the donkey ever changing his pace or wagging an ear. I call this a good performance, but as a game-shooting companion often remarks, "They do come easy, *sometimes.*"

I want to say a word about the indicators, or honey guides, which have caused so much comment from all African travellers. We found two kinds. The natives call them "Manóch" and treat them to a great deal of ceremony and a little set speech, the meaning of which we did not get. Most ornithologists concur, I think, in the belief that the honey guides do not guide, but merely attract one to honey by their presence in its neighborhood. There was one bird, however, at Mangangani, which persistently followed me about, and chattered in an amazing manner. I thought I never would shake him off, and I am almost convinced that he was following me and talking to me, too.

We got ten species of hawks, eight of thrushes, eleven of old world warblers, seven of shrikes and bush shrikes, and eleven of ploceids or weavers. Several of the ploceids are kinds seen commonly in cages. The long tailed Paradise Whydah, with rectrices that certainly impede its progress, and the beautiful little Cordon-blue of aviculturalists. This little gem of bright cobalt blue, so delicate and short-lived in captivity, was everywhere common, and associated in little flocks with the Small Red Weaver, *Lagonosticta senegala.* These little mixed flocks were most confiding, and we saw them everywhere.

The ostrich, which is rare, we did not get a sight of. It, with various species of cranes, storks, herons and the Giant Hornbill, is protected by law.

Most of the resident Blue-Nile birds belong to Abyssinian types, and are therefore different from the White-Nile forms only a short distance away. The mammals also tend towards Abyssinian, rather than central African forms.

Early workers in the eastern Sudan and Abyssinia were Rüppell

and von Heuglin, while of late years Reichenow, Neumann and others have done a great deal of systematic work. Mr. A. L. Butler, present Superintendent of Game Preservation at Khartoum, has given us interesting papers on Sudan birds since 1905. He is a keen observer, and has the interests of the great game and the birds very much at heart. He has been instrumental in many reforms such as limiting the slaughter of the sand-grouse near Khartoum, protecting the giraffe, etc. It is hoped that the Government will always be able to find such men, and that the policy of no arms for the Arabs and large sanctuaries for the game animals can be continued.

Were space sufficient, I should like to speak of many of the other groups. We had to leave just when some of the birds were beginning to assume their spring plumage and to sing. A little later the common weavers change from dull browns to orange, yellows and reds, and must be a gorgeous sight.

The Sudan has a curious attraction, and what it is no man can say, but as I look back I think of two pictures; one a crisp February morning breakfasting by candle light and watching the complaining camels as they are led in out of the still dusky thorn trees, while the first flights of cranes and weavers appear against a pale pink dawn. Next it is noon on a winding path amid the sweet smelling thorn bush. Nothing is heard but the tireless scuff-scuff of my camels' feet, on the dusty path, while hornbills flap from the branches as we pass, and the sun blares down through the leafless trees.

VIEW OF NEST NO. 1 OF THE FERRUGINOUS ROUGH-LEG. SHOWING GAP TO BE CROSSED.