

SOME ALASKA PENINSULA BIRD NOTES.

BY CHARLES A. GIANINI.

THE wandering bird lover if fortunate sometimes finds himself in a bird paradise — such was my good luck last Spring when I landed in Stepovak Bay on the south side of the western end of the Alaska Peninsula. My time while on the mainland was pretty well taken up with hunting the big brown bear of that country, but I always had a welcome eye for birds and now that I am home in the east and the trip in retrospect it is questionable whether bears or birds gave me the most pleasure but certain it is that one without the other would have left a void.

The country surrounding this great bay is inhabited for about six months every year and then only by a limited number of trappers who make their homes on the outlying islands and come here in the Fall and leave in the Spring. The shore of the main bay is indented by smaller bays and each has its trapper's shack or barabara, and as the men usually trap in pairs the population amounts to about two exclusive of any women and children for each bay. The trappers arrive when most of the birds are either gone or travelling south and leave when they are coming in so that the birds of this big section of country are practically unmolested save by some of the predatory members of their own family and a few four-footed hunters. The country remains wild and in its original state and offers every attraction to breeding birds in the way of shore, grass, shrubbery and cliffs; everything but large trees of any kind, for these last do not grow on this part of the peninsula.

Two of us and our dunnage on the 25th of May were landed on the beach at daybreak and I was immediately treated to the spectacle of a couple of jaegers worrying a gull but the arrival of gull assistance put the former to flight. We hunted from two camps, the main one a cabin a couple of hundred yards from the sandy beach and the second a tent pitched on the bank of a river five or six miles inland. Both were in great flat valleys surrounded by high snow-covered mountains with glaciers and a steaming volcano for variety.

The country surrounding the main camp is very flat and the whole intersected by a number of glacial streams and dotted all over with ponds; in places there are long stretches of sand and gravel and many marshes and patches of tundra. A good part of this is made land and is still in process of formation as is plainly shown by the successive old beach lines which extend inland quite a distance. That the big mountains are gradually breaking up and wearing away is perceptible and a fine example of one method could be seen from the camp. About five miles away stands what was at one time a volcano but the side facing the camp had been blown out and down into the valley leaving exposed a great core of sulphur which however, is protected from grasping hands by an intervening river of ice.

Alders and willows follow the river courses and of the latter there must be five or six varieties from a low creeping shrub to a fair sized tree. A variety of grasses grow here both tall and wide of leaf. Flowering plants abound in season though some are very minute and hug mother earth for warmth and comfort. Many varieties of plants would be recognized by name but not in substance, however the marsh marigold was a pleasant surprise one day found blooming early as it does in the east. A beautiful variety of the wild geranium was everywhere abundant in July. One day while laboring up the verdureless side of a bleak mountain I found growing in the slides of rotten stone a few groups of a brave little plant some with red and others with yellow flowers surrounded by round-ling leaves and the whole not over an inch in height; they proved to be of the saxifraga family. In some places violets were as plentiful as in our woodlands in Spring and the day I shot my largest bear I wore a boutonniere.

The great coarse cow parsnip was very common and the dry stalks furnished the kindling for our fires.

In season a choice of berries is offered from the crow berry nestling close to the ground to great luscious salmon berries half as large as your thumb. Ferns are there in quantity and variety from tall, stout brakes to a very delicate *Filix fragilis*, but none appealed to me more than our own little polypody which I found growing in the sides of great cliffs.

In bear hunting there are many enforced waits and these intervals

when weather permitted were devoted to bird observations and the surprises and treats were many. The first morning ashore after getting our duffle and outfit under cover and arranged, I went afield and for a time I saw such a variety of birds that I wished for a pair or two of extra eyes. Some birds I had seen before but a few were entirely new to me and as I did not collect any there were several I was unable to name. The following list is of birds positively identified — Holbøll's Grebe, Red-throated Loon, Long-tailed Jaeger, Herring Gull, Arctic Tern, Mallard, Scaup, Northern Phalarope, Least Sandpiper, Black Turnstone, Willow Ptarmigan, Bald Eagle, Savannah Sparrow and Pipit. Never before had I fallen into such company and such a number in so short a time and limited extent of territory.

As I journeyed about the country and bay my list of birds increased so that I shall name them in accordance with the A. O. U. classification:

Colymbus holbøelli. HOLBØELL'S GREBE.— I had seen before but not in his spring feathers. I first saw two in a pond and on June 17 a flock of fifteen swimming in the bay. I found no signs that they breed here.

Gavia pacifica. PACIFIC LOON.— Quite common and seen more often off the beach and in the rivers than about the ponds. I have no doubt it breeds here as it was noticed almost every day up to the 12th of July when we left for the westward in a small boat.

Gavia stellata. RED-THROATED LOON.— Was very common and breeding; I saw as many as five at a time on a small pond. They are passing continually back and forth from the ponds to the big bay and in flying the outstretched head and neck are bent at a slight downward angle to the body. They are very noisy, have a coarse quack on the wing and a jeering, *graah, graah*, on the water. They keep up their calls away into the night but at their breeding period daylight continues to almost midnight. These loons are tamer and easier to approach than the other variety.

Lunda cirrhata. TUFTED PUFFIN.— Often seen in the bay. First noted in Cook's Inlet on the 20th of May.

Brachyramphus marmoratus. MARBLED MURRELET.— Seen in the bay singly and in pairs. Not very wild and allowed a close approach in a row boat.

Cepphus columba. PIGEON GUILLEMOT.— Common about the bay and not very wild.

Stercorarius parasiticus. PARASITIC JAEGER.— Quite common. I collected one in the dark color phase.

Stercorarius longicaudus. LONG-TAILED JAEGER.— They are com-

mon and I sometimes saw four or five at a time around the small ponds. I collected one in the light color phase which when held up by the feet vomited crow berries.

Rissa tridactyla pollicaris. PACIFIC KITTIWAKE.— They were nesting on a rocky islet in the bay and had their nests on shelves and tops of rocks as close together as they could be placed. They allowed me to make a close approach and gather a mess of eggs which our menu was sadly in need of. On June 17, the nests contained some two and others three eggs and part of them we found to be in the process of incubation. As we approached the island a half dozen of cormorants sat on the rock looking for all the world as some one has remarked "like black bottles."

Larus glaucescens. GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL.— Were here but in no great numbers.

Larus schistisagus. SLATY-BACKED GULL.— I noted but one or two here.

Larus argentatus. HERRING GULL.— This gull has hardly ever been out of sight since leaving Seattle. They followed the steamers, the various canneries had immense colonies and here the beach and ponds were alive with them. They had selected one pond with boggy shores and small islands for a breeding ground. On May 27 I found on the bank two nests containing eggs — one with two and the other three eggs. There were probably more nests on the little islands but I was unable to reach them. On June 29 there were some young on the pond.

At a salmon saltery where I spent a few days after the 15th of July I watched these gulls feeding. The salmon were split and dressed on a staging over the water close to the beach and all undesirable parts tossed overboard and the great bunches of eggs hardly reached the water before the gulls would have them and two or three gulps were sufficient to put them out of sight.

Larus brachyrhynchus. SHORT-BILLED GULL.— This gull was here and associating with the Herring Gull. Was nesting at the same pond.

Sterna paradisæa. ARCTIC TERN.— Positively the most graceful bird I saw on this trip and the only representative of the family here. They were here in limited numbers but never failed to make their presence known either by their rasping cries or their acrobatic flying. They have a habit of remaining in a fixed position in the air supporting themselves entirely by their vibrating wings with the balance of the body stationary. They do this over both land and water and from this position often dive into the water for fish disappearing entirely for two or three seconds at a time. I noted that they did not always catch their prey.

They must breed here for I saw them almost every day of my stay.

Fulmarus rodgersi. RODGER'S FULMAR.— This bird while undoubtedly coming into the bay probably has no justification for being introduced here but the capture of one by rather unusual methods is my apology. On the 26th of July while the coast guard steamer 'Unalga' in which I was travelling to Seward, was to the eastward of the Shumagin Island a young

fulmar came aboard into the fireroom by way of a ventilator. The bird was very tame and showed no fear of us and was given its freedom after we passed on its identity. One of the officers called it a "scupper bill" — a new name to me.

Phalacrocorax auritus cincinnatus. WHITE-CRESTED CORMORANT.— Those I saw here I took to be of this variety. They were frequently seen about the bay and often high up, evidently travelling across the peninsula either to or from the Bering Sea side.

Anas platyrhynchos. MALLARD.— Here in good numbers and breeding. Every inland trip we made we found these ducks in the marshes and about the ponds and streams.

In front of our home camp was a pond with sedgy shores which was visited by a great variety of ducks and Mallards often came here early in the morning to feed.

Mareca americana. BALDPATE.— On the 2nd of June near our camp on Big River, I saw a pair of these ducks, the only ones I noticed.

Nettion carolinense. GREEN-WINGED TEAL.— Common and breeding.

Dafila acuta. PINTAIL.— Common and breeding. Saw my first one in a pond in front of camp on May 29; and from the 17th of June, when we returned there, until the 12th of July, a male and two females made the pond their headquarters — feeding and napping there.

On the 4th of July, six lively ducklings appeared on the pond and some were seen on other days after this. I took them to be young Pintails, yet I never saw them with the old birds nor did the latter seem to pay any attention to them. Mallards and Green-winged Teal also visited this pond but not to such an extent as the Pintails and this causes me to think that the young were of the last named species.

Marila marila. SCAUP DUCK.— Very common and breeds.

Histrionicus histrionicus. HARLEQUIN DUCK.— Fairly common. Seen on the rivers particularly near the mouth and among the rocks along the shore of bay. The first I saw were at Chignik on the 23rd of May; three of them in the gentle surf close to the sandy beach. While they are fairly watchful I found I could make a close approach by careful management.

Somateria v-nigra. PACIFIC EIDER.— Not very common. I saw but a few about the rocks close in shore.

Oidemia perspicillata. SURF SCOTER.— I saw a large raft of these Ducks in the bay one day in June.

Lobipes lobatus. NORTHERN PHALAROPE.— This is one of the most common and interesting of the smaller birds. Every pond had a pair or more. They could be seen almost any day on the pond in front of our camp. I found no nests nor saw any young, yet these birds breed here. They are unsuspecting and allow very close approach. They are very graceful in the water, sit very high and seem to move about without any effort. I did not see them do the "circling" act but noticed that

they swing right and left as they sail along picking up particles of food from the surface of the water. They also have a habit of bobbing the head forwards and backwards as they proceed. They rise from the water with great ease. Along the beach they fed close to the water and seemed to jump over the incoming ripples. They sing a *tweet-tweet* note on the wing which is often heard before the birds can be seen or located. These birds and the other two species of the same family are exceptions to the general rule in that the females are slightly larger and more brilliantly colored and while they lay the eggs the males incubate them.

I observed that the necks of these birds are more slender and delicate-looking than is usually shown in drawings.

Pisobia minutilla. LEAST SANDPIPER.— Common and breeding here. On the 7th of June I found a nest containing 4 eggs on the tundra; the female jumped off at my near approach and tried to draw me away by the usual feigning methods. Nest was a depression in the ground lined with grass and small round leaves of some shrubby plant.

These birds are very tame and have a twittering song in the air and when on the ground. They spend considerable time feeding on the beach.

Egialitis semipalmata. SEMIPALMATED PLOVER.— I saw my first one on the 26th of May and from that date on until we left they were very common. They are very tame and show little fear of man. Often found along the beach and further inland but never far from water. I watched one feeding along the beach; he would run a yard or two, stop and pick up some morsel, and repeat the performance which was continued for some distance.

One day while resting on a sand bar close to a stream I had a bird come very close and circle completely around me at the same time uttering its call notes. Soon a second bird, its mate, appeared, answered the call and came near but did not repeat the performance. This happened on the 16th of June and caused me to think I must be near the nest, but I was unable to find it.

Arenaria melanocephala. BLACK TURNSTONE.— On the 25th of May I saw my only one, working about the rocky shore of a pond.

Lagopus lagopus lagopus. WILLOW PTARMIGAN.— They are fairly numerous on the lower levels but do not range very high on the mountains.

On the 7th of June I found a nest containing seven eggs. My guide remarked that it was unusual that in all our travels we did not find another nest. There are many foxes and wolverines here and they undoubtedly take a rich toll.

In Newfoundland I do not recall ever seeing a ptarmigan perched in a tree of any kind — here it was common to see them in alders and willows.

Lagopus rupestris rupestris. ROCK PTARMIGAN.— On the mountains they are occasionally met with but do not seem to be very abundant. When climbing a mountain if any birds are about they soon make their presence known by their coarse notes which are easily distinguished from those of the other species.

Archibuteo lagopus sancti-johannis. ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK.— This was the only hawk that I was able to positively identify — I collected one. They were in fair numbers and nesting on the cliffs both overlooking the bay and further inland.

Evidently there is mutual respect between them and the Bald Eagle, for I have seen their nests on the cliffs in close proximity to each other. They were very noisy at times.

Haliaeetus leucocephalus alascanus. BALD EAGLE.— It was in evidence along the coast all the way from Cordova; when traveling along near the shore a white spot in the edge of green timber usually produced an eagle. Here they were numerous and from the home camp I could always see them along the beach or the banks of the rivers. Many codfish were stranded on the sands and afforded an abundance of food for eagles and gulls and they were generally closely associated. They nested on the cliffs overlooking the bay and further inland as well, but always near water. On the 31st of May I found a nest containing two eggs. On the 2d of June I found another nest containing only one egg; this nest was a mere depression in the heavy grass situated on the top of a butte inland and overlooking Big River. It was easily approached. It never contained more than the one egg and on the 15th of June this was destroyed by gulls. On the same day I saw two gulls attacking an immature but large eagle and one of the former gave a wonderful exhibition of flying — making a complete downward somersault in mid-air.

On the 28th of June I found a nest on the cliffs overlooking the bay containing two young which I photographed. They were as large as fair sized chickens and covered with grey down in appearance like wool. They looked well fed but were very logy and I was obliged to stir them up to make them look animated. The nest was clean but close by were the bones and remains of quite a few water birds. The carcass of the first bear obtained was left in an open park surrounded by ridges and whenever we passed that way we were certain to find a gallery of eagles and ravens. I learned that eagles were sometimes shot by the people up here for the plumes found on the body under the wings.

Cryptoglaux funerea richardsoni? OWL.— The guide told me of a small owl he had often seen in the alders and willows but I was never fortunate enough to see one. On several occasions late in the afternoon, I heard the notes of some species of owl and I thought it might be the Richardson's.

Pica pica hudsonia. AMERICAN MAGPIE.— This bird quickly made his presence known about camp and compelled us to protect any fresh meat we desired to keep for ourselves. The guide set baited rat traps for them but they proved too wary to be caught that way. Their bulky nests were often seen in the alders. Some fully feathered young were common among the rocks along the beach early in July and easily caught by hand.

Perisoreus canadensis fumifrons. ALASKA JAY.— One day in June I saw four birds at one place and they were the only ones I saw.

Corvus corax principalis. NORTHERN RAVEN.—Fairly common; they traveled up and down the rivers. Their wing movements are very noisy when flying and I could always tell when a Raven passed overhead without looking up.

Acanthis linaria subsp.? REDPOLL.—I was disappointed in seeing but one of these birds.

Plectrophenax nivalis nivalis. SNOW BUNTING.—Up here this is a different looking bird from what I see home in the winter — it is a beautiful white and black bird and naturally not found in big flocks as we know it. It is fairly common on the flats and also well up the mountains and no tamer here than further south. I was never able to get close enough to enjoy its little song.

Calcarius lapponicus alascensis. ALASKA LONGSPUR.—On the flats around the home camp in May, June and July the birds were plentiful and I never could walk about without seeing the male sail up in the air a short distance and sing his song; sometimes descending as he sang. They breed here.

Passerculus sandwichensis alaudinus. WESTERN SAVANNAH SPARROW.—Is here in abundance and seen on the tundra and flats and also on the cliffs and rocks of the shore. Breeds.

Zonotrichia coronata. GOLDEN-CROWNED SPARROW.—Fairly common here but seen more frequently inland than near the shore. I heard them first on the 28th of May; notes are suggestive of those of the White-throated Sparrow. They fed about the camp.

Passerella iliaca unalascensis. SHUMAGIN FOX SPARROW.—A few seen.

Hirundo erythrogastra. BARN SWALLOW.—This was the one bird which brought back most vividly to mind the thoughts of home and to find it here in July optimistically starting a nest was a pleasant treat. On our return to the home camp on the 17th of June I noticed about the place a pair of these birds and one Bank Swallow but in a few days the latter disappeared leaving only the mated pair. Our shack was protected in front by a partially closed veranda and the swallows were in and out continually and in the early morning their twitterings were the first sounds we heard. The cabin proper had several windows, the casings of which had never been sealed up on the outside so that at the top was a long narrow shelf and right after the 1st of July the birds started a nest on one end of one over against the side upright; I only had to raise myself a few inches to overlook the building operation. One of the birds, the female, did all the work; she gathered the mud, made the variously shaped pellets and laid by a small supply of dried grass. First was laid a course of the pellets outlining a space slightly longer one way; then the bird made a number of pellets varyings in size which she placed to one side possibly to dry and furnish a handy stock so that when she got further along she could proceed in laying up the walls without having to wait for materials.

Unfortunately this nest was never completed; the Magpies bothered

the Swallows so they finally gave up the task and moved to other quarters. In the early days before houses and barns were plentiful and afforded nesting sights Barn Swallows nested in caves and caverns and as houses and huts are few and far between here, possibly this pair of birds reverted to primitive ways and resorted to a cave of which there were many in the cliffs along the shore.

The two birds were often together but I only saw the one do any work.

The late date at which the nest was started might cause one to think that they had already raised one family but I doubt this as I never saw more than the two birds.

Riparia riparia. BANK SWALLOW.—I only saw the one previously mentioned.

Dendroica aestiva rubiginosa. ALASKA YELLOW WARBLER.—The guide collected one and I think I saw a few more. Not very common.

Wilsonia pusilla pileolata. PILEOLATED WARBLER.—Fairly common and I often saw them after the 1st of June. Breeds.

Anthus rubescens. PIPIT.—This bird is supposed to breed on high ground but I found it occasionally on the lowlands. Breeds.

Cinclus mexicanus unicolor. WATER OUZEL.—This little bird proved one of my big disappointments. On my way to Alaska I had talked with my guide, who accompanied me, about these birds and he assured me I should find them on almost every stream; in fact they were so plentiful that in his trapping operations he shot them to bait his traps. I was continually on the watch for them and one day when I was very busy with a bear skin in a swift river I caught a hasty glance of one which proved the only one of the trip.

Hylocichla guttata guttata. ALASKA HERMIT THRUSH.—Noted this bird first on the 5th of June and saw and heard it occasionally afterwards. The foggy depressing weather may have had some effect on the bird's spirits but the song I heard could not compare with that of our bird in the Adirondacks.

Penthestes cinctus alascensis. ALASKA CHICKADEE.—One day while hunting inland we lunched in the meagre shelter of some alders and while there several birds put in an appearance. They looked and acted about the same as our eastern Black-cap. These were the only ones I saw.