

## NOTES ON THE BIRD-LIFE OF MONA AND DESECHEO ISLANDS.

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DURING the summer of 1926 the first of a series of Caribbean Expeditions, sponsored by friends of Syracuse University and directed by a member of the Zoology Department, visited Porto Rico and the small islands lying in the Mona Passage. One of the main objects of the trip was to study the bird-life of these isolated islands. The observations which were made form the subject matter of this paper. Our stay on Mona and Desecheo extended from June twenty-third to July eighteenth, which allowed sufficient time to make a rather careful survey of the islands and note the habits of the birds found there. A report of the bird-life on Desecheo should be of interest to ornithologists, since this tiny bit of desert land in the South Atlantic is one of our United States bird reserves which is too remote to boast of a resident warden and is practically never visited by nature students. Mr. B. S. Bowdish and Dr. Alexander Wetmore are the only ones who have published on its bird life.

The past summer the islands of this region experienced very unusual climatic conditions; a period of extreme drought killed much of the vegetation and this was followed in July by a severe tropical hurricane which increased the destruction of trees and bushes which offer nesting places for the birds. These conditions, although not affecting the marine birds, must have delayed the breeding season and reduced the population of resident land birds.

The following discussion deals with twenty species of birds found on the islands during our visit. Fortunately specimens of each species were collected, so that careful identification could be made. The nesting birds were very tame, making it comparatively easy to get moving pictures illustrating their breeding habits. The following account deals with the birds in their taxonomic order.

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**Phaethon americanus** Grant. YELLOW-BILLED TROPIC BIRD.—Several hundred of these beautiful sea-birds were found nesting high up on the limestone cliffs bordering the west and north coasts of Mona Island. The breeding season was apparently at its height for all stages from newly laid eggs to the fully plumed, speckled black and white young were observed. It was a beautiful sight to stand on the edge of the cliffs three hundred feet above the sea and watch, these pure white birds with long tail streamers, gliding about over the green tinted waters of the Caribbean. No Tropic birds were seen about Desecheo.

**Pelecanus occidentalis occidentalis** Linnaeus. WEST INDIAN BROWN PELICAN.—A flock of Pelicans consisting of adults and young still unable to fly made their home about the coral lagoon near Sardinero beach. A small rookery consisting of four nests was found along the shore south of West Point, the nests being placed in the tops of the West Indian birch (*Elaphrium simarubra*). The protected lagoon is shallow and abounds with an abundance of fish on which the Pelicans feed. Apparently the breeding season corresponds with that in Porto Rico, occurring in February and March. Previous observers state that this species was not found about Mona (Wetmore, 1916, p. 18). It is an interesting fact that within the last ten years the lagoon at Sardinero beach has been changed, from a deep and unprotected bay partially surrounded by a barrier reef, to an almost completely enclosed lagoon, which, due to the rapid accumulation of sand, is so shallow in places that it is not possible for a rowboat to pass at low tide. The Pelicans have taken advantage of this geological change, enjoying here an ideal home free from dangers and supplied with an abundance of food. This species was not found on Desecheo.

**Sula piscator** (Linnaeus). RED-FOOTED BOOBY.—No Red-footed Boobies were seen about Mona, but on Desecheo they occupied a region along the south shore about five hundred feet east of where the author found it in 1922. This change was made necessary by the fact that the natives living on the island have cut down the trees and put a garden where the rookery was formerly located, in order to take advantage of the soil made rich by bird excrement. The new rookery seemed considerably larger and better protected due to the presence of a deep ravine which separates it from the trail leading to the inhabited part of the island. Although the nesting season had passed the adults in white plumage and the young birds of a brownish color were roosting in the vicinity of the old nests. They were very tame, allowing us to climb the trees and photograph them without the least sign of fright.

**Sula leucogastra** (Boddaert). BOOBY.—This species was found both on Mona and Desecheo, but the breeding season was over for only one young in the teddy-bear-like down plumage was seen. Either these birds had departed after the nesting season or else they were breeding there in much smaller numbers, for instead of counting them by the thousand, as the author did in 1922, they could be counted only by the hundred. Unfortunately there are several natives now living on Desecheo

and they take the eggs of this bird for food. The island is overrun with a large species of snake resembling the Garter snake, which must destroy many eggs and young.

**Fregata magnificans rothschildi** Mathews. MAN-O-WAR BIRD.—The Rabijunco, as the natives call this bird, was common about both Mona and Desecheo. The breeding season was past and the rookeries abandoned, but all day long the birds were seen soaring high in the heavens, sometimes in groups of four or five, but more often it was a single bird patrolling above a Tropic Bird, waiting for a chance to rob it of a fish. The method of feeding is very interesting to watch. The Man-o-War bird from its position high in the sky will wait until the Booby or Tropic bird has made a catch, then with a sudden dive it swoops down on the unsuspecting fisherman. A hot chase always follows but the Man-o-War invariably overtakes the smaller bird, which in order to save itself will drop its catch. Immediately the chase ends and the Man-o-War bird, with a gracefully maneuvered swoop, snaps up the desired delicacy before it reaches the water. Just at dusk the Man-o-War birds were seen to congregate outside the reef, where they would soar close to the sea in search of fish, showing that all their food is not obtained in a pirate-like fashion.

**Nyctanassa violacea** (Linnaeus). YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT HERON.—This species was quite common in the cocoanut grove near Sardinero beach. At night their guttural call was commonly heard back of the camp and on moon-light evenings they could be seen walking along the beach bordering the lagoon in search of fish. One young bird was taken in the middle of the day while feeding in the shallow water of the lagoon. This species seems to be a regular resident on Mona Island for Bowditch (1902-3, p. 359) speaks of seeing it.

**Himantopus mexicanus** (Muller). BLACK-NECKED STILT.—Although this species has not been previously reported on Mona, we found it common about the lagoon. They frequented the sandy beaches and shallow water near West Point, where an abundance of small fish were to be found. When alarmed they would seek the protection of the reef, standing like statues on some partly exposed rock unmindful of the heavy surf. The birds were not nesting at the time of our visit, but it seems probable that they may have nested there for the dry sand beaches offered excellent nesting places and the natives living on Mona state that this flock had been there for a long time. Doubtless this flock was simply a group of visitors for the absence of marshes make Mona an unsatisfactory place for this species to live permanently.

**Larus atricilla** Linnaeus. LAUGHING GULL.—These Gulls were continually passing up and down the coast past our camp. Their trim bodies, strongly sustained flight and incessant scolding attracted much attention. They were not breeding at the time of our visit, but the presence of immature birds indicated that the nesting season had just passed. About five hundred individuals were seen on Desecheo.

**Anous stolidus stolidus** (Linnaeus). NODDY.—The Noddy was very common along the cliffs at Mona, especially in the vicinity of West Point, where several hundred were nesting. The eggs were placed in a depression among the rocks, without a sign of a stick or feather to indicate an attempt at nest building. The males assisted in incubation and caring for the young. This species was also nesting on Desecheo, its eggs being placed on a low shelf of rock near the top of an over-hanging cliff.

**Sterna anaetheta** Scopoli. BRIDLED TERN.—This species was not seen about Mona and only a very few individuals were noted on Desecheo. Previous observers found it common on both islands. Wetmore (1916, p. 46) states that he found fifteen hundred individuals of this species nesting on Desecheo in June (1912), while Bowdish (1902-3, p. 357) found them common on both Mona and Desecheo.

**Sterna fuscata** Linnaeus. SOOTY TERN.—This Tern was found very common on Desecheo and Mona islands. It was nesting in the same localities as the Noddy, in many places the nests of the two species being placed within three feet of each other. The nesting season was, however, slightly more advanced than that of the Noddy for most of the nests had a young bird. The adults showed very little fear on our approach and it was possible to make some very interesting moving pictures of the nesting habits. The young birds look much like Brown Leghorn Chickens. Each youngster was given the undivided attention of both parents, one remaining about the nest while the other was foraging for food.

**Geotrygon montana** (Linnaeus). RUDDY QUAIL DOVE.—One specimen of this species was collected in a thicket on the coastal plain at Mona. This is the first record for the species from Mona, but it undoubtedly is found there as a visitor during the summer for the natives were acquainted with the bird and said it sometimes nested there.

**Chaemepelia passerina exigua** Riley. MONA GROUND DOVE.—This tiny Dove was abundant all over the island of Mona, found usually in pairs, although in favorable feeding localities, groups of fifty or more were seen. They were very tame, especially on the plateau where they would run along the trail ahead of us until overtaken, when they would step aside to let us pass. They were undoubtedly nesting as well developed eggs were found in female specimens. This Dove is somewhat smaller and of a paler color than the Porto Rican Ground Dove.

**Zenaida aurita zenaida** (Bonap.). PORTO RICAN DOVE.—During our stay on Mona we found this species very abundant, especially on the plateau, where the birds were nesting. The nests were placed among the vines which cover the trunks of the trees and large cactus plants. Although more often heard than seen it was by no means uncommon to see these Doves sitting on some dead limb, craning their necks to better the view. The mournful "coo-coo" of this *Tortula* was as much a part of Mona as the cactus covered cliffs. Their food seemed to consist wholly of seeds from the leguminous plants.

**Columba leucocephala** Linnaeus. WHITE-CROWNED PIGEON.—It is a pleasure to report that this large Pigeon, although not previously reported from Mona, was found nesting on the plateau by the thousands. Gundlach refers to this Pigeon as being common in the seventies on Porto Rico, but Wetmore (1916, p. 53) states that in 1912 it was found in only a few localities. The author observed the same condition of scarcity on Porto Rico in 1922. Both at sunrise and sunset flocks numbering as high as five hundred individuals were seen approaching Mona from the direction of Santo Domingo. Many of these birds were collected and several had the seed of the royal palm in their crops. As this palm was not found on Mona these birds must have migrated recently. Due to the almost impenetrable undergrowth on the plateau the Pigeons nest in comparative safety. The natives say that the Pigeons all leave in October.

**Coccyzus minor** Gmelin. MANGROVE CUCKOO.—This Cuckoo, although not previously reported from Mona was seen on several occasions both on the plateau and the coastal plain, inhabiting the shrubbery bordering the trails. The birds were very timid and it was difficult to observe their habits, or to ascertain whether or not they were nesting. They were always observed in pairs and they seemed to frequent the same localities.

**Tyrannus dominicensis** (Gmelin). GRAY KINGBIRD.—This Flycatcher was seen on several occasions both on the arid plateau and in the bushes bordering the trails which cross the coastal plain. It was always found in pairs, but no indication of nesting was seen. The natives say it lives on Mona and without doubt it represents one of the resident species.

**Progne dominicensis** (Gmelin). CARIBBEAN MARTIN.—Individuals of this species were observed frequently during our stay on Mona, in the vicinity of the cocoanut grove, where they perched on the palm leaves, occasionally leaving their shady retreat to soar after a passing insect. A young female was collected near our camp on June thirtieth.

**Margarops fuscatus fuscatus** (Vieillot). PEARLY-EYED THRASHER.—This species inhabits all parts of Mona island and represents one of its most characteristic birds. Its caroling was the first bird note to greet us on landing and throughout the stay this large brown Thrasher was seen on every side. One would find them angrily quarreling among themselves in the cocoanut grove; again one would be found in some somber nook among the rocks flitting about like a phantom spirit, or again they were encountered along the trail searching through the undergrowth for seeds or an occasional insect. No indication of nesting was seen.

**Agelaius xanthomus** (Sclater). YELLOW-SHOULDERED BLACKBIRD.—This Blackbird seemed to be quite common for it was seen almost daily on the trips to the plateau or along the coastal plain. It was always found in pairs actively engaged in working through the low bushes search-

ing for insects. No indication of nesting was seen, but the species is probably resident on Mona for it has been previously observed on the island and the natives say it stays there all the year.

The status of the bird-life on Mona and Desecheo, judging from the information obtained the past summer together with that of previous observers, varies considerably throughout the year. There are twelve resident species living on Mona, while Desecheo has three species of marine birds, which are resident. During the summer six species visit Mona to nest, one of which the White-crowned Pigeon represents a tremendous influx of bird life. This pigeon is of considerable food value and it should be carefully protected during the breeding season. Several species of Terns and the Laughing Gull visit Desecheo to nest, but apparently in much smaller numbers than formerly. Due to the geographical position of these islands one would expect to find a few species of migratory birds driven there by storm or staying there temporarily before continuing their flight to one of the larger islands of the Caribbean Sea, where a suitable habitat may be found. Illustrations of such an occurrence would be the Black-necked Stilt and possibly the Pelican.

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