

FURTHER NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF THE
MAGDALENE ISLANDS.

BY REV. C. J. YOUNG.

MY first trip to the Magdalene Islands was made in June, 1897; I again made a visit in the spring of 1927; thirty years having elapsed in the interval. Arriving at Pictou, N. S., on the 19th of May, I found communication to the Islands hindered by the accumulation of ice in the Gulf, owing to the lateness of the spring this year, and prevailing N. E. winds. On her first trip in April the Steamer *Lovatt* encountered so much ice that she took five days to reach Grindstone Is. and was compelled to make the passage by the west end of Prince Edward Island. On her second trip she encountered much ice, but managed to get through; the third passage on May 23, after a delay at Pictou of four days, was normal, though a considerable amount of ice was still drifting about at the east end of Prince Edward Island.

We landed at Grindstone Island on May 24, and through the courtesy of the Leslie Packing Co., were able to reach Grosse Isle,—my destination,—in the afternoon of the following day, May 25. There I stayed five weeks, spending three days on Bryon Island, but unable to visit the Bird Rock on account of the uncertain and squally weather.

In the interval of thirty years, I found a great change had come over the islands; roads had been made where none previously existed; new canning factories were in operation; a large fish-curing business was carried on at Grindstone Is.; telephone and radio stations were working. Much of the spruce and fir had been cut down and the land cleared; and on Grindstone especially new buildings, and an increased population numbering over 2000, was in evidence. So conditions were not as favourable for bird life as formerly, though some species were still fairly abundant in places.

The Magdalene Islands have in the past been a great resort and breeding ground for a number of our migratory birds, and some species have been met with there that are not known to breed in the same latitude elsewhere in Canada. Consequently there has been

a desire on the part of ornithologists to investigate bird life here. In the year 1878 Charles B. Cory of Boston, Mass., visited the Islands, one of the first to do so, arriving on the 17th July. He went primarily for sport, and recalls that he and his party during the week ending August 20, shot: 6 Godwits, 64 Yellow-legs, 6 Teal, 9 Snipe, 57 Sandpipers, 7 Curlew, 74 Plover, 21 Turnstones and 4 Ducks: a total of 250 birds. There was little bird protection in those days, and bird matters were looked at from a different viewpoint to that which prevails now. In 1881 the late William Brewster made a trip to the Magdalenes and investigated the breeding habits of many species; a few years later A. C. Bent visited the Islands; and later myself, Dr. Bishop, Rev. H. K. Job, J. M. Phillips, E. Beaupre of Kingston, Ont., and others, have been there for the same purpose. The list I have made during my two visits is probably the most complete, and may be taken as a fairly accurate résumé of the birds breeding there; a number of additions to cover the birds passing in the 'fall' and spring migrations may be added, taken from Mr. C. B. Cory's list; but of these I have no actual knowledge. I found that at the present time (1927) bird collecting is badly commercialized; a stranger on arrival is presently interviewed by boys and even girls as to what he will pay for such and such nests; the Least Sandpiper (peep); the Rusty Blackbird, Wilson's Snipe and others being especially in evidence. The result of this, continued for a few seasons past, is that the Sandpipers, common breeders formerly, have become scarce; as too the Semi-palmated Plover, the Fox Sparrow and others. This is partly owing, of course, to clearing of the land, and increased cultivation, but more especially to the excessive egg collecting carried on—nominally for scientific purposes, but more often for purely mercenary ends.

Wilson's Snipe is a somewhat early breeder; in Ontario I have seen fresh eggs on May 15; here I was informed of two nests each with four eggs on the 25th. If the first nest is disturbed, the bird soon makes another nest not far from the first;—in about two weeks, and again lays four eggs. I am not sure whether this is repeated a third time, but think it is. The nest is frequently in a dry place at the edge of the marsh, but not far from water. These birds are very numerous, and their peculiar breeding sounds can

be heard any evening during May and June, and at intervals all night: I have seen them alight on a spruce tree.

On May 28 there were still deep snow drifts among the stunted spruce, as much as two or three feet in places; the weather continued cold and several nights were frosty. Vegetation had scarcely started, and there was no sign of growth anywhere. The Horned Lark has become very common; there are the two forms;—the Horned Lark (*Otocoris alpestris*) and the sub-species (*praticola*). They can be readily identified, the former being the commoner and considerably larger. It breeds later, and frequents the sand beach or neighbouring 'flats,' whilst '*praticola*' appears to resort to the grassy fields and hill-sides.¹ I plainly distinguished both species. On May 28 near the house on Grosse Isle where I stayed, some boys showed me a nest on a grassy hill-side which contained three eggs. They were highly incubated and almost ready to hatch; later, on June 8, I found a nest with three fresh eggs among the sand dunes at East Point. There was no mistaking the latter bird, as the true '*alpestris*.' It was quite tame and approached within a few feet. I was informed that these birds had become numerous, but had nested only within the last ten years. They are all over the Islands, being especially plentiful at Grosse Isle, where several pairs had nests close to houses. I did not observe them during my former visit in 1897, so they were not included in my list. Another bird I met with was the Acadian Sharp-tailed Sparrow; finding two nests; one near the 'lagoon' on the 16th; the other on June 20 in exactly similar situations, along the sand beach south of Grosse Isle. The birds fluttered from the nests at my feet, but so well were the nests concealed in a growth of dwarf juniper and cranberry vines that it took some time to locate them. They are very elusive, and after leaving the nest could nowhere be seen. Lincoln's Sparrow was by no means uncommon, several pairs were breeding in the marsh at Grosse Isle. I did not observe the Song Sparrow there, but found a nest with young on Grindstone Island on July 6. It is by no means as common as either the Swamp or Lincoln's; the former is the most abundant of the Sparrows with the exception of the Savannah, which is everywhere, but more particularly on the grassy hills and hay meadows. In 1887 the Fox Sparrow was

¹There would seem to be an error as to *both* forms nesting. From the nature of the case two subspecies *cannot* nest together.—Ed.

quite plentiful, and I heard and saw it repeatedly and found several nests in the spruce trees; in 1927 I seldom heard it and saw very few, finding only one nest also in a spruce tree, which on June 16 contained young just ready to fly. The Sparrows are an interesting study; I believe the Acadian Sharp-tailed to be not uncommon among the sand dunes and around the Lagoon. I noticed several there. The Tree Sparrow is occasionally seen, as too the White-throated, and the Pipit, but these are rare after the migration northward in May. The Least Sandpiper (or peep) still breeds, but only a few nests are now met with; these also lay three times, if disturbed. I found a nest near the canning factory at Grosse Isle on June 15 which contained two eggs. It was at the edge of the marsh on a sandy ridge where a few stunted spruce grew, some little distance from the sea shore. A few Semi-palmated and Piping Plovers still breed about Grosse Isle and along the shores of the 'Lagoon' towards Grand Entry, but in much reduced numbers. The Black-poll Warbler is common; they do not lay until the last week in June, invariably making their nests in the stunted spruce two or three feet from the ground. I saw several nests, the last with four fresh eggs on June 30; in each case feathers were plentifully used in the lining. The Yellow Warbler was also common; the nests here are lined with last year's cat-tail down; outside of these, with the exception of the Red-start, the Warblers were not numerous. I saw again a Golden-winged¹ and several others on May 30 and 31, but they appeared to be migrating with the Myrtle and Magnolia Warblers and not yet to be breeding, as I did not see any of them later. The Rusty Blackbirds still breed in some numbers: they select a thick scrubby spruce, always near a pond or swamp. On May 30 I found a nest with five eggs. This was late for them, as most have hatched by that date. The Bronzed Grackle is now quite common on the Islands: in 1897 I did not see any, but now they are everywhere, and destroy many Warblers' and Sparrows' nests. It is only within the last ten years, residents told me, that they had been observed. Another bird I noticed at Bryon Island was the Meadowlark: it was observed there by E. Beaupre in 1926 as well, and a pair or two breed on the grassy hills.

¹ I am certain of my identification of this bird both in 1897 and 1927. It was also seen by E. Beaupre on Bryon Isle in 1926.

In 1897 none of the Gulls were breeding on the Magdalenes, except a few Kittiwakes at Bird Rocks: now there is a great colony of Herring Gulls at Seal Island in the Lagoon. It is the largest colony I have ever seen, and there must be two or three hundred pairs. The Island contains eighty acres, mostly covered with stunted spruce, and there is but little clearance. The Gulls have their nests on the ground, some under branches of the trees, a number on the tops of the spruces, where the branches are matted together by the prevalent winds. Along with them are some Red-breasted Mergansers and possibly an occasional Black Duck.

A trip to East Point is a very interesting day's outing. It is here among the sand ridges that one meets with the ponds of fresh water, that in the past, have been such bird resorts. On June 8 and 13 I made this trip.

We went in a cart from Grosse Isle across the sands at low tide to East Cape, thence over the sand ridges and swamps to East Point,—a distance of about eight miles. It is a rough journey, but well worth the trouble. At the head of the largest fresh water ponds are the 'Egg Nobbles.' Here a colony of common terns are breeding. On June 8 none of the nests contained more than one egg; very few had begun to lay; but by the 13th most of the nests had a full complement of two or three eggs. The 'Nobbles' are little sandy islets, covered with grass and weeds surrounded by mud and water from three to five feet in depth. The colony seemed to consist entirely of common Terns; a few Arctic Terns which are not numerous seemed to prefer the dry sandy beaches, where shells and stones were plentiful. On one of the little 'islets' I found a nest of the Great Black-backed Gull with three eggs; on adjoining islets the Terns had their nests. This is, I believe, the first Black-backed Gull's nest ever found on the Magdalene Islands, so I took photographs of it. It was difficult to do so, for we could only find an old leaky boat. Near by on another of the 'islets' or 'nobbles' was a Black Duck's nest with nine eggs, almost ready to hatch, which we were careful not to disturb. It was near by on the shore that I found the Horned Lark's nest on June 8 above referred to. On that date I first noticed the Black-backed Gulls, and by their actions felt sure they had a nest. The Greater Scaup Duck bred here in 1897, but I did not see any on this occasion and fear they

are no longer there to breed. In the smaller ponds the Sora Rail is quite common and breeds; and there are still a few pairs of Horned Grebes.

I must not forget to mention the Snowy Owl. It is quite plentiful on some of the Islands; on Grosse Isle and towards Grand Entry. These birds are of great service by feeding on the numerous mice, which abound. They probably are attracted by such food; having once gained a foot-hold; and this last season (1927) have been particularly plentiful; on June 8 at East Point we saw five; another day three, and several times one and two both there and towards Grand Entry. A nest is said to have been found with nine eggs, but this is doubtful. In concluding I may say, that Leach's Petrel no longer breeds on Bryon Island; formerly it did; I obtained three nests. This year I looked for it, but could see no sign of a nest, and understood they had not nested for several years.

In my former list of birds (vide *Ottawa Naturalist*, vol. XI, No. 8) I mention 61 species, mostly breeding; I would omit two of these, the Screech Owl, and the Cliff Swallow, and in their place insert Richardson's Owl and the Barn Swallow. To this list (1897) therefore, I now would add fourteen species:—

62. The Nashville Warbler. One seen.
63. Myrtle Warbler. Rare breeder on Bryon Is.
64. Magnolia Warbler. Rare, may breed.
65. Meadow Lark. On Bryon Island.
66. Acadian Sharp-tailed Sparrow. Breeds on Grosse Isle.
67. Pipit. Rare breeder on Grosse Isle.
68. Lesser Yellow-legs. Common migrant.
69. Kingbird. Two pairs; breeds.
70. Tree Swallow. Breeds.
71. (a. Horned Lark. Common, breeds late in June and July.
(b. Prairie Horned Lark. A few.
72. Snowy Owl. Seen in May and June.
73. Brunich's Guillemot. The commonest species at Bird Rocks.
74. Bronzed Grackle. Common; breeds.

A total of 75 species, identified by myself. Besides forty-one migrating species shot by C. B. Cory in 1878, and listed by him, which bring the Magdalen Island list to 115.