

FEBRUARY BIRD LIFE OF PUNTA PENASCOSA, SONORA,  
MEXICO.

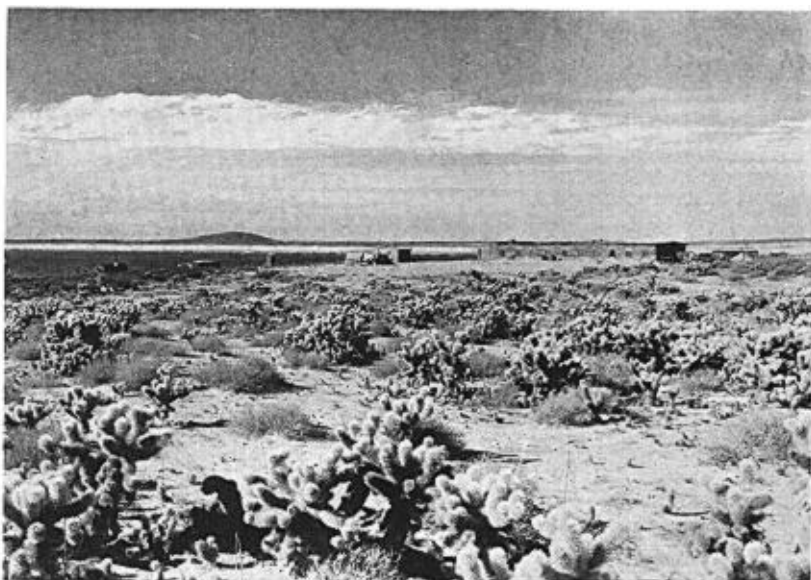
BY LAURENCE M. HUEY.

*Plates X-XI.*

From February 8 to 28, 1934, a party representing the San Diego Society of Natural History, operating under permits from the Mexican Federal Government, maintained a field collecting camp at Punta Peñascosa, on the northwestern coast of Sonora, Mexico. A brief description of the region and an annotated report of the birds follow.

Punta Peñasco is a compact series of low, rugged, broken, black lava hills on the northeastern shore of the Gulf of California at latitude 30° 18' N., and lying between Bahía Adair and Bahía de San Jorge. Immediately behind and parallel to the beach there is an area of sand dunes which varies in width from a few hundred yards to about two miles. These range as far up and down the coast line as we were able to explore or see from the summit of the rocky hills. The adjoining area for five or six miles inland from the dunes is a level, sandy, alkaline region with very sparse vegetation, and not at all conducive to bird life. From a vantage point on the summit of the hills at Punta Peñascosa, "George's Island" is plainly visible to the southward and the high Sierra San Pedro Martir in Lower California can be seen on the other side of the Gulf. Directly across the rather shallow bay towards the northwest a headland of granite hills not unlike those of Punta Peñascosa in shape, called Punta Cholla, stand out in bold prominence, while inland and more northerly "Direction Hill" is seen. Far beyond on clear days the Tinajas Altas range, which lies just east of Yuma, Arizona, is visible. To the north, the Sierra Pinacate with its three-peaked summit, the highest one of which has been named Carnegie Peak, is ever in view. This range was visited by William T. Hornaday and has been graphically described in his book, 'Camp Fires on Desert and Lava.' Almost the entire eastern skyline was bounded by serrated granite mountains, including the Sierra Pintada range, but all were too far away from Punta Peñascosa for exploratory work from our camp. In general, the interior region here described differed physiographically but little from that part of southwestern Arizona which is directly north of the International Boundary—a vast plain with small, jutting, steep, rocky ranges piercing the level surface.

Botanically, however, a vast difference was found. The level condition of the southern region forbade rapid drainage of the no doubt heavy, sporadic, summer storms, and the alkaline content of the soil seems to have accumulated. Hence only salt-tolerant plants were present. Chief amongst



UPPER: CHOLLAS CACTUS; CAMP IN CENTER OF BACKGROUND.  
LOWER: GULLS FEEDING ON FISH OFFAL NEAR THE VILLAGE, PUNTA PENASCOSA,  
MEXICO.

these were Frutilla (*Lycium*), Glasswort (*Salicornia*), and a species of wire-grass (*Spartina*) that grew sparingly nearer the sand dunes. Only two kinds of cacti were found—a rather scarce species on the lava hills that was unknown to me and Bigelow's Cholla (*Opuntia bigelovii*). The latter was found growing in rather dense patches in two or three places where soil conditions permitted and apparently had no bearing on the bird life of the region. The Frutilla was by far the most important of the three plants mentioned and seemed to harbor the majority of the few land birds present. Thus, of eleven resident land birds, seven found either protection or subsistence amid the thickets of this plant.

That the alkaline condition of the soil controlled both plant and bird life of the land area of this region was plainly evident when the more dense desert growth thirty or forty miles inland was observed. Here an abundant desert flora and avifauna were present whose approach to the coast was discouraged chiefly by the saline condition of the soil there. In the more elevated and irregular terrain inland, the storms doubtless dissolved and carried the alkali seaward, permitting a ranker type of vegetable growth to become established and a correspondingly greater avifauna.

It is thus not difficult to see that a very scanty land bird life through such an arid region was to be expected, and a great number of the species recorded or collected were single individuals. This list may well represent a fairly good part of the winter visitants to Punta Peñascosa. While I little doubt that during migration the number of species could be greatly increased, it is hardly conceivable that an abundance of individuals would be found, owing to the scarcity of food and entire lack of water to attract them. Along the shore-line, conditions were much better for the birds that occur in a littoral association. The presence of humans deriving their livelihood from fishing and the consequent refuse offered a bounteous source of food for Gulls, and they were present in multitudinous numbers feasting while the offal was fresh. This same refuse, when drying along the high water mark, attracted myriads of small flies on which several species of shore birds fed. However, but little attempt was made to undertake a complete survey of the water birds and without question many species were missed.

I am indebted to Mr. A. J. van Rossem of the California Institute of Technology of Pasadena for identifying the Horned Larks. To the several courteous Mexican officials who expedited our passage I also wish to express thanks.

1. **Colymbus nigricollis californicus.** EARED GREBE.—When down by the water's edge on the afternoon of February 25, I saw two Eared Grebes at very close range.

2. **Pelecanus occidentalis californicus.** CALIFORNIA BROWN PELICAN.—Common and seen throughout our visit.

3. *Sula brewsteri*. BREWSTER'S BOOBY.—Not uncommon. Usually seen fishing in company with Pelicans and Terns.

4. *Phalacrocorax auritus albociliatus*. FARALLON CORMORANT.—Not uncommon. Seen almost every time the shore-line was visited.

5. *Ardea herodias treganzai*. TREGANZA'S HERON.—A pair of very wild Blue Herons lived along the beach and were seen many times.

6. *Egretta thula brewsteri*. BREWSTER'S SNOWY EGRET.—A single bird of this species frequented the beach and was often seen. At first it seemed very wild, but later became remarkably tame. At one time when I was without even a camera it allowed approach to within 50 feet before it flew.

7. *Casmerodius albus egretta*. AMERICAN EGRET.—On February 8, a single bird of this species was seen flying over the bay.

8. *Anserinae* (sp.?). GEESE.—On the night of February 18 many bands of Geese were heard flying over. The calls of some seemed so close that several times we were out trying to catch sight of them in the dim light of a very faint moon.

9. *Dafila acuta tzitzihoa*. AMERICAN PINTAIL.—Ducks were few during the first part of our stay. Two male Pintails were closely approached on February 18. Later, great flocks passed up and down from one bay to another with daily regularity. They seemed to come into shore during the night to feed and retreat to the safety of deep water at daybreak.

10. *Nyroca americana*. REDHEAD DUCK.—Not common. A bright headed male was seen in the company of the two Pintails on February 18, and during the last days of our visit a bunch of 14 were living in the bay near the fishing boats.

11. *Nyroca affinis*. LESSER SCAUP DUCK.—On February 25, six Lesser Scaup Ducks joined the bunch of Redheads. A young Mexican official borrowed a gun from us and killed two. Both were preserved as specimens.

12. *Melanitta perspicillata*. SURF SCOTER.—Three were seen early on the morning of February 23.

13. *Mergus serrator*. RED-BREADED MERGANSER.—Seen along the beach in fair numbers. They were pairing off during the latter part of the month.

14. *Cathartes aura teter*. WESTERN TURKEY VULTURE.—Observed soaring about almost daily.

15. *Buteo borealis calurus*. WESTERN RED-TAILED HAWK.—During the afternoon of February 7, while we were en route to Punta Peñascosa, several Red-tails were seen flying over the desert; and during our stay an occasional one was seen in the air.

16. *Aquila chrysaetos canadensis*. GOLDEN EAGLE.—On February 21 a fine adult Golden Eagle soared over camp.

17. *Circus hudsonicus*. MARSH HAWK.—A single Marsh Hawk was observed coursing over the region and was secured on February 21.

18. *Pandion haliaetus carolinensis*. OSPREY.—A lone Osprey inhabited this immediate region and was seen almost every day. When the tide was high his favorite perch was on the top of a boat mast; but when the boats were grounded he took refuge on the tops of the sand dunes. On several occasions he was seen inland perched on dried fish heads that had been dragged from the beach by coyotes.

19. *Falco mexicanus*. PRAIRIE FALCON.—At about 10:30 P. M. on February 7, as we were grinding along through very heavy sand on our way to and not far from Punta Peñascosa, a Prairie Falcon, apparently dazed, fell with considerable impact in the center of the road directly in front of the car. Probably the fact that I had allowed the spot-light to cast its beam obliquely upward had some bearing on this

unexpected occurrence. The bird's line of flight may have crossed this beam, causing it to lose its sense of direction. The Falcon regained its balance and took wing in a remarkably short time, even before one of our party riding on the running board could leap to capture it.

Another Prairie Falcon was seen on February 8, perching on a sand dune near the shore. When it flew it started to harry five Ravens, which were flying in close formation nearby, and seemed to get a great delight out of the Ravens' distress and the distracted cawing of the pursued bird.

20. **Lophortyx gambeli gambeli.** GAMBEL'S QUAIL.—A small covey was flushed from a thicket of Frutilla on February 20. The presence of Quail in the region had been determined by tracks seen several times on tramps in various directions. The fact that Quail were living in limited numbers amid such bleak and waterless surroundings gave rise to considerable speculative conversation regarding this bird's habits.

21. **Charadrius nivosus nivosus.** WESTERN SNOWY PLOVER.—Fairly common along the beach. Most frequently found around the dried fish heads, feeding on flies.

22. **Pagolla wilsonia beldingi.** BELDING'S PLOVER.—On February 16 a flock of 8 Belding's Plovers was found near the water's edge as the tide was receding, from which 3 were taken. Later this Plover was seen in small numbers along the beach. They seemed to frequent the place where the fishermen dumped the offal from their catches and it was found that they were feeding on the small flies which congregated in vast numbers about the rotting fish heads.

23. **Eupoda montana.** MOUNTAIN PLOVER.—On February 19 a bunch of about three dozen individuals was found on a flat sandy area about one mile inland by Philip Lichty, a member of the party, and 2 specimens were taken. This same bunch was seen by the writer on three subsequent days when collecting in the region, but owing to their rarity no more specimens were taken. The Plovers were very tame and could be approached within a few yards before they took wing.

24. **Oxyechus vociferus vociferus.** KILLDEER.—Three Killdeer Plovers stayed about the old dried fish heads, where they feasted on flies.

25. **Squatarola squatarola.** BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER.—A single Black-bellied Plover was seen on February 8 and almost every time thereafter that I visited the beach.

26. **Arenaria interpres morinella.** RUDDY TURNSTONE.—A single individual was seen in the flock of Black Turnstones on February 15.

27. **Arenaria melanocephala.** BLACK TURNSTONE.—A flock of about 20 birds was seen several times along the beach.

28. **Capella delicata.** WILSON'S SNIBE.—A single specimen was collected February 17. The bird seemed out of place when it flushed from the shade of a Frutilla bush on the dry desert two miles from the beach!

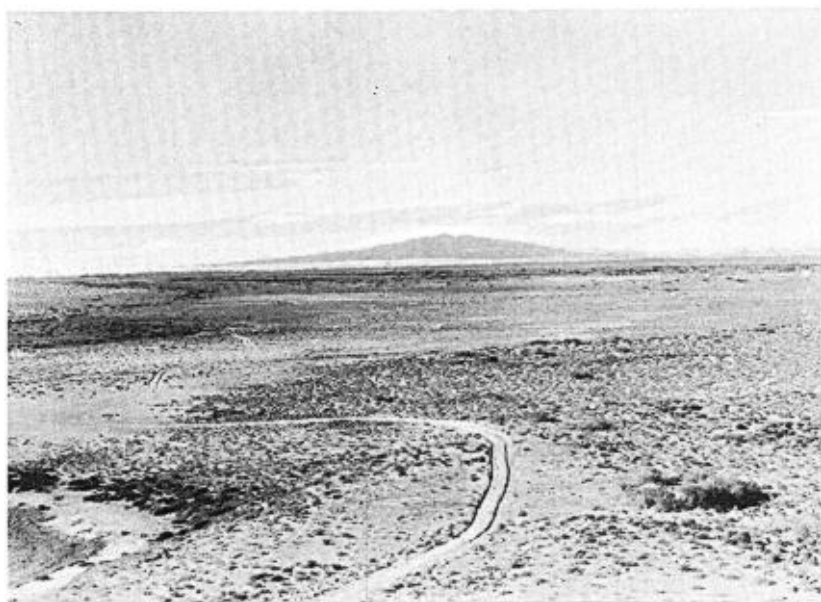
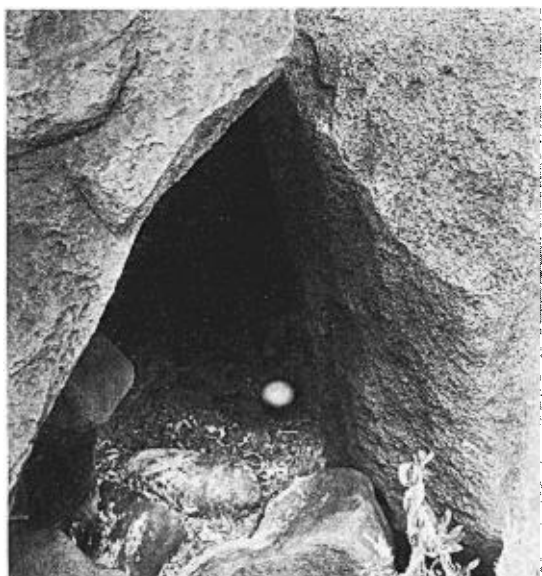
29. **Numenius americanus americanus.** LONG-BILLED CURLEW. A few Long-billed Curlews were to be found along the beach at all times during our stay.

30. **Catoptrophorus semipalmatus inornatus.** WESTERN WILLET.—Like the preceding species, Willets in limited numbers were present throughout our stay.

31. **Pisobia minutilla.** LEAST SANDPIPER.—Found in fairly large flocks along the beach throughout our stay and seemed fond of catching the flies that collected about the dried fish heads.

32. **Ereunetes maurii.** WESTERN SANDPIPER.—Like the Least Sandpiper, was fairly abundant.

33. **Limosa fedoa.** MARBLED GODWIT.—A few Godwits were present along the beach, but were never numerous.



UPPER: NEST OF WESTERN HORNED OWL.

LOWER: VIEW FROM SUMMIT OF HILLS AT PUNTA PENASCOSA, LOOKING NORTH;  
MT. PINACATE IN THE DISTANCE.

34. **Crocethia alba.** SANDERLING.—A small flock of Sanderlings was often seen with a congregation of other small shore birds along the tide line and likewise had a taste for the flies found about the fish heads.

35. **Larus glaucescens.** GLAUCOUS-WINGED GULL.—Not an uncommon representative in the horde of Gulls attracted by the offal thrown out by the fishermen when they cleaned their daily catch. All of this species were in the immature stages of plumage and not a single adult bird was observed.

36. **Larus occidentalis livens.** YELLOW-FOOTED GULL.—About twenty individuals comprised the population of this resident Gull and they were always present when fish were cleaned.

37. **Larus californicus.** CALIFORNIA GULL.—This was the most abundant Gull present and formed at least 80 per cent of the Gull population of Punta Peñascosa.

38. **Larus delawarensis.** RING-BILLED GULL.—Positive sight identification of Ring-billed Gulls in the various immature plumages is difficult, but the adults were more easily determined. Judging from the proportion of adult Ring-bills compared to adult California Gulls, their numbers were not great.

39. **Larus philadelphia.** BONAPARTE'S GULL.—Observed but once when, after a day of very heavy wind, 3 Bonaparte's Gulls were seen among the host of other Gulls feeding on a school of small fish near shore.

40. **Larus heermanni.** HEERMANN'S GULL.—Never seen scavenging on the beach with the other Gulls, but always sought the schools of small fish for food; and therefore not seen with regularity. About noon on February 14, small fish were running in the bay and approximately 200 Heermann's Gulls came in. After the excitement was over and the Gulls commenced washing themselves and preening their feathers, the Heermann's all bunched up together apart from the large congregation of Pelicans and several other species of Gulls.

41. **Thalasseus maximus maximus.** ROYAL TERN.—This species, like the one following, came in large flocks when the small fish were running, though a few scattered individuals could be seen at any time along the beach.

42. **Thalasseus elegans.** ELEGANT TERN.—Numbers of this beautiful Tern were seen. During the time of our stay they paired off and were fairly well settled by the end of February. It was not uncommon, during the middle of the month, to hear a boisterous clamor of Tern voices high in the air. There a triplet of tiny specks would be discerned, evidently two ardent males seeking the favor of a single female and expressing their opinions of each other.

43. **Bubo virginianus pallescens.** WESTERN HORNED OWL.—On February 18 a Horned Owl's nest containing one egg was found by Philip Lichty. The nest, composed entirely of regurgitated pellets, was situated between two large lava blocks in a slide on the side of a rocky hill back of the village. On revisiting this nest on February 26, the egg was found in the position in which it had been left eight days previously. It was cold and had no doubt been deserted. Further search over the rocky hills disclosed several roosting sites amongst the slides of large lava blocks. A notable feature of five of these roosts was that at each one a large boulder, that stood out prominently and offered the best vantage point, was almost completely white-washed with excrement. These were undoubtedly resting places for the Owls as there were no other elevated situations where they could alight to eat or digest their prey. Scattered below these roosts were large numbers of regurgitated pellets, some of which contained beetle, scorpion and mammal remains. Several dozen pellets were collected and have been sent to the U. S. Biological Survey for analysis. Two Horned Owls were flushed from one of these roosts, but were too far away for

an effective shot. Judging from the amount of excrement and pellets of all ages found, this pair of Owls must be permanent residents in the locality.

44. **Calypte anna.** ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD.—A single specimen was taken February 21.

45. **Megaceryle alcyon caurina.** WESTERN BELTED KINGFISHER.—A single Kingfisher was occasionally seen along the shore and over the small tidal marsh at high tide. This bird was very wild at all times and its presence was often revealed only by its rattling call as it flew away.

46. **Colaptes** (sp. ?). FLICKER.—This species is listed on the basis of heavy wing and tail feathers in the sand dunes, where the bird had no doubt fallen prey to a Prairie Falcon. The feather shafts were of the coral-red color and probably belonged to *C. cafer collaris*; but there is a slight possibility of the victim having been an aberrant *C. chrysoides mearnsi* such as occurs along the Colorado River.

47. **Sayornis nigricans nigricans.** BLACK PHOEBE.—On February 17 two Black Phoebes were collected near the beach. They were feeding on flies congregated about the decaying fish heads and were the only birds of this species seen during our stay.

48. **Sayornis saya saya.** SAY'S PHOEBE.—Two or three very wild Say's Phoebes lived about the village. A single specimen was shot at long range.

49. **Otocoris alpestris leucolaema.** DESERT HORNED LARK.—Several fair-sized flocks and scattered pairs of Horned Larks lived on the flat region east of the tidal flat. Twenty-nine specimens were collected, two of which belonged to this form. Without question most of these birds were winter visitants, and had more specimens been collected other forms would have been found present.

50. **Otocoris alpestris ammophila.** MOHAVE HORNED LARK.—Nine specimens of the series mentioned above belonged to this race, recording its most southern winter occurrence to date.

51. **Otocoris alpestris leucansiptilla.** YUMA HORNED LARK.—By far the most interesting part of the series of Horned Larks belonged to this form. The taking of these birds substantiates Grinnell's suspicions (Univ. Calif. Publ. Zool., Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 146) that the race *pallida* or *dwigthi* (= *pallida*) is in reality *leucansiptilla*. The series taken by me was collected but a few miles from the type locality of "*pallida*" and the birds are not separable from specimens of *leucansiptilla* from Yuma and Imperial Valley points. Especial effort was made, when collecting the series, to obtain resident birds. Some of those taken were in pairs and their sexual organs were enlarged; so while too early in the season for nests, there is but little doubt that they were on their nesting ground.

52. **Iridoprocne bicolor.** TREE SWALLOW.—A few scattered Tree Swallows were first seen on February 12 and irregularly afterwards. On February 27 Philip Lichty brought in the only specimen that was taken.

53. **Corvus corax sinuatus.** WESTERN RAVEN.—Five Ravens lived along the beach near the village. They were always extremely wild and were harassed severely by a Prairie Falcon on February 8. Perhaps it was the occasional persecution by the visiting Falcons that made them wary.

54. **Auriparus flaviceps acaciarium.** ARIZONA VERDIN.—It is known that the Verdin keeps a nest repaired at all times for night shelter. Oddly enough, in spite of the finding of a dozen or more nests, in good repair, of this supposedly resident bird, no individuals were seen. Their absence must have been caused by a temporary food shortage.

55. **Heleodytes brunneicapillus couesi.** NORTHERN CACTUS WREN.—Paucity



of the type of flora necessary for Cactus Wrens' existence almost excluded them from this region. The single bird taken and only one encountered might well have been a straggler, wandering westward from the desert growth which grew in profusion twenty or thirty miles inland.

56. *Salpinctes obsoletus obsoletus*. ROCK WREN.—Rock Wrens were found about the hills near camp and were occasionally seen searching among the loose stone walls of the village houses for food.

57. *Mimus polyglottus leucopterus*. WESTERN MOCKINGBIRD.—The only bird of this species recorded was seen February 27 on a rocky hillside near the village.

58. *Toxostoma curvirostre palmeri*. PALMER'S THRASHER.—At least two pairs of Palmer's Thrashers lived within our collecting radius. Although they were seen occasionally they proved exceptionally wild and only two chances to collect a bird were offered. A single specimen was taken.

59. *Toxostoma lecontei lecontei*. LECONTE'S THRASHER.—This desert loving species was the most common resident bird and several specimens were taken. An incubating female was shot by Philip Lichty on February 19. When we returned the next morning to the locality, the nest was found in a Frutilla bush. The male bird was found sitting on the clutch of three heavily incubated eggs.

60. *Oreoscoptes montanus*. SAGE THRASHER.—Sage Thrashers were fairly common and were seen feeding about the village and in the open desert areas. An individual which stayed about our camp became very tame and gleaned crumbs from beneath our table every day. On February 18 about 7:30 A. M. this tame Thrasher found its reflection in the windshield of a truck parked nearby and fought it for over three-quarters of an hour. Standing on the top of the hood about a foot from the windshield the bird would rush violently at its reflection in the dust-covered glass and strike with both beak and feet. Thwarted in its attempt to reach its rival, the bird would back off again and from about the same position feint and parry a moment, rooster fashion, as though it were eyeing its opponent to catch it off guard. This was done when rest was much needed. At other times a violent attack was followed by a hopping and pecking encounter without leaving the glass. Once when the bird was almost exhausted it pecked and pecked at the reflection from a sitting position, resting on its breast and occasionally using its wings to balance itself. Twice, when in an extremely exhausted condition, it slid off the hood on to the running-board with a thump, being too weakened by its vigorous onset to break either of these falls with its wings. Each time, after a short rest, it would get up and fight some more. Once I saw the bird hop down and quench its thirst from a small pool of water that had collected on the ground from melting ice in the truck. By 8:30 the light had changed to such an extent that the reflection was but barely discernible and the then exhausted bird left the scene of battle. Although this Thrasher was present throughout our stay, this was the only time I saw it shadow-boxing. An explanation may be that the truck was moved several times and not always placed in the same position when returned. It seemed to me, however, that the bird discovered its reflection on this particular morning, and after an experience of almost complete exhaustion thought better of repeating the ordeal.

61. *Polioptila caerulea amoenissima*. WESTERN GNATCATCHER.—Western Gnatcatchers winter in the lower desert regions and a single specimen was taken on February 19.

62. *Polioptila melanura lucida*. ARIZONA BLACK-TAILED GNATCATCHER.—This resident species was found sparingly through the Frutilla thickets and three specimens were collected.

63. **Lanius ludovicianus sonoriensis.** WHITE-RUMPED SHRIKE.—A pair of Shrikes lived back of the sand dunes north of the village and were observed almost every day. So extremely wild were they that it was not until February 21 that a bird was secured.

64. **Lanius ludovicianus gambeli.** CALIFORNIA SHRIKE.—A single specimen of this form was taken on February 21. This bird is known to winter sparingly in western Sonora.

65. **Vermivora celata lutescens.** LUTESCENT WARBLER.—Small greenish Warblers were seen occasionally through the Frutilla thickets. Two specimens collected were both of this form.

66. **Dendroica auduboni auduboni.** AUDUBON'S WARBLER.—A single individual of this species was seen near the village during the afternoon of February 14 and was the only one noted.

67. **Sturnella neglecta.** WESTERN MEADOWLARK.—The small tidal marsh of about ten acres was the home of several Meadowlarks. Three specimens taken were all of the above species.

68. **Calamospiza melanocorys.** LARK BUNTING.—On February 19 a flock of about 25 Lark Buntings was found on the desert two miles inland. They were first seen perched in a compact group on the top of a small Frutilla bush. Their dark bodies amid the pale desert soil and shrubs made them extremely conspicuous from a rather long distance.

69. **Passerculus sandwichensis alaudinus.** WESTERN SAVANNAH SPARROW.—An occasional Savannah Sparrow was seen along the shore-line and amid the sand dunes back of the beach. Two specimens collected are both referable to the above race.

70. **Passerculus sandwichensis rostratus.** LARGE-BILLED MARSH SPARROW.—These Sparrows were fairly common near the shore where the fish heads had been dumped, and about the village where it bordered the beach. No evidence of breeding was seen when the few specimens collected were dissected.

71. **Amphispiza nevadensis nevadensis.** NORTHERN SAGE SPARROW.—Sage Sparrows were fairly common in small, loose flocks over the dry, sparsely shrubbed areas.

72. **Spizella passerina arizonae.** WESTERN CHIPPING SPARROW.—Seen but once when, on February 19, a small flock of ten or twelve was found out on the desert. A single specimen was shot but was too badly mutilated to save.

73. **Spizella breweri.** BREWER'S SPARROW.—These small Sparrows were not uncommon on the desert and were sometimes seen in company with a few scattered Sage Sparrows.

74. **Zonotrichia leucophrys gambeli.** GAMBEL'S SPARROW.—A small number of Gambel's Sparrows were present during the entire stay.

75. **Melospiza lincolni lincolni.** LINCOLN'S SPARROW.—A bird of this species was taken on the edge of the tidal marsh on February 17 and was the only record made during our stay.

*San Diego Society of Natural History, Balboa Park, San Diego, California.*