

BIRDS OF THE MACMILLAN LABRADOR EXPEDITION, 1946

BY ROBERT GRAYCE

WITH the sunny days of peace returned and oceanic waters free again for unrestricted navigation, it was good news to hear that MacMillan planned once more to steer his famous old ship, the 'Bowdoin,' into polar seas. The ultimate destination of this expedition was to be Frobisher Bay, Baffin Island, to concentrate particularly on the gulls, but ice conditions in the Labrador fjords prevented passage northward beyond Saeglek Bay at 58° 30' north latitude. Officially the voyage began and ended at Boothbay, Maine (June 29–August 2), cruising a distance of 3,270 miles. Days were consumed awaiting repairs at Sydney, Nova Scotia, and visiting bird islands along the northern shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. I have chosen to confine the results of the investigations to the Newfoundland-Labrador area, a classic entity ornithologically studied for seventeen days (July 7–July 23). During this period, activities included a shipboard survey day by day of species seen and their abundance; visits for photography to the 'alcid' islands of Hamilton Inlet, and the Glaucous Gull colonies of Davis Inlet and an island off Port Manvers Run; bird walks for collecting and observations in the coastal coniferous stands or barren tundra of Battle Harbor, Antille Cove, Windy Tickle, Hopedale, Nain, Hebron, McDonald Bay and Saeglek Bay. Fifty-four forms may be reported including four birds new to Austin's Labrador list (Ringed Plover, *Charadrius h. hiatricula*; Kumlien's Gull, *Larus leucopterus kumlieni*; Caspian Tern, *Hydroprogne caspia*; and Mandt's Guillemot, *Cepphus grylle mandtii*) plus the recently subspecifically separated Black-backed Robin, *Turdus migratorius nigrideus* and Newfoundland Yellow Warbler, *Dendroica petechia amnicola*.

The following annotated list has been made brief because of the extensive treatment, including records for the Kumlien's Gull, of the Bowdoin-MacMillan Expedition of 1934, written by Dr. Alfred O. Gross (Auk, 54: 12–42, 1937) which is particularly valuable for the birds of northern Ungava and the Button Islands, not visited by the 1946 expedition. Everts Loomis has published data on a few species from the southeastern corner of this region which was helpful (Auk, 62: 234–241, 1945). Although the birds were our major object of study, Labrador geographically is a region that stirs the imagination. The presence of an Arctic current strewn with imposing icebergs, the coniferous pockets along a tundra coast, the 'tickles' or inland channels connecting deep fjords, the imposing

mountains of the north carved by an ice sheet, the alcid and white-winged gull colonies, the native peoples, settlements, and alpine plants are subsidiary elements to enliven the ornithological picture often contributing their sociological or ecological impact. Add to this the pleasure of an ocean voyage with interesting companions by one not inclined to seasickness and you have the ingredients of a first-class birding adventure.

For the opportunity of making the voyage, I thank the president and directors of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, now enjoying its fiftieth anniversary, and particularly its secretary, Mr. C. Russell Mason, under whose guidance the Society has also become an active institute of field ornithology. In many ways I am indebted to Dr. Alfred M. Bailey, Director of the Colorado Museum of Natural History, my birding companion through both stormy seas and fair weather. For their stimulation in a region noted for its paucity of variety though abundance of certain individuals, my appreciation is extended to Commander Donald B. MacMillan, his two mates, former Lieutenant John Matthews and former Lieutenant Commander Norman Hanson, and my shipboard friends who were eager to point out any winged form even though it frequently proved to be Black Guillemot 2,897! The trip was made doubly enjoyable by the charming hospitality of the two feminine crew members, Mrs. MacMillan and Miss Helga Knudson, formerly of Greenland.

ANNOTATED LIST OF LABRADOR BIRDS

COMMON LOON, *Gavia immer immer*.—Nine were observed, all on the same day (July 12), at Port Manvers Run, north of Nain.

RED-THROATED LOON, *Gavia stellata*.—The commoner of the Labrador loons, seen from the Straits of Belle Isle to Hebron. Forty-one birds recorded.

SOOTY SHEARWATER, *Puffinus griseus*.—Nine of these hagdons occurred in a small group off Battle Harbor in southern Labrador (July 21).

GREATER SHEARWATER, *Puffinus gravis*.—Two skimmed along by themselves north of Battle Harbor (July 21).

FULMAR, *Fulmarus glacialis glacialis*.—One of these cold-loving species in the dark phase appeared at Saeglek Bay (July 13).

GANNET, *Morus bassana*.—An adult bird flying ten miles south of Domino Run (July 21) was our farthest northern record in Labrador. Thirty-two birds were observed from here to Belle Isle (July 21, 22).

CANADA GOOSE, *Branta canadensis*.—One was seen flying across Straits of Belle Isle (July 7).

BARROW'S GOLDEN-EYE, *Glaucionetta islandica*.—Eight drakes were observed at McDonald Bay, Mugford Tickle. In this cold, barren spot surrounded by mountainous cliffs these male birds paddled without any females about, probably having headed coastwise while the females were brooding.

AMERICAN EIDER, *Somateria mollissima dresseri*;

NORTHERN EIDER, *Somateria mollissima borealis*.—The commonest Labrador pelagic

ducks breeding on the numerous islands all the way north to Saeglek Bay. Males predominated among the birds observed, as was to be expected during the nesting season, outnumbering the females (unmated or with nests broken up) about ten to one according to counts of over four hundred birds in Nain "Tickle" (July 16). Dr. Gross places Hopedale, at the 55° parallel of north latitude, as a probable dividing line for the breeding ranges of the two subspecies.

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER, *Melanitta fusca deglandi*.—The breeding range of this bird is officially given as west of Hudson Bay, yet I saw 173 individuals, with a preponderance of males, scattered from Cape Harrison through the inland channels to Port Manvers Run. Cleveland Bent told me he believed this bird unquestionably will be found nesting in Ungava. MacMillan states that in August this scoter is most abundant.

AMERICAN SCOTER, *Oidemia nigra americana*.—The officially breeding scoter of Labrador produced only 189 individuals. The center of abundance occurred in the region about Nain. They nest in the interior, not on the islands of the channels. None of the three scoters was seen south of the 55° parallel, north latitude.

SURF SCOTER, *Melanitta perspicillata*.—Eighteen birds were listed from Davis Inlet to the vicinity of Nain (July 11, 16), the least abundant of the three scoters at this season.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER, *Mergus serrator*.—Unusual is the fact that only one bird was seen, a female, far north in the austere setting of Port Manvers Run (July 12).

AMERICAN ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK, *Buteo lagopus s.johannis*.—Scarce this year after their cyclic journey southward coincident with the failure of the lemming supply, two of these hawks in the normal phase were spied by MacMillan circling high over the steep escarpments of Mugford Tickle (July 13). The pair that nests on the ledges at Nain did not appear this season.

GYRFALCON, *Falco rusticolus obsoletus*.—Marvelous to watch were the swift flights and breathtaking stoops of this largest of the falcons, the lord of the desert tundra of northern Labrador. Only one was seen, and this in intermediate plumage, far north on the shores of Saeglet Bay (July 13).

DUCK HAWK, *Falco peregrinus anatum*.—A pair nested on one of the little offshore islands outside Nain (July 16).

WILLOW PTARMIGAN, *Lagopus lagopus albus*.—For long hours over the barrens, Dr. Bailey and I searched for these birds unavailingly. From information garnered at Nain, one could say they were low but not at the bottom of their cycle. Roland Clement, encamped the year before at Northwest River, found them abundant there at that time. One probable record was made (observed from ship) near Antille Cove (July 22).

EUROPEAN RINGED PLOVER, *Charadrius hiaticula hiaticula*.—Bray reported these birds in eastern Baffin Island as the common form. Taverner mentions the lesser webbing of the foot as the only mark distinguishing this species from the Semipalmated Plover. The larger size, thicker breast band and restricted white line over the bill shown by a bird observed on the wet tundra at McDonald Bay (July 12) places on the hypothetical list a new stray for Newfoundland Labrador. A comparison of specimens at the Museum of Comparative Zoölogy verifies this sight record.

SEMPIPALMATED PLOVER, *Charadrius hiaticula semipalmatus*.—One pair and another individual at Nain (July 16) on a shingly beach where the species nests yearly.

SPOTTED SANDPIPER, *Actitis macularia*.—Though usually found along the little brooks formed from the melted snowfields, during an early migration I saw ten birds

on the small area of Battle Harbor Island (July 22). A far northern record was made by one bird at Saeglek Bay (July 13).

RED PHALAROPE, *Phalaropus fulicarius*.—The brilliantly brick-colored females with white facial patch had come seaward to play about in the Labrador ice fields during the summer. Eleven were observed (July 14) among the floes out from Saeglek Bay.

NORTHERN PHALAROPE, *Lobipes lobatus*.—Accredited as the more southerly breeding species, yet only one bird was seen amongst the flock of Red Phalaropes.

PARASITIC JAEGER, *Stercorarius parasiticus*.—One of these rapacious sea hawks in the dark phase observed in the Strait of Belle Isle (July 7) can be recorded for this region, although there are several records of this species and the Pomarine Jaeger during the expedition off Nova Scotia and Quebec-Labrador.

GLAUCOUS GULL, *Larus hyperboreus hyperboreus*.—These great white birds flying across the sky personify the spirit of the Arctic oceanic regions. None appeared south of the 55th parallel at the Hopedale area. The most southerly nesting station visited was Gull Cliff, on Freestone Island, oceanward from Davis Inlet, where approximately twenty birds bred. As our ship progressed, the Burgomasters became immediately the common gull seen every day from this point, with their center of abundance at Port Manvers Run and islands offshore. The smaller but similar Iceland Gull (*Larus leucopterus leucopterus*) was searched for in vain.

KUMLIEN'S GULL, *Larus leucopterus kumlieni*.—To study this bird on its nesting ground in eastern Baffin Island was to have been the prime scientific purpose of the expedition. An immature bird (the size of a Herring Gull but lighter, with paler brownish-gray primaries and more reddish legs and feet) which flew about our ship and perched on an iceberg out from Saeglek Bay (July 14) can be recorded as this form.

GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL, *Larus marinus*.—A nesting species on the islands of the Labrador region, the Minister Gull is never numerous. At Port Manvers Run MacMillan noticed them breeding on a site previously utilized by Glaucous Gulls, thus demonstrating their more dominating disposition, though on an offshore island holding close to fifty nesting pair of Glaucous Gulls there were eight Black-backed Gulls (no Herring Gulls).

HERRING GULL, *Larus argentatus smithsonianus*.—Austin categorizes this coastal breeding bird as Labrador's commonest gull. According to our observations a division of Labrador into north and south sections at 55° north latitude would limit Austin's statement as correct with regard to the south section only. Their absence as scavengers at the harbors and settlements (one of the surprising bits of local gull behavior) calls to mind their persecution by six generations of fisherfolk for bait and by native peoples for food.

ATLANTIC KYTTIWAKE, *Rissa tridactyla tridactyla*.—More than three hundred of these white dove-like gulls, wings tipped with inky black, circled over the first huge iceberg encountered outside the Straits of Belle Isle (July 7). Five birds south of Domino Island (July 21) completed our Labrador record. No nesting sites were found.

ARCTIC TERN, *Sterna paradisaea*.—Twelve birds were flying outside Antille Cove (July 7). On our passage by the islands of Nanuhtok and Turnavik Bays, where Austin once banded these terns, not one bird was seen.

CASPIAN TERN, *Hydroprogne caspia*.—Leaving Antille Cove (July 7), Dr. Bailey noted a tern in the distance decidedly larger than the others which he believed to be of this species, with which judgment I concur.

RAZOR-BILLED AUK, *Alca torda torda*.—Breeding in rock crevices and talus slopes on the outside islands only, these auks spread from Hamilton Inlet (where they were surpassed in numbers only by the Atlantic Puffin) to the Nain region. The white 'hip pockets' of this species in flight differentiate it afar from the puffin and murre. In speed of flight they quickly outdistance the sluggish puffin.

COMMON MURRE, *Uria aalge aalge*.—Murre are uncommon birds, having suffered most at the ignorant hands of the egger. At their center of abundance in the Gannet Clusters I averaged, during a brief visit to the chief island, not more than fifty nesting pairs; only two of those I observed were of the ringed variety.

BRÜNNICH'S MURRE, *Uria lomvia lomvia*.—A few birds rested on the waters of the Gannet Clusters on which islands they unquestionably nested.

NORTHERN BLACK GUILLEMOT, *Cepphus grylle arcticus*.—The most successful member of the family in Labrador was always numerous, especially in the channels.

MANDT'S GUILLEMOT, *Cepphus grylle mandti*.—After guillemots were seen by the thousands, the enlarged white area of the wing was conspicuous, giving the bird an even more twinkling appearance in flight. In the ice floes out from Saeglek Bay (July 12) two birds close by were positively identified.

ATLANTIC PUFFIN, *Fratercula arctica arctica*.—Extremely abundant (at least two thousand bred on the Gannet Clusters), these birds were at home about the islands, in open water and in the ice-ridden floes, but never appeared in the inland channels. The particular niche of the guillemots.

SNOWY OWL, *Nyctea scandiaca*.—There is some doubt if most of these cyclic visitors southward, so abundant last winter (1945-1946), ever attempt to return to the Arctic to breed. It is a moot question whether sight records from Labrador the following season prove very much. One bird disturbed by me flew to another islet of the Gannet Clusters (July 9). At Hopedale (July 10) hearing this owl's call was a novel experience. Neither of these could have been breeding birds so far south, but might have wintered in the vicinity. At Nain we were told they were "very abundant" last winter, though there was no evidence of their presence during our visit. Everyone presumed they had gone back north, as they probably had done.

EASTERN BELTED KINGFISHER, *Megaceryle alcyon alcyon*.—A lone kingfisher called and flew over the harbor at St. Mary's (July 21).

NORTHERN HORNED LARK, *Otocoris alpestris alpestris*.—This exotic-faced terrestrial bird, the companion of the American Pipit, is confined to the open stretches of the coastal barrens. Over one hundred individuals were counted on Battle Harbor Island (July 22), slightly predominating here over the pipit.

LABRADOR JAY, *Persioreus canadensis nigricapillus*.—Uncommon during the summer in the coastwise coniferous pockets and at the settlements, six were collected at Nain by Dr. Bailey (July 12).

NORTHERN RAVEN, *Corvus corax principalis*.—Either flying among the stark, hoary cliffs of the northern mountains, somber tenants of the glacial cirques, or lying in wait for hapless fledglings or exposed eggs on the offshore islands, ravens appear the length of the region—the 'crow' of the Labrador where there are no crows. Eleven birds were recorded.

BLACK-BACKED ROBIN, *Turdus migratorius nigrideus*.—The new, large subspecies of intensified coloration, with the black of the head extending uninterruptedly into the back, is the robin of the coastal spruce-fir-larch pockets that extend north to Napartok Bay south of Hebron. I observed them in small numbers from Antille Cove (July 7) as far north as Nain (July 11).

GRAY-CHEEKED THRUSH, *Hylocichla minima minima*.—Nine Gray-cheeked Thrushes came out at dusk about the Grenville Hospital at St. Mary's (July 21), even perching on a clothesline to give their rapturous evening serenade. The song, even heard this late in the season, was inseparable to me from the notes of Bicknell's Thrush. One bird was seen at Nain (July 16).

AMERICAN PIPIT, *Anthus spinoletta rubescens*.—Inhabitants of the desert tundra, spurning close proximity to man. Two hours' walk one evening ashore at Saeglek Bay (July 13) produced over ten pipits sharing their habitat with the horned larks, but now the predominating species. Four birds were observed in the Gannet Clusters (July 9).

NORTHERN YELLOW WARBLER, *Dendroica petechia amnicola*.—One bird, most likely of this subspecies, responded to my squeaking and popped up through the foliage skirting a larch grove at St. Mary's (July 21).

MYRTLE WARBLER, *Dendroica coronata coronata*.—Dr. Bailey collected one at Nain (July 12).

BLACKPOLL WARBLER, *Dendroica striata*.—This is the common Labrador warbler heard in every coniferous band.

COMMON REDPOLL, *Acanthis flammea flammea*.—The only redpoll observed and most abundant. I found a nest with four young about three days old, covered with black natal down, at Nain (July 15). During my first landfall at Antille Cove (July 7), the evening flight performance of this red and gray sparrow proved a special treat. High in the air, cavorting in dexterous evolutions and arching volplanes over a valley embracing an eighth of a mile territory, these tiny fringillids darted, calling their melodious *che-e-e-ur* and non-metallic rattle and always returning to a favorite perch.

LABRADOR SAVANNAH SPARROW, *Passerculus sandwichensis labradorius*.—Only at Hebron (July 13) were savannah sparrows found, but here they proved most common. Fourteen birds flitted beyond the Moravian missionary enclosure and in the scrubby acres behind the village.

SLATE-COLORED JUNCO, *Junco hyemalis hyemalis*.—More common in the Canadian-Hudsonian Zone of the south. One bird was observed at Nain (July 21).

WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW, *Zonotrichia leucophrys leucophrys*.—Horned larks, pipits and White-crowned Sparrows vied for the honor of being the commonest oscinine bird along the Labrador coast. I give the palm to this species, abundant in every spruce pocket, coastal village and sparsely vegetated glade. At least its plaintive, sweet notes must be ranked as Labrador's characteristic bird song. One bird was singing in the inhospitable tundra at Saeglek Bay (July 13). By a combination of observation and collecting the specimen, Dr. Bailey found that the male bird fed the three birds of the year after nest desertion when the family group was still intact.

WHITE-THROATED SPARROW, *Zonotrichia albicollis*.—One individual was heard at St. Mary's (July 21).

LINCOLN'S SPARROW, *Melospiza lincolni lincolni*.—Four of these Sparrows lived in the willow tangles of a brook at St. Mary's Harbor (July 21).

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