

### A Night on Land.

BY A. W. ANTHONY, TAYLORSVILLE, CAL.

[Read before the Northern Division of the Cooper Orn. Club, March 3, 1900.]

FROM the day I was informed that "not a living thing" was to be found on the San Benito Islands, I made up my mind that they were well worth a visit, and when, one after another of the captains of coasting vessels repeated the threadbare statement, my anxiety grew until I began to regard the rocks as the most interesting spot in the Pacific. Many similar islands I had visited, all of which were forsaken by all living creatures—if the statements of the fishermen and sealers were to be believed—and I usually found that the more "accursed" an island was, the more interesting it was found to be from the standpoint of the naturalist. I was hardly prepared, however, for the appearance of desolation that greeted me when I first dropped anchor in the lea of the westernmost of the three islands that form the group, which lies about sixty miles off the coast of Lower California and about twenty miles from Cerros Island, the largest of the islands on the Pacific coast of the peninsula.

I have said that the outlook was not encouraging. Hardly a sea bird was in sight; in place of thousands of gulls, cormorants and pelicans that usually enliven the region of a "bird island" in these waters, a dozen or so Western Gulls (*Larus occidentalis*), half as many cormorants and one or two Royal Terns (*Sterna maxima*) seemed to comprise the avian census of the islands. It was evident at a glance that there were no large rookeries of these species to be found. On landing, the island was found to be fairly honey-combed with the burrows of Cassin's Auklet (*Ptychoramphus aleuticus*.) As it was late July this species was nearly through with its season's housekeeping, and one or two burrows which were opened contained petrels. As petrels can be seen in their glory only at night, we paid them a call after dark and were well repaid for our trouble. Since then I have several times wandered over the more level paths of this island at night, and have always found a bird popula-

tion that has surprised me, familiar as I am with that and similar rookeries.

As I recently tried to give a crude idea of what was to be seen and heard on the water after night-fall, I will borrow a few notes from my field book concerning what transpired on land during one of my night calls on the birds of San Benito. Leaving the schooner soon after it was fairly dark, we pulled to the landing a few hundred yards from the anchorage. On a high rock lying in front of and breaking the sea from the landing, we disturbed a Frazar's Oystercatcher (*Hematopus frazari*), which flew past the boat uttering its rattling alarm. There is always an Oystercatcher on this rock at night. Sometimes it is the present species, but as often the Black (*Hematopus bachmani*), and they never fail to herald the landing of a boat. Sometimes the Oystercatcher is accompanied by a Wandering Tattler (*Heteractitis incanus*), which is a great night feeder, and can be heard at all hours, though seldom seen at night.

Hauling the boat out on the shingle, a few steps places us in the city of birds, a fact we discovered by breaking through into the burrows at almost every step, but the birds themselves are very much in evidence. Hundreds of inky black objects are dashing about with bat-like flight, now here, now there, with no apparent object in their wanderings. Like butterflies they come and go, flitting so near at times that one attempts to catch them as they pass. Others are constantly coming from the burrows to join in the revel. Each, as it reaches the outer air, utters its characteristic call, flops along the ground a few feet, somewhat like an old felt hat before the wind, and is away, as graceful and airy as the rest. Those in the air are constantly calling and from the ground under our feet come answering cries. The noise and confusion suggests a busy street in a city.

From the harsher notes of the Black Petrel (*Oceanodroma melania*), the very

similar cries of the Socorro Petrel (*O. socorroensis*) are distinguished. The former birds are far more numerous and as yet have only eggs in their nests, while most of the latter have young by July 15, and are soon away at sea in search of food, which consists entirely, so far as I am able to discover, of the young of the rock lobster. Now and then a Cassin's Auklet flew by like a feathered bullet, with food for a hungry squab, and one that passed so close to my face as to make my hair rise, was captured and found to be full to overflowing with the same larval lobsters eaten by the petrels.

As the beach is left behind and the booming of the surf becomes less noticeable, the bird notes are more easily distinguished. A Royal Tern is heard flying overhead, and on the hillside above us a Burrowing Owl (*Speotyto c. hypogæa*) calls. It is rather surprising that the owls should be found on such small and uninviting islands, yet I have found them on almost all of the islands off the coast of Southern and Lower California, even to the small islets of but a few acres in area.

As soon as the rocky ground at the base of the hills is reached, a strange note is heard which seems to come from the loose rocks fallen from a small ledge above, and resembles the "whirring" of a rapidly revolving cog wheel. For about ten seconds the whizzing continues, when suddenly a note is dropped,—there is a quick gasp, as for breath—and instantly the wheels begin to revolve again, having given one the impression that there is a broken cog in the buried machine. I have no idea how long the strange note might be continued. I have waited until my patience was exhausted, and always the same "cog" was slipped, at exactly the same interval, and the bird was as fresh as ever when I left it with its unfinished song. Another note of this species which is occasionally heard from the same rock pile and which gives one a clew to the author, is exactly like the cry of the two petrels above mentioned but is higher pitched and more hastily uttered, giving one the idea of a smaller bird, as indeed it is, the Least Petrel (*Halocyptena microsoma*.)

This species I have never found in burrows, but always in loose rocky ledges or under rocks. In a rock wall about seven feet long and less than two feet high, I once found twenty-eight of these little petrels, but I have never found them on other islands of the coast. The discordant notes of the Blackvented Shearwater (*Puffinus gavia*) is also heard among the higher rocks of the island and it is quite probable that they have young in some of the holes in the ledges. They are not very abundant on the Benitos, but I have found them in several parts of the island and know of two or three caves where they regularly nest.

As we leave the island the call notes of Xantus' Murrelet (*Brachyramphus hypoleucus*) comes from several quarters along the kelp. Although the species has long since taken its young to sea, it regularly visits the islands at night but at day-break is far from land again. A flock of a dozen or more Western Gulls accompanied by a few Heermann's, are strung out in a long line astern of the schooner, resting on the water and waiting for breakfast. They were there at sunset, and will be there three weeks from now, if we stay so long. Overhead, and as far as the eye can reach in the moonlight, flit dusky shadows of petrels. The air is vibrant with their calls, mingling with those of Cassin's Auklet, Xantus' Murrelet, and the more distant notes of shearwaters. Truly, though San Benito may be a quiet spot by day—as bird islands go—, it teems with life at night!

\*\*\*

MR. A. W. ANTHONY writes that he has seen Brewer's Blackbirds going into woodpecker's cavities in the firs over 100 feet from the ground, along the Columbia River Valley.

\*\*\*

MR. JAS. J. CARROLL of Waco, Tex., reports the taking of  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{1}{3}$  Bald Eagle during January, sets of three eggs being very unusual with this species.

\*\*\*

MR. JOSEPH MAILLIARD presented a paper at the meeting of the Section of Ornithology of the California Academy of Sciences on March 6, entitled "Formaldehyde as an Aid in Bird Collecting."