

A GLIMPSE OF BIRD LIFE ON THE WEST COAST OF MEXICO

By CHESTER LAMB

ON MARCH 27, 1909, the writer was one of a party of three that embarked from San Diego on a little wind-jammer, bound for San Blas, Territory of Tepic, Mexico, some 1200 miles southeast of Los Angeles. On account of some misunderstanding about our quarters we were compelled to share them with two cows and a dozen chickens, which, as some of us were suffering from mal-demer at first, was not very pleasant. Just at dusk we passed the Coronado Islands, the northernmost known breeding place of the Xantus Murrelet, (*Brachyramphus hypoleucus*) and the recipient of an occasional visit from the Frazar Oyster-catcher (*Haematopus frazari*).

The first few days out Western Gulls (*Larus occidentalis*) and two or three Black-footed Albatross (*Diomedea nigripes*) were following in our wake, but on the 31st, just off Magdalena Bay, our last gull left us, and we did not see another till we reacht San Blas, and then only three or four individuals. We saw the last albatross just before we past Cape St. Lucas. Before we reacht the Cape, Cassin Auklets (*Ptychoramphus aleuticus*), Black Petrels (*Oceanodroma melania*) Least Petrels (*Halocyptena microsoma*), shearwaters and a few migrating shore birds going north, were frequently observed. We did not make acquaintance with the Frigate Bird (*Fregata aquila*) till the day after we past the Cape; from then on our hopes were high that we would become acquainted with many birds new to us, and we were not disappointed, altho we met many of our California friends as well.

On April 4, while about seventy-five miles from the Tres Marias Islands a couple of Red-billed Tropic Birds (*Phaethon aethereus*) flew slowly over us, the only ones I saw on the expedition. The next day Blue-footed Boobies (*Sula nebouxi*) could be seen on all sides busily fishing. They fish much like a tern, plunging from a great height head first into the water. Brewster Boobies (*Sula brewsteri*) were not plentiful but those seen evinced considerable interest in us, flying about the ship and trying to alight in the rigging. My first impression of them was of their awkwardness in alighting. One finally managed to perch on the forecastle. After carefully photographing him we thought we would see how close we could get to him without his flying, and were indeed surprised when he allowed us to pick him up. He could not rise from the deck but after hopping around for awhile finally succeeded in climbing up on the railing, where he sat for awhile before he flew away.

On the tenth day out we reacht San Blas, and, landing at just about dusk, our ears were greeted with a terrible din and some melody, as if we were in an enormous aviary. After investigating we found the source to be great numbers of Colima Boat-tails (*Megaquiscalus major obscurus*) and Mexican Crows (*Corvus mexicanus*). The Boat-tails were present in great numbers and it seemed as if they were all trying to use the same tree to roost in. They are very bold and cause considerable annoyance by coming into the houses and carrying off food. The Crows are much smaller than ours and have quite a pleasant and peculiar call. The next most conspicuous birds are the Black Vultures, (*Catharista urubu*) with an occasional Turkey Vulture, (*Cathartes aura*) flying around, tho they do not infest the market places as I have seen them in Acapulco, several hundred miles farther south. On April 7 I found a young Black Vulture about two days old, in a ruined stone building near the town. After the vultures in noise if not in numbers are the

parrots, parakeets and Mexican Caciques (*Cassiculus melanicterus*). The birds are not hard to approach, tho the parrots and parakeets are somewhat wild.

We stayed in San Blas two days this time, which was spent in getting acquainted with and skinning birds. On the ninth of April we embarkt for the Las Marietas Islands, some sixty miles south and four miles from the mainland, known for their considerable guano supply and immense numbers of Blue-footed and Brewster Boobies. The guano is found in large caves and is not the product of our present day birds or bats. The guano of the boobies is considered worthless and on this coast it is the cormorant guano that is sought. As we approacht the islands they seemed to be literally covered with boobies, the Brewster greatly exceeding the Blue-footed in numbers. This group of islands consists of two main islands, one of which is about a mile and a half in diameter, composed mostly of piled-up lava. The other, slightly smaller, has a large flat grassy plain and a small spring of fresh water, a few small trees and some patches of cactus. There are several small outlying rocks and it was on these rocks that we found Heerman Gulls (*Larus heermanni*) nesting.

On these islands the Brewster and Blue-footed Boobies have distinct nesting habits. No Blue-faced Boobies were seen. At the time of our visit Brewster Boobies were all thru their nesting, the young being well able to fly about and fish for themselves. These Boobies make their nests on the high parts of the islands and on the hillsides among the rocks, while the Blue-footed seek the flat plains. Brewster Boobies construct a well-made nest of grass, while the Blue-footed simply scratches a hole in the bare earth and deposits her eggs without any lining to the nest. The captain of the ship told me that when he was there, about the 6th of January, Brewster Boobies had young and eggs. We found Blue-footed Boobies with eggs and young in all stages of development. Their colonies never encroacht on those of Brewster's and the two boobies did not seem to associate with each other. Sets of their eggs consist about equally of two or three eggs, and out of hundreds examined only three nests containing four eggs were noted. A singular thing is the large number of runts, and the difference of size of the eggs in the same nest. The eggs when first laid are identical in appearance to those of the cormorants, but soon become badly nest stained.

Altho there were hundreds of Frigate Birds about during our stay of five days I did not see any attempt to rob the boobies of their fish, tho when we moved around the colonies the brooding birds would vomit quantities of small fish before flying, which the Frigate Birds would be on the alert to pick up. The boobies do considerable fishing at night and, as the water gave off a phosphorescent light when disturbed, it gave the appearance of flashes of flame when the birds made their dives. The Frigate Birds had their nests in a large tract of wild pineapple plants, which, being exceedingly prickly, made their nests well protected, at least from us. After some very careful work and many stabs I managed to reach a few of the nests and there found young and eggs in all stages of development. The single egg is placed on a platform, flimsily made of twigs and it is a marvel to me how the bird can brood without destroying it. The white downy young often fall victim to their own indiscretion, by falling out of the nest, and once among that wild pineapple death is inevitable, as testified by many mute witnesses.

Tho we made careful search for that exceedingly dainty and graceful bird, the Red-billed Tropic Bird, the only evidence of one was a dried up dead one on the beach. Old friends such as Great Blue Heron, (*Ardea herodias*). California Brown Pelican, (*Pelecanus californicus*) and Heermann Gull were nesting. At this date eggs of the Great Blue Heron were fresh, California Brown Pelican were

considerably incubated and Heermann Gulls were both fresh and advanced in incubation; one chick just hatched was found on April 14. Other birds that pass the southern border of the United States, found nesting there, are Audubon Caracara (*Polyborus cheriway*), Mexican Ground Dove (*Columbigallina passerina pallescens*) and Frazar Oyster-catcher. The Caracaras were so abundant in Mexico only one nest was located, found by Mr. Virgil Owen on April 10. A few Yellow-crowned Night Herons (*Nycticorax violaceus*) were observed but were not nesting. Mr. Pingree Osburn shot a Laughing Falcon (*Herpetotheres cachinnans*) with a Ridgway Noddy (*Anous stolidus ridgwayi*) in its talons, the only ones of either seen. One Duck Hawk (*Falco peregrinus anatum*) was seen.

On the 15th we left the islands in a little yawl for Las Penas situated on Banderas Bay and some twenty miles away. We spent three weeks there where practically all our collecting was done. At Las Penas the hills come right down to the beach and back of the hills rise mountains some 4000 feet in elevation. To the north of the town is a flat country in which there are several rivers and many sloughs or esteros and considerable forest, mostly of cocoanut and other tropical trees. We found this wet flat land ideal for the herons and they were well represented in both species and numbers. Here we made acquaintance with the Roseate Spoonbill (*Ajaia ajaia*), a bird of which I believe we have only two records for California. Only fourteen were seen. A pair or so would come down to the river mouth early in the mornings to feed; in feeding they are very graceful and exceedingly quick. We could not locate their breeding grounds as the swamps were simply impenetrable.

The Wood Ibis (*Tantalus loculator*) was present tho sparingly. Mr. Owen took one and I had the good fortune to witness several in their flights. That curious heron, the Boat-bill (*Cancroma zeledoni*) occupied every bog hole in company with the Black-crowned Night Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax naevius*) Anthony Green Heron (*Butorides virescens anthonyi*) Louisiana Heron (*Hydranassa tricolor ruficollis*) and Little Blue Heron (*Florida caerulea*), while the Great Blue Heron seemed to keep more to the beach. American Egrets (*Herodias egretta*) and Snowy Herons (*Ardea candidissima*) were quite rare. A few were seen in secluded swamps. Anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*) Mexican Cormorants (*Phalacrocorax mexicanus*), White Ibis (*Guara alba*) White-faced Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis guarauna*) were present in large numbers, tho the first two were solitary in their habits. The latter two fed in flocks, the two species not intermingling however. Mexican Grebes (*Colymbus dominicus brachypterus*), Mexican Jacanas (*Jacana spinosa*), Blue-winged Teal (*Querquedula discors*) and American Coots (*Fulica americana*) were common. The only rail seen was the Mexican King Rail (*Rallus tenuirostris*) a single specimen being taken by Mr. Osburn at San Blas. Going from the swamps to the beach at the river mouth, old familiar friends could be found such as Royal Terns (*Sterna maxima*), Least Terns (*Sterna antillarum*), Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) Least Sandpipers (*Pisobia minutilla*) Greater Yellow-legs (*Totanus melanoleucus*), Yellow-legs (*Totanus flavipes*), Western Willets (*Symphemia semipalmata inornata*), Hudsonian Curlew (*Numenius hudsonicus*), Long-billed Curlew (*Numenius longirostris*), Killdeer (*Oxyechus vociferus*), Snowy Plover (*Aegialitis nivosa*) and Spotted Sandpipers (*Actitis macularia*). Two Black Skimmers (*Rynchops nigra*) were seen together on one occasion, and one was secured.

In the cocoanut groves and around the mangoe trees were the homes of Finsch Parrots (*Amazona finschi*), White-fronted Parrots (*Amazona albifrons*), Red-and-blue-headed Parakeets (*Conurus canicularis*) and the Military Macaw (*Ara mili-*

taris), a bird always in evidence by its loud cries. The Macaws usually go in pairs and when flying keep up a regular, frequent and very loud call that sounds like the word wah-cah, with the accent on the last syllable, repeated two or three times, and hence receives the name of Waca by the natives. The Mexican Double-yellow-headed Parrot (*Amazona oratrix*) we did not see on the mainland but it occurs commonly on the Tres Marias Islands. The natives have many in captivity and they are said to be the best talkers of the Mexican parrots. The parrots nest in holes, usually cocoanut trees. On May 10 a Mexican boy brought me two young White-fronted Parrots about two days old. He said two were all that were in the nest. A few days later a boy brought us four young Red-and-blue-headed Parakeets all of which he said came out of the same nest in an old ants' nest. Of these young I successfully raised one parrot and Mr. Osburn one parakeet. They were fed on mashed ground corn while we were in Mexico but on reaching home their diet was changed to the more modern Cream of Wheat and they seemed to thrive on it. The Parakeets make their nests in deserted ants' nests. These nests are great globular masses more or less round, composed of what appeared to be chewed up wood cemented together. The Parakeets bore into this and make a cavity near the center. I flushed a bird from one but upon digging it out found no evidence of a nest lining.

The Mexican Cacique, a black and yellow oriole with a crested head, and about the size of a California Jay, is very common and its inimitable call is one of the familiar sounds. It builds a nest in shape like a California Bush-tit, tho from three to three feet and a half long usually situated at the end of a limb in a tree covered with thorns. I might say that I only made one attempt to climb such a tree. Where we were the Chachalaca (*Ortalis vetula maccalli*) was not common. One of these birds can make enough noise to shame a whole flock of Guinea Fowls. The first time I heard it I was in a dense growth of brush and to say that I was startled would be mild indeed. The night before a Mexican had told me that frequently a jaguar visited that tract. The San Blas Jay (*Cissilopha san-blasiana san-blasiana*) was a conspicuous bird of the open places, and the Long-tailed Blue Jay (*Calocitta collieri*) a very handsome bird, about two and a half feet in length, tho mostly tail, was rather common among the banana groves and ranches.

The kingfishers, Texan (*Ceryle cabanisi*), Belted (*Ceryle alcyon*) and Great Rufous-bellied (*Ceryle torquata*) could all three be frequently seen at the same time, their favorite haunts being the running streams rather than the swamps. Their near relative the Mexican Motmot (*Momotus mexicanus*) was of an exceedingly retiring disposition, or else very rare, for often a whole day's search in their favorite haunts would fail to reveal one. Citreoline Trogons (*Trogon citreolus*) and Coppery-tailed Trogons were birds more of the higher hills than where we were; however, three of the former and one of the latter were identified. At dusk Nighthawks (*Chordeiles acutipennis texensis*) commenced to fly and were very numerous. On May 14 I flushed a Paraque (*Nyctidromus albicollis*) from her nest containing one egg. The next day I went back to get the full set and the parent but both were gone; however, later, Mr. Osburn got two birds at San Blas. Hawks seemed to be particularly abundant and easy to secure. Audubon Caracaras seemed to be the most abundant, followed by the Mexican Black Hawk (*Urubitinga anthracina*), Harris Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus harrisi*) and Mexican Goshawk (*Asturina plagiata*). Owls could frequently be heard at night. Elegant Woodpeckers (*Centurus elegans*) and Mexican Pileated Woodpeckers (*Ceophloeus scapularis*) could be seen on every trip to the groves, while of that woodpecker-like bird in habits, tho belonging to a different order, the Swainson Woodhewer (*Dendronis flavigas-*

ter), only two were seen. Inca Doves, Mexican Ground Doves, White-winged Doves and Mourning Doves were all abundant except the first mentioned, and for the most part frequenting the open roads and fields. The only pigeon seen was the Red-billed (*Columba flavirostris*). On April 29 I found one incubating a single egg on a frail platform of twigs in a clump of bushes. Mocking Birds (*Mimus polyglottos leucopterus*) were not uncommon but a peculiar thing was that they did not do any singing, tho I watcht them for some time on different occasions. Bronzed Cowbirds (*Tangavius aeneus aeneus*), Groove-billed Anis (*Crotophaga sulcirostris*) and Brewer Blackbirds (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) occupied every field where there was any stock. Colima Ground Sparrows *Aimophila acuminata* and Mexican Goldfinches (*Astragalinus psaltria mexicanus*) were mainly evident as roadside birds. A very rare and shy bird, two seen, was the Rufous Cuckoo (*Piaya mexicana*), a slightly larger bird than ours and very much longer tailed.

Wrens were noticeably absent, the only ones noted being the Happy Wren (*Pheugopedius felix*) and an unidentified species. Our familiar friend the Western Gnat-catcher (*Polioptila caerulea obscura*) was present tho not at all common. Scarlet-headed Orioles (*Icterus pustulatus*) were numerous, and a few individuals of Painted Redstarts (*Setophaga picta*), Hepatic Tanagers (*Piranga hepatica*) and Arizona Hooded Orioles (*Icterus cucullatus nelsoni*) were observed. The natives had many Tres Marias Cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis mariae*) in cages, which they got from the Tres Marias Islands some fifty miles off the coast. We were disappointed in not finding hummingbirds present in numbers and species. Only the Rufous (*Selasphorus rufus*) and another of undetermined species were seen. Mr. Osburn secured one Xantus Becard (*Platypsaris albiventris*), the only one seen. White-rump Swallows (*Tachycineta albilinea*) were nesting in fence posts May 10. The flycatchers were very abundant and well represented by the Derby Flycatcher (*Pitangus derbianus*) the largest and noisiest and particularly haunting the streams, Cassin Kingbird (*Tyrannus vociferans*), Giraud Flycatcher *Myiozetetes similis superciliosus*), Ash-throated Flycatcher (*Myiarchus cinerascens*) Vermilion Flycatcher (*Pyrocephalus rubineus mexicanus*) and Least Flycatcher (*Empidonax minimus*) the latter being rare.

In passing Natividad Island, what I took to be Sooty and Black-vented Shearwaters, Brandt and Farallone Cormorants were numerous. One Farallone Cormorant was observed at San Blas. Other birds seen, not mentioned above, were Douglas Quail (*Lophortyx douglasi*), Purple Gallinule (*Ionornis martinica*), Cuernavaca House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus rhodocolpus*), Lincoln Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*) and Pigmy Owl, (*Glaucidium phalaenoides*). Many other birds were seen that were not identified, the most prominent among which was a large black tree duck, another species of Mexican duck, a large white-headed hawk with a rufous colored body, and a large owl.

The Tierra Caliente or Hot Lands offer much in the way of collecting, but also considerable hardship in so doing. If collecting eggs, the trees selected by the birds for a nesting site, if not the slippery and tall cocoanut trees or the thorn trees, are very large around the base with the first limbs starting at some distance from the ground; besides the enervating climate makes about one such tree climbed, a day's work. The swamps are well nigh impenetrable, tho one does not have to watch out for venomous snakes. The only snakes I saw were sea-snakes which remain well out to sea. Woodticks are especially numerous and a sort of a jigger, called by the natives Wenas, are very rapacious. If allowed to get under the skin they frequently make very painful and troublesome sores, and if out in the brush much it is impossible to keep them from boring into the skin. A very small gnat

also helps to make things unpleasant, but all these things can be endured when one has the opportunity to meet so many birds so rare or unknown to us in California.

These observations cover three weeks at Las Penas, three weeks at San Blas and five days on the Las Marietas Islands. On account of missing steamer connections at San Blas we were compelled to wait there three weeks; and as we did not figure on this extra time our ammunition gave out, so little or no collecting was done. We left Mexico just before the rainy season started, May 26. The natives and what few Americans we interviewed assured us that the birds were much more numerous in the rainy season. Specimens were taken of all birds mentioned in this sketch, with the exception of the following, the greater number by Mr. Osburn.

Species seen, of which no specimens were secured: Cassin Auklet, Xantus Murrelet, Western Gull, Black-footed Albatross, Sooty Shearwater, Black-vented Shearwater, Least Petrel, Black Petrel, Farallone Cormorant, Brandt Cormorant, Blue-winged Teal, White-faced Glossy Ibis, Purple Gallinule, Long-billed Curlew, Mourning Dove, Turkey Vulture, Black Vulture, Duck Hawk, Desert Sparrow Hawk, Pigmy owl, Coppery-tailed Trogon, Texas Nighthawk, Brewer Blackbird, Cuernavaca House Finch, Painted Redstart, Western Gnatcatcher.

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

A Pink-Legged Tern.—On December 6, while walking along the beach, near Santa Barbara, California, with Mr. Bradford Torrey, he called my attention to a peculiar looking tern just ahead of us. It was standing on the sand in company with several Royal Terns (*Sterna maxima*), but was at once distinguishable from them by its intensely pink legs, in marked contrast with the black legs of the Royal. A long examination at close range with our binoculars seemed also to show that it was a trifle smaller than the others, with if anything a rather more pronounced crest.

Our inference pointed to its identification as the Elegant Tern (*Sterna elegans*), but none of our books offered any clue as to the pink legs. Any information will be most sincerely appreciated.—J. H. BOWLES.

The Western Winter Wren (*Nannus hiemalis pacificus*) in the Yosemite.—On the 18th of May, 1909, while in the footpath below Vernal Falls, I caught the sound of a Winter Wren's voice. The bird sang for some minutes ("full of music" my pencilled note says), but the place was difficult, and an attempt to see him was unsuccessful. However, a sight of the bird could have added nothing to my assurance of his identity.

On the 14th of June in the same place, I heard the song again, tho this time the bird seemed to be farther away, while the river was fuller and noisier, so that the notes came to my ear rather faintly, and if this had been my only hearing of them I should hardly feel justified in recording the bird's presence. But thirteen days later (June 27) I was again there, and after long silence the bird struck into song. Now he was close at hand, and presently I discovered him on one of the lower branches of a small maple where he sang repeatedly with my glass focussed upon him. I am told that there is no previous Yosemite record for this species.

I have had an acquaintance of many years with the New England bird, but I had met with the western form only once before this,—under the big redwoods at Santa Cruz. It may have been the effect of prejudice, but in both places I seemed to perceive that the westerner's song was a shade less beautiful than the easterner's, tho the difference between the two, if there really is any, is certainly very slight.—BRADFORD TORREY.

The Ring-neckt Duck (*Marila collaris*) in Colorado: A Correction.—In a paper on the birds of southwestern Montrose County, Colorado (Condor, XI, Jan. 1909, p. 13), I recorded a specimen of the Ring-neckt Duck as taken at Coventry, April, 1906. This bird was a female and turns out to be a female of the Lesser Scaup (*Marila affinis*.) While the original identification of the specimen as a Ring-neck was made by one in whose knowledge I had confidence, yet I am myself much to blame for not checking it up by reference to descriptions; and of course now regret very