

WINTER NOTES ON SOME NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS IN THE TROPICS

By LOYE MILLER

It was my good fortune in 1936 to spend ten weeks of the late winter on the coastwise waters between San Pedro, California, and Panama, during which time the bird life was a major interest. Mr. Frank Richardson and I left San Pedro on the United States Navy Transport "Vega" for Panama. We transited the Canal eighteen days later, were picked up at Colon by the "Nokomis" of the United States Hydrographic Service and were taken 130 miles westward across the Mosquito Gulf to Chiriquí Lagoon, on the Caribbean coast of Panama near the Costa Rican border.

Here we occupied quarters on the large houseboat of the Hydrographic Service, enjoying every facility in transportation along the coast and among the islets with the daily survey parties that were engaged in mapping the area for some twenty-five miles about. We occupied this station until April 4, leaving on that date for the return journey to San Pedro.

The courteous officers and the enlisted men of the navy took pains to give us every possible assistance—a contribution which is most gratefully acknowledged. Without their aid we would have been seriously handicapped.

Procellariiformes.—My confidence in the albatrosses was somewhat rudely shaken during our southward journey. On two previous journeys along the same route, the Black-footed Albatross (*Diomedea nigripes*) was not uncommon off the coast of Lower California, but both these trips were taken in May (1896 and 1925). The birds followed our ship as scavengers on both occasions.

During our southward journey in February, no albatrosses were seen at any point. On the return journey, in early April, they were present in small numbers, though never did they pay any attention to the ships which were not infrequent along the traffic lane. Are they busy at their breeding grounds on remote islands during the earlier months, to disperse again only in the later spring and summer season? The latitude of Magdalena Bay, Lower California, was the most southerly point at which they were noted.

Petrels and shearwaters were an insignificant factor in the avifauna and were never seen in numbers such as appear during migration along the California coast. The several species seen could not be absolutely identified.

Pelicaniformes.—*Phaethon aethereus*. Red-billed Tropic-bird. My greatest surprise in connection with tropic-birds came from their extreme scarcity. In relation to the number of days spent on the water, I saw more tropic-birds on the southern California coast during the preceding summer than were seen in the tropics where conditions appeared to be ideal.

The Red-billed Tropic-bird was first seen off Cape Corrientes, Mexico. A bird was sitting on the surface of the sea and rose readily as the ship approached, again demonstrating for me the ability of these birds to take wing in calm weather. A single Yellow-billed Tropic-bird (*Phaethon lepturus*) was seen on the Caribbean coast. Though there are numerous islets for possible nesting sites in the Gulf of Panama and in Chiriquí Lagoon on the Caribbean side, not more than a dozen tropic-birds of the two species were seen during ten weeks of observation, largely in tropic-bird range.

The food supply was certainly adequate as proven by the incalculable numbers of pelicans and cormorants that streamed in wavy lines across the Bay of Panama.

Pelicanus occidentalis, ssp. Brown Pelican. Murphy (Oceanic Birds S. Amer., vol. 2, 1936, p. 807) says, "As regards the forms of the Brown Pelican occurring in North and Central America, the West Indies, and the northerly tropical coasts of South America, I have not yet been able to come to any final taxonomic conclusion." I may be pardoned, therefore, if I do not use "brown pelican" subspecifically. The birds were seen in all manner of places along both shores and through the Canal. The most impressive fact that was noted repeatedly was their ability to grasp a perch with the totipalmate foot.

Our California birds seem so much a part of the bare spray-drenched rocks, or the flat sand bars, that it seems incongruous to think of them as perchers. In Chiriquí Lagoon there were many small islands crowned with thick jungle, but bastioned with bare rocks. The pelicans deserted the rocks to sit in rows on the flexible fronds of the coconut palms!

Fregata magnificens rothschildi. Man-o'-war-bird. Frigates were in evidence more or less at all times, south of Magdalena Bay. Like the pelicans, they follow the fresh waters through the Canal, though their principal victims, the boobies, were not seen on fresh water. Gonads of those taken were large and males had the brilliant colored throat pouch, but no breeding colonies were found. The birds were a daily source of fascinating interest to us, but only a bolder pen than mine would venture to add to the literature on their wonderful powers of flight.

Ciconiiformes.—I was greatly surprised at the absence of the Wood Ibis, for this species is common in El Salvador. The extensive mangrove swamps in the several brackish water areas visited produced none. The fresh waters of the Canal on both sides of the divide, and the Cricamola River and smaller streams draining into Chiriquí Lagoon, seemed ideal terrain for these storks and for various of the true ibises, but apparently none of these species entertained such opinion. No representative of the family was seen.

Hérons, on the other hand, were fairly abundant. Louisiana, Snowy, Little Green, Little Blue, and Yellow-crowned Night herons all were collected and the larger American Egret was observed. The Boat-billed Heron did not appear. Two species, *Egretta thula* and *Florida caerulea*, were often associated in small groups and were made the object of special scrutiny. The Little Blues were either in full adult plumage or else in spotless white, none being in transition stages either of feather or of naked parts. I saw none in a stage that duplicated those birds several times seen at Point Mugu, California, and identified as Little Blue Heron (Miller, Condor, vol. 36, 1934, p. 178). Both the Panama and the California herons had yellow-green legs, but in the case of the Panama birds, the color was more uniform along the whole length of the shank. I find no record of greenish yellow on the legs of Snowy Herons, and certainly I saw none with greenish legs in Panama. Is there a stage in the youth of the Snowy Heron when the legs are greenish instead of black? In the meanwhile I feel that *Florida* should be placed on the hypothetical list for California.

Snowy Herons were extremely shy even in the very sparsely settled vicinity of Chiriquí Lagoon. The fully white and the blue phases of the Little Blue were, on the other hand, quite easy to approach, remaining behind even when the Snowy Herons had flushed from the mixed group. This difference in behavior strongly suggests persecution by man as the determining factor.

Laridae.—Much interest came from noting the varying extent of southward migration among several of the species of gulls. Also noteworthy was the fact that during the winter some of these birds live well offshore for considerable periods without contact with the land. At least they appeared to do so along the traffic lanes.

Larus occidentalis wymani. Wyman Gull. This gull appeared to be entirely resident. It was common at all times about California ports as well as offshore. It was the dominant gull during the first day out from San Diego. They did not follow the ship a great deal, but sat about on the surface of the water or came to meet us from farther out. Individual birds were about the ship for an hour or two, then left, to be replaced by others. After nightfall of the first day, no Wyman Gulls were seen, although a single bird, presumed to be the Yellow-footed Gull (*Larus occidentalis livens*) from the Gulf of California, was seen off the mouth of the Gulf.

Larus californicus. California Gull. Having lost sight of the Wyman Gulls on the previous evening, we were interested to see a delegation of gulls coming to meet us at sunrise the next morning (February 13) as we approached Cape San Lazaro. These were all California Gulls. We were sixty miles offshore with no land visible (to human eyes). The gulls were "rafting" in great numbers and could be seen at sunset settling on the water far to seaward. The Californias continued for two days to be the dominant gull, until the nightfall of their second day. The following morning off Cape Corrientes they were absent and were not seen again. On our return trip (April 12) they had seemingly all gone north to breed.

Larus atricilla. Laughing Gull. All through the previous day, running southeast from Cape Corrientes, no gull of any species was visible, but on February 16, off White Friars' Rocks, we were met by hosts of Laughing Gulls, and the species was with us continuously from there on to the Gulf of Tehuantepec, two days run.

No gulls of any species were seen as we crossed the Gulf, nor yet as we coasted the Central American republics until we rounded Cape Mala, our farthest point south. Here the Laughing Gull again became an abundant bird. At Balboa they were everywhere about the docks in both juvenal and adult winter plumage. Within a hundred yards of the wharf, a Duck Hawk snatched one from a flock of this species, fluttered with it to the shore, and there proceeded to pluck it.

As we started northward through the Canal the gulls all left us at tidewater and were seen no more until our return journey began. There were no birds of this species wintering north of the Isthmus in our area.

During the next six weeks we were in and out of Chiriquí Lagoon on the Caribbean coast of Panama, an ideal place for gulls, but a few terns were the only larine birds seen there. We left the Lagoon on April 4, and immediately outside the headlands found Laughing Gulls in abundance, all in adult spring plumage. They were common the rest of the way into and through the Canal to the Pacific side, on fresh water or salt, in places where they had been entirely lacking in February. There appeared also a marked segregation of the adult birds. On the open Caribbean coast all birds were adults in breeding plumage. As we passed southward into the Canal, the proportion of juvenal birds increased until at Panama Bay they outnumbered the adults. From the Pacific end of the Canal we continued east of south through the Bay of Panama until well into the night, with Laughing Gulls attending us until dark. Before morning we were headed north of west, up the Pacific coast, and saw no more of the Laughing Gull.

These confessedly incomplete data would suggest a divided winter range for this gull. The western group did not go south of the Gulf of Tehuantepec, about 15° north latitude, nor east of 95° west longitude. The eastern group were all south of 9° and

east of the 80th meridian. As the spring season came on, all the western group had left the winter range before April 10, whereas in the eastern group, only the adult birds had crossed the Isthmus to the Caribbean side by April 6. Do the western birds have a shorter migration into Texas and Louisiana, upon which they embark at an earlier date to nest at a different time and place from the eastern group? Some of our western passerines have developed subspecific differences by just such a segregation during the breeding season. Too bad the bird-banders haven't a house-boat station thirty miles off the coast of Guerrero, Mexico!

Larus glaucescens. Glaucous-winged Gull. A few of this species were seen off Magdalena Bay, and on southward to the mouth of the Gulf of California off Tres Marias Islands.

Xema sabini. Sabine Gull. These gulls were not seen in February, since their normal wintering area is farther south than the farthest point south which we visited. In April, however, they were moving northward and were several times seen on April 11 and 12 north of Tehuantepec. In all instances, they were moving steadily up the coast without wandering about in gull fashion. The migratory urge was evidently in quite definite control.

Other larine species—terns and jaegers—were observed, but not out of their ordinary ranges for the season.

Charadriodea.—Shore birds were remarkably few during our stay in Panama. The Spotted Sandpiper (*Actitis macularia*) was almost ubiquitous along the banks of the Canal wherever a foothold was offered and upon the many beaches of Chiriquí Lagoon. It was evidently stationed for the winter. A single Black-bellied Plover (*Squatarola squatarola*) appeared during our last day at the Lagoon (April 3). The bird had not assumed the summer plumage.

Phalaropus fulicarius. Red Phalarope. Several flocks were seen February 13 off Magdalena Bay, but the greatest numbers were in the Gulf of Tehuantepec. Here they were rafting in uncountable numbers all during our transit of the Gulf. They were not migrating, but seemingly were in winter quarters out in the open gulf—a notably stormy area in the annals of the human mariner. A scant dozen birds were seen in this area on the return journey in April. Numerous small flocks were seen in the mouth of the Gulf of California, but the great majority of the birds had left the area where they had been so abundant.

Many other northern birds were seen which were not out of the ordinary, either in range or behavior, yet they furnished items of great personal interest. The Broad-winged Hawk (*Buteo platypterus*) was the most abundant predator seen at Chiriquí Lagoon. They sat about quietly in the forest, were very fat, and had grasshoppers in their stomachs. The Osprey was fairly common, but extremely shy and unapproachable. A flight of Turkey Vultures (*Cathartes aura*) was seen at sunset, at least a thousand of them in a dense spiraling swarm reaching from the treetops to a great height. They continued in air until dark, and probably set out for the north on their regular spring migration (March 6). And of all surprising things—a flock of Kingbirds (*Tyrannus tyrannus*)! I counted forty of them sitting silently in one small tree (March 19), much like a winter group of waxwings. These noisy and pugnacious individualists were certainly under a spell strange to me, but probably quite normal to their annual cycle of instincts. So was I called upon to readjust my concept of *Tyrannus* and to plug in on the "hormonic" circuit. Such things add to the charm of field work.

University of California at Los Angeles, October 24, 1936.