

NOTES ON THE WINTER BIRD-LIFE OF FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

By GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON

From February 12 to 18 inclusive and from March 21 to 26 inclusive, 1945, I was stationed near Fairbanks, Alaska, testing survival equipment for the Army Air Forces. While I had little time for ornithology, I nevertheless was on the lookout for birds wherever I went, and kept notes faithfully. During the earlier period I was afield a total of about 40 hours. On five days of the seven I went by motor transport to Cleary Summit, an inconspicuous, smooth-topped mountain with an elevation of slightly more than 2000 feet, about 16 miles (20 some miles by road) northeast of town. Here the mixed spruce, birch, balsam poplar, and aspen woods thinned out considerably at higher elevations, some areas being quite devoid of tree growth or shrubbery. The weather was beautifully clear and cold throughout the seven days, recorded temperatures at the Summit or at Fox (a point about half way between Cleary Summit and Fairbanks) being as low as -38° F. and -42° F. by day and -51° F. by night. The snow, not quite knee deep, had a fair crust in the more exposed places, and was nowhere badly drifted. There was little wind. Birds were scarce. Often I walked for miles without seeing so much as a jay or chickadee. But when I did come upon birds, I often found two or more species in a loose band. I saw several caribou, a few red squirrels, and tracks of snowshoe rabbits, red foxes, and mice in the vicinity of the Summit. On February 17 I motored to Chatanika, a little cluster of dwellings five or so miles north of Cleary Summit.

From March 21 to 26 I was afield from one to four hours daily, a total of about 23 hours. During this period I covered rather thoroughly the north bank of Chena "Slough" from 3 to 8 miles east of Fairbanks. Once I walked directly northward a mile or so across the stream's broad flood-plain, finding the woods there to be rather thin. Some stands of spruce along the slough were fairly dense, but most of the woodland had obviously been cut over, and some areas had been thoroughly cleared. Noticeable among the second growth were aspens, poplars, birches, tamaracks, alder, and wild rose. The snow was about knee deep and nowhere did it have a firm crust. The weather was delightful, with bright sun, very little wind, and temperatures ranging from 50° F. down to about 15° F. The area covered was low in comparison with Cleary Summit, the elevation being from 470 to about 600 feet. Again I encountered few birds and considered myself fortunate if I saw more than two or three chickadees, a grouse or two, some ravens, and a flock of 8-10 redpolls on a six-mile tramp. Judging from my observations I should say that bird-life in general was not more abundant in the low country than in the high country. As for ptarmigan, I saw them more frequently in the vicinity of Cleary Summit than elsewhere.

The following list includes only the species which I recorded personally during the two above-mentioned periods. The few specimens obtained are now at the Museum of Zoology, University of Michigan. For the subspecific determination of these, as well as for a critical reading of the manuscript, I am indebted to Joseph J. Hickey. Olaus J. Murie also was good enough to read the manuscript and to offer suggestions. Identification of the stomach contents of the specimens of Sharp-tailed Grouse and Richardson Owl was checked by A. L. Nelson, Fish and Wildlife Service, U. S. Department of the Interior.

Accipiter gentilis. Goshawk. I noted this species only in the vicinity of Cleary Summit where, on February 13, I observed one chasing a flock of ptarmigan. On February 17 I saw two moving back

and forth swiftly over the shrubbery and stunted spruce trees looking for prey. Occasionally they made their way to the very top of the ridge, where, perched on a stub, they surveyed their surroundings intently.

Canachites canadensis osgoodi. Spruce Grouse. First seen on February 17, about 4 miles east of Fairbanks, when I flushed three birds from rather open, mixed spruce, aspen, and birch woodland a few rods back from a frozen slough; a female was collected. On March 23, at the edge of a pure stand of spruce about 7 miles east of Fairbanks, I came upon a male and female perched a few yards apart in the trees. The female became agitated as I approached, lifted her head and eyed me closely, then put her head down, took a step or two along the branch, elevated and partly spread her tail, and flew off uttering a low *kuk, kuk, kuk* of protest. The male, which remained wholly unperturbed by this alarm, I collected. In the crop and gizzard of the two specimens I found nothing but spruce needles and small, smooth, remarkably uniform pebbles of milky white quartzite. On comparison with a series of *Canachites canadensis canadensis*, Mr. Hickey found the female to be slightly grayer than female birds from Labrador; but the male was like Labrador males save that, owing to the deepness of the black in its plumage, the barring appeared to be sharper.

Bonasa umbellus yukonensis. Ruffed Grouse. Noted several times 4 to 8 miles east of Fairbanks, at about 500 feet elevation, in pure stands of aspen and open mixed woods along Chena Slough. As a rule the birds were in groups of two or three, feeding in the trees or in snowless areas under the largest spruces. The dozen or so individuals which I saw all were definitely gray-tailed. On February 27 I took a male (not fat; testes not enlarged) of this pale gray race about 5 miles east of Fairbanks. The crop and gizzard were filled with alder catkins, willow buds, birch buds and twigs, aspen buds, wild rose hips, and a few cranberries. On March 23, in a dense stand of spruce about 8 miles east of Fairbanks, I found the feathers (no bones whatever) of a Ruffed Grouse scattered in the snow. The rectrices were gray. I encountered no living Ruffed Grouse anywhere in this woods, nor did I succeed in discovering a trace of mammalian footprints near the remains. The only bird of prey seen in that vicinity was a Richardson Owl.

Lagopus lagopus. Willow Ptarmigan. Ptarmigan or their tracks were seen daily from February 12 to 18, principally in the vicinity of Cleary Summit at from 1400 to 2000 feet elevation, but also at lower points along the Steese Highway north of Fox. The birds went about in flocks of 4 to 30 individuals, usually frequenting the sheltered parts of the more open slopes and often pausing for a rest or sunbath at the side of the road. They were in full winter feather, and their silky white plumage had a delicate pink cast. In alighting they often kicked the loose snow about, getting it into their eyes. Goshawks hunted them at Cleary Summit, but we found no remains of ptarmigan which had actually been killed by these hawks. Two females which I examined but had no opportunity to identify specifically had eaten quantities of cranberries and willow buds. One of these (February 17) was probably fully adult; the other (February 18) may have been a bird of the year, for it was rather small and the outermost primary and covert of the summer plumage on each wing had apparently failed to molt.

Pedioecetes phasianellus caurus. Sharp-tailed Grouse. I saw the Sharp-tailed Grouse but once—a single female, which I shot from the top of what appeared to be the tallest spruce of the forest about a mile north of Chena Slough and 5 miles east of Fairbanks. The specimen was not fat. Some of the ova were somewhat enlarged. The crop contained 68 alder catkins, most of which were quite whole. The stomach contained the remains of several more alder catkins (20%) as well as more than a hundred wild rose seeds (80%). The eyes were hazel. The subspecies *caurus* was described from the Fairbanks region by Friedmann (Jour. Wash. Acad. Sci., 33, 1943:189). Dr. Friedmann, who has been good enough to compare it with material in the National Museum, states that it "agrees very closely with the type of *caurus*," and he considers it "a typical example" of that race.

Asio flammeus. Short-eared Owl. On March 25, in the late afternoon, I saw a Short-eared Owl flying back and forth along the brushy edge of the woods bordering Chena Slough about 5 miles east of Fairbanks. I had abundant opportunity to identify it, for I watched it for about ten minutes. It apparently was hunting mice, for it made a point of hovering over patches of grass which protruded from the snow.

Cryptoglaux funerea richardsoni. Richardson Owl. At about noon, March 25, a Richardson Owl was seen by several persons along the road skirting Chena Slough about 6 miles east of Fairbanks. It was about 10 feet from the ground, sitting motionless in the sunlight, with its eyes partly closed. When one of the party approached it, hoping to obtain a photograph, it stared straight downward at the camera, and flew off when the lens was about 5 feet away (see fig. 48). After this incident had been reported to me later that day, I begged to be taken to the spot. With an hour's searching we found a Richardson Owl perched on the top of a birch stub 15 feet from the ground about 200 yards

back from the road, more or less in the direction the flying bird had been seen to take. The specimen proved to be a female, not at all fat, with slightly enlarged ovary. In the stomach were the remains of a rather large mouse, probably *Microtus*, the hind legs and tail of which had not yet been digested.

Picoides tridactylus fasciatus. Three-toed Woodpecker. This species I saw only in mixed woodland along Chena Slough at about 500 feet elevation. It could hardly have been common in the region, for I was constantly on the lookout for it, yet recorded only three individuals during the course of my stay. The first of these, a female, was with four Black-capped Chickadees about 3 miles east of town. It alighted momentarily in an aspen near me, swung deliberately across the highway, and disappeared among some large spruces (March 21). The second was a male, seen by Donald Stullken of my party, again along the highway east of town. It was on a stub only a few feet from the ground (March 21). The third was a female, which I collected along a small brook about 2 miles east of town, on March 22. It was pecking industriously at a slender birch. It was not at all fat and the ovary was



Fig. 48. Richardson Owl, photographed at Fairbanks, Alaska, on March 25, 1945, by A. Bajkov.

not enlarged. Its wing measures slightly less (108 mm.) than the low limit for females (109 mm.) given by Ridgway for *fasciatus*. At no time during my stay did I hear a woodpecker of any sort calling.

Corvus corax. Holarctic Raven. Common about Fairbanks and along Chena Slough; less common, as a rule, at Cleary Summit and in other more remote areas. It has become semi-domesticated because of the abundance of food about the town and military installations. Never did I walk along Chena Slough without seeing literally dozens of these birds. Even in February they appeared to be going about in pairs, and in late March the woods resounded with their curious courtship cries. One call note was a mellow, not unmusical, rapidly given *coo-look, coo-look, coo-look!* At no time did I see them nest building, but some pairs behaved as if they had selected their nest territories. On February 17, between Cleary Summit and Chatanika, I saw a flock of 19 Ravens circling high in the air. I think they had gathered to feed on the remains of a caribou which had been killed a few days previously in that area.

Perisoreus canadensis fumifrons. Canada Jay. Noted several times in the vicinity of Cleary Summit, usually in company with other small birds, at elevations of from 1000 to 1800 feet, February 13 to 18. It was not partial to coniferous woodland there; indeed, I saw it frequently in pure stands of

aspens and birch. It was conspicuous along the Steese Highway on cold mornings, when bands of three to six birds gathered at the edge of the woods to bask in the sun as it rose over the mountains. Now they looked like soft gray balls, with their long, exceedingly fluffy body plumage almost hiding their wings and completely covering their feet. Three specimens were taken at about 1700 feet, south of Cleary Summit, February 14. The ovaries of the two females were not enlarged, but in the male the testes measured about 4×6 mm. At Chatanika (about 1000 feet) on February 17, I saw six or seven individuals come to food placed out for them. It was surprising to find the species rare below 1000 feet. Indeed I saw it only twice anywhere in the vicinity of Fairbanks proper. On March 25 I encountered a single bird in a stand of small spruce about 7 miles east of town and a mile or so north of Chena Slough. I think this bird was a female, for its coloration was rather dull. It sang almost continuously in a soft voice as it moved deliberately from tree to tree.

Parus atricapillus turneri. Black-capped Chickadee. Noted at elevations from 470 to 1800 feet, in mixed woodland. Not often seen at Cleary Summit proper, nor anywhere in pure stands of spruce. Commonest along Chena Slough a few miles east of Fairbanks, where it was conspicuously more dirty than in areas well back from the town and railroad. Usually I encountered it in bands of three or four. On a walk of 3 to 8 miles I might come upon two or three such bands. A male and female taken on February 14 about a mile south of Cleary Summit were so clean they did not have to be washed. Neither specimen was fat and the sex organs were only slightly, if at all, enlarged.

Parus hudsonicus. Brown-headed Chickadee. Noted only at lower elevations (460 to 600 feet), as a rule in pure stands of spruce. I never saw more than three individuals at a time, nor more than nine individuals in one day. It was not seen at all in the vicinity of Cleary Summit. I took three specimens (female, February 16; female, March 23; male, March 25) along Chena Slough, finding the ovaries in the females to be unenlarged and the testes of the male to measure only 2×2 mm. In Mr. Hickey's opinion these birds are too gray-capped for *P. h. hudsonicus*, which supposedly is the race of interior Alaska. All three specimens were thoroughly washed, so final determination may have to await the collecting of strictly comparable material.

Pinicola enucleator alascensis. Pine Grosbeak. Noted on February 13, 14, and 18 and on March 22, 24, and 25, usually in flocks of 4 to 10 individuals. A single male seen on March 22 was singing brilliantly. Not noted at Cleary Summit proper, but seen at various elevations up to 1800 feet. Observed to feed on weed seeds and rose hips (February 13), grain scattered along the road (February 14), and spruce and tamarack seeds (March 22 and 24). A flock of about 30 which I observed along Chena Slough on March 24 appeared to be composed wholly of female birds, but some of them probably were young males. All were calling in musical tones. In the three specimens taken (male, February 18; male, March 22; female, March 24) the gonads were unenlarged.

Loxia curvirostra. Red Crossbill. I saw a flock of about a hundred Red Crossbills in a spruce wood below Cleary Summit, at about 1700 feet, on February 13.

Acanthis flammea flammea. Common Redpoll. Noted daily at all elevations and in all sorts of woodland. Equally common on Cleary Summit and along Chena Slough. From 10 to 70 birds were seen or heard each day. They often were noted high in the air, swinging from one feeding ground to another. Flocks were noisy, restless, and surprisingly wary. They were most approachable when, intent on feeding on the bare ground under the spruces or on slopes with southern exposure, they shoved and burrowed their way through the loose debris and dry leaves. The only Redpoll I collected was a male taken about 2 miles east of Fairbanks on March 22. It was by itself, scratching among leaves on a bank. It was not fat and its testes were not enlarged.

Plectrophenax nivalis. Snow Bunting. Noted only once: a flock of about 30 males, 2 miles east of Fairbanks, March 21. A familiar chirp called my attention to the birds, which were perched in the top of a tamarack tree as motionless as so many cones. As I approached, some of them hopped about and called sharply, and the whole flock bounded away, alighting a quarter of a mile off in a field which was partly free of snow.

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