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NOTES ON SOME OF THE RARER BIRDS OF MASSACHUSETTS.*

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THE Natural History of any portion of country cannot, of course, be too fully known; and the few ornithological notes at this time presented I feel sure will be acceptable to those who are interested in the study of the New England birds. While a large portion of the facts now communicated are of my own observing I am greatly indebted to the kindness of other persons for many of the interesting notes that, during the last five years, have been accumulating in my note-book. As the authorities upon which the observations not my own in the following pages are communicated are always indicated, I have here but to return thanks to my numerous ornithological correspondents and friends who have so generously favored me from time to time with their valuable contributions. Only by knowing thoroughly the fauna of a locality can the subsequent changes in it, induced by its becoming more densely settled, or by

* A supplement to a Catalogue of the Birds of Massachusetts, published five years since by the writer in the fourth volume of the Proceedings of the Essex Institute.

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other causes, be traced. As is well known, the mammalian and bird faunæ of all the older settled parts of the United States are vastly different from what they were two hundred years ago. These changes consist mainly in the great decrease in numbers of the representatives of all the larger species, not a few of which are already extirpated where they were formerly common; a few of the smaller species of both classes have doubtless increased in numbers. Two causes operate unfavorably upon the larger ones; the disforesting of the country and the sporting propensities of the people, everything large enough to be shot, whether useful or otherwise, being considered as legitimate game. The former destroys the natural haunts of many species, while the latter destroys and drives away others that would otherwise remain. Many of the water-fowl that are now only transient visitors, as the Canada Goose, the several species of Merganser, Teals, Black Duck and Mallard, undoubtedly once bred in this State, as did also the Wild Turkey and the Prairie Hen. Several of the Gulls and probably some of the *Tringæ* have been driven, like the Ducks and Geese, to seek more northern breeding grounds. In comparatively recent times, geologically speaking, probably other causes, as climatic, have been operating to effect a gradual northward migration, in certain species at least. These changes are of great interest, not only generally, but in a scientific point of view, and we shall be able to trace them and their causes only by comparing, from time to time, exhaustive faunal records of the same localities.

In a district so little diversified as that portion of Massachusetts lying east of the Connecticut River, it is perhaps a little unexpected that marked discrepancies should occur in the observations made at adjoining localities by equally competent naturalists, in respect to the relative abundance of certain species. As every experienced observer must have noticed that the birds of passage, as many of the Warblers especially, vary greatly in numbers in different

years, and in the time occupied by them in passing a given locality, it is less surprising that at different points they should vary in abundance the same year. Among the birds that regularly breed in the district in question, there are some that are not equally common at all points. The Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus savanna*), for instance, that along the coast and on the islands is one of the most common species of its family during the summer, is almost unknown at this season in the interior of the state, although a species that at different seasons of the year is found throughout nearly the whole continent. The Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza palustris*) is likewise locally restricted, for while a common summer bird in many of the larger swamps in the eastern part of the state, as the Fresh Pond marshes in Cambridge, it has thus far escaped the detection of very expert observers in the interior and western part. The Yellow-winged Sparrow (*Coturniculus passerinus*) is likewise partial to peculiar localities, preferring apparently sandy plains and dry open pastures; while it is one of the most numerous summer sparrows about Springfield, on Cape Cod and at Nantucket, it is generally much more rarely observed in the eastern counties of the state, where at some localities it is deemed rare. The same remarks apply to other species, as the Solitary and White-eyed Vireos (*Lani-vireo solitarius* and *Vireo Novæboracensis*), etc. The Prairie Warbler (*Dendroæca discolor*) is much more at home in old pastures partially grown up to barberries and cedars than elsewhere. The Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), generally so numerous everywhere, I found last year was one of the rarest sparrows on the islands and extreme coast border, where its relative, the Savannah, was so common.

Birds, as probably other animals, are not quite so invariable in their habits as has been commonly supposed, nor in the precise character of their notes and songs, or the situation and materials of which they compose their nests. Hence one should not rashly question the accounts given by usually

reliable authorities, because in particular instances they do not accord with their own observations. Neither should differences in habits, in song, etc., be taken as infallible evidence of a difference of species. It is well known that in Massachusetts the Brown Thrush (*Harporhynchus rufus*) is not uniform in the location of its nest, as about Springfield it almost invariably builds on the ground (in the many scores of nests that I have seen there I have met with but a single exception), while in other localities it as invariably places its nest a little above the ground in bushes. At Evanston, Ill., I once found one in an oak higher than I could reach; the locality, however, was swampy. How universally the Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella socialis*) breeds in trees, and generally at an elevation of several feet, is well known, but several authentic instances of this bird's nesting on the ground have come to my knowledge, one of which I myself discovered. Variations of this character in other species are of occasional occurrence, examples of which have doubtless been met with by every experienced collector.

The materials which birds select in the construction of their nests are well known to vary in different localities; the greater care exhibited by some species to secure a soft warm lining at the north that are much less precautionous in this respect at the south, is already a recorded fact. Aside from this, the abundance of certain available materials occurring at only particular localities gives a marked character to the nests there built, which serves to distinguish them from those from other points. Some of the Thrushes, for instance, make use of a peculiar kind of moss at some localities that elsewhere, from its absence, are compelled to substitute for it fine grass or dry leaves. At Ipswich, on Cape Cod, and perhaps generally in the immediate vicinity of the sea, the Purple Grackles (*Quiscalus versicolor*) and Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelæus phæniceus*), and in fact numerous other species, in building their nests often use little else than dry eel-grass or "sea-wrack," which results in

nest-structures widely different in appearance from those of their relatives residing in the interior. Every egg-collector is aware of the wide variations eggs of the same set may present, not only in the markings and in the tint of the ground color, but in size and form, and especially how wide these differences sometimes are in eggs of different birds of the same species. Also how different the behavior of the bird is when its nest is approached, in some cases the parents appearing almost utterly regardless of their own safety in their anxiety for their eggs or helpless young, while other parents of the same species quietly witness the robbing of their nest at a safe distance, and evince no extraordinary emotion. Those who have witnessed this, and have also watched the behavior of birds when undisturbed in their quiet retreats, will grant, I think, the same diversity of disposition and temperament to obtain among birds that is seen in man himself.

In respect to the songs of birds, who that has attentively listened to the singing of different Robins, Wood Thrushes or Purple Finches, has not detected great differences in the vocal powers of rival songsters of the same species? Different individuals of some species, especially among the Warblers, sing so differently that the expert field ornithologist is often puzzled to recognize them; especially is this so in the Black and White Creeper (*Mniotilta varia*) and the Black-throated Green Warbler (*Dendroica virens*). But the strangest example of this sort I have noticed I think was the case of an Oriole (*Icterus Baltimore*) that I heard at Ipswich last season. So different were its notes from the common notes of the Baltimore that I failed entirely to refer them to that bird till I saw its author. So much, however, did it resemble a part of the song of the Western Meadow Lark (*Sturnella magna*; *S. neglecta* Aud.) that it at once not only recalled that bird, but the wild, grassy, gently undulating primitive prairie landscape where I had heard it, and with which the loud, clear, rich, mellow tones of this beau-

tiful songster so admirably harmonize. This bird I repeatedly recognized from the peculiarity of its notes during my several days stay at this locality. Aside from such unusual variations as this, which we may consider as accidental, birds of unquestionably the same species, as the Crow, the Blue Jay, the Towhee and others, at remote localities, as New England, Florida, Iowa, etc., often possess either general differences in their notes and song, easily recognizable, or certain notes at one of these localities never heard at the others, or an absence of some that are elsewhere familiar. This is perhaps not a strange fact, since it is now so well known that birds of the same species present certain well marked variations in size according to the latitude and elevation above the sea of the locality at which they were born, and that they vary considerably, though doubtless within a certain range, in many structural points at one and the same locality. In other words, since it is known that all the different individuals of a species are not exactly alike, as though all were cast in the same die, as some naturalists appear to have believed.

Certain irregularities in the breeding range of birds have also come to light. It is perhaps not remarkable that a pair of birds of species that regularly breed in northern New England should now and then pass the summer and rear their young in the southern part, as has been the case in certain known instances in the Snow Bird (*Junco hyemalis*), the Pine Finch (*Chrysomitris pinus*), and the White-throated Sparrow (*Zonotrichia albicollis*); but it is otherwise with the Snow Bunting (*Plectrophanes nivalis*), which rarely breeds south of Labrador, of which there is a single well authenticated instance of its breeding near Springfield. The casual visits of northern birds in winter, which we may suppose sometimes results from their being driven south by want of food or the severity of the season, are also less remarkable, it appears to me, than the occurrence here of southern species, as of the two Egrets, the Little Blue Heron

(*Florida cærulea*) the Gallinules and other aquatic species, which never, so far as known (with one exception perhaps), breed so far north. In the latter case they are generally young birds that reach us towards fall in their chance wanderings.

It may here be added that the cause of the migration of our birds still offers an interesting field for investigation. Observers are of late noting that in the case of some northern species that reach us only occasionally in their winter migrations, young birds only are at first seen, but if the migration continues the older birds appear at a later date. But sometimes young birds only are seen. This frequently happens in the case of the Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*). The cause of their visits is not always, it is evident, severe weather; the last named species appearing sometimes in November,—weeks before severe cold sets in—while at other times it is not seen at all during some of our severest winters. The probable cause is more frequently, doubtless, a short supply of food, as last winter was remarkable in this state for its mildness and for the great number of northern birds that then visited us. It has repeatedly been observed that on their first arrival these unusual visitors are generally very lean, but that they soon fatten; an argument in favor of the theory that their migration was compelled by a scarcity of food.

Probably fewer birds are actually permanently resident at a given locality than is commonly supposed, for species seen the whole year at the same locality, as the Blue Jay, the Titmouse, the Brown Creeper, and the Hairy and Downy Woodpecker, etc., in Massachusetts, are represented, not by the same, but by different sets of individuals, those seen here in summer being not those seen in winter, the species migrating north and south, *en masse*, with the change of season. We are generally cognizant of a migration in a given species only when the great "bird wave" sweeps entirely past us either to the north or south. Some species, how-

ever, seem actually fixed at all seasons, and are really essentially non-migratory, as the Spruce Partridge, and Quail (*Ortyx Virginianus*) are in New England. But only a small proportion, doubtless, of the so-called non-migratory birds at any given locality are really so.*

In connection with this topic of migration, the fact that some of the young or immature individuals of our marine birds, as the Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) and other species of that family, and several of the Tringæ, linger on our coast during summer, while the adult all retire northward, is one of some interest. Mature and strong birds only, in species that breed far to the north, evidently seek very high latitudes. Birds of the first year also appear to roam less widely than the older. In different species of the Gull family it is generally only the mature birds that in winter are seen far out at sea, though in the same latitudes the young may be numerous along the coast. All observant collectors are well aware of the fact that those birds that first reach us in the spring, of whatever species, are generally not only very appreciably larger, but brighter plumaged and in every way evidently more perfect birds than those that arrive later; and that in those species that go entirely to the north of us there is a much larger proportion of paler colored and immature birds, especially among the *Sylvicolidæ*, or warblers, towards the close of the migrating season than earlier. Hence the presence here of a few individuals in summer of species that usually go farther north is not always sufficient evidence that the species breeds with us.

In reference to the notes which follow, they may be considered as forming a supplement, as already stated in a foot note, to a "Catalogue of the Birds of Massachusetts" published by me five years since. In the present paper seven species †

* In respect to the proof whereon this proposition rests, see my remarks on this point in the Memoirs of the Boston Society of Natural History, Vol. i, Pt. iv, p. 488 (foot note).

† *Strix pratincola*, *Surnia ulula*, *Turdus nævius*, *Seiurus Ludovicianus*, *Centronyx Bairdi*, *Micropalama himantopus*, *Pelecanus erythrorhynchus*.

are added to the list then given, four of which are entirely new to the fauna of the State, and the others have not before been fully established as occurring within it, though supposed to from their known general distribution. Two, the Barn Owl (*Strix pratincola*) and Varied Thrush (*Turdus naevius*), have only been previously given in Dr. Coues' Addenda to his "List of the Birds of New England."*

The latter occurs only as a straggler from the far interior and western portions of the continent. Another now added, the Baird's Finch (*Centronyx Bairdii*), discovered by Mr. C. J. Maynard at Ipswich (see notes beyond for farther particulars), is another similar example equally remarkable, it having been previously known only from near the mouth of the Yellowstone River. A few errors in that Catalogue are also now corrected, with the design of making that and the present paper a fair exposition of the ornithological fauna of the State, so far as it is at present known. Three species † there included are now stricken out. Numerous unrecorded instances of the capture of rare specimens within the State are also chronicled, as also the breeding of a few not before positively known to breed here. There are remarks also on a few species, for obvious reasons, that are not to be regarded as among the rarer species of the State.

The whole number of species of birds now known to occur in Massachusetts is three hundred.

GERFALCON. *Falco sacer* Forster. (*F. candicans et Islandicus* Auct.) A specimen in the speckled plumage was taken near Providence, R. I., by Mr. Newton Dexter, during the winter of 1864 and 1865. Its occurrence so far south appears to be wholly accidental.

The suspicion many authors have had that the *F. candicans* and *F. Islandicus* were but birds of the same species in different states of plumage, my own examination of speci-

* Proceedings of the Essex Institute, Vol. v, p. 312.

† Archibuteo Sancti-Johannis, Helminthophaga Swainsonii, Quiscalus major.

mens of both, in the Museum of the Boston Society of Natural History and elsewhere, has led me to believe is actually the fact. Sabine, so long ago as 1819, I think has fully shown this in his remarks on *Falco Islandicus* in his Memoir on the Birds of Greenland.* According to the late lamented Mr. Cassin, *sacer* is the specific name which has priority for this species. †

DUCK HAWK. *Falco peregrinus* Linn. (*Falco anatum* Bon., and *F. nigriceps* Cass). I stated in my Catalogue, published five years since, that the eggs and the young of this species had been taken at different times from Mount Tom, and that the young had also been obtained from Talcott Mountain in Connecticut. A few months later I had the pleasure of giving a full account of the eyrie on Mount Tom, with a detailed description of the eggs, and some general remarks on the distribution of this interesting species in the breeding season. ‡ These eggs were the first eggs of the Duck Hawk known to naturalists to have been obtained in the United States, the previous most southern locality whence they had been taken being Labrador; but the species had previously been observed in the breeding season by Dr. S. S. Haldeman as far south as Harper's Ferry, Virginia. One or more pairs of these birds have been seen about Mounts Tom and Holyoke every season since the first discovery of the eggs at the former locality in 1864. Mr. C. W. Bennett, of Holyoke, their discoverer, has since carefully watched them, and his frequent laborious searches for their nest have been well rewarded. In 1866 he took a second set of eggs, three in number, from the eyrie previously occupied. In 1867 the male bird was killed late in April, and this apparently prevented their breeding there that year, as they probably otherwise would have done. At least no nest was that

*Transact. London Linn. Soc., Vol. xx, p. 528.

†See Dr. Coues' List of the Birds of New England, Proceedings of the Essex Institute, Vol. v, p. 254.

‡See Proceedings Essex Institute, Vol. iv, p. 153.

year discovered. In 1868 hawks of this species were seen about the mountains, and although they reared their young there, all effort to discover their nest was ineffectual. The present year (1869) they commenced to lay in the old nesting place, but as they were robbed when but one egg had been deposited, they deserted it and chose a site still more inaccessible. Here they were equally unfortunate, for during a visit to this mountain, in company with Mr. Bennett (April 28th), we had the great pleasure of discovering their second eyrie, and from which, with considerable difficulty, three freshly laid eggs were obtained. Not discouraged by this second misfortune, they nested again, this time depositing their eggs in the old eyrie from which all except the last set of eggs have been obtained. Again they were unfortunate, Mr. Bennett removing their second set of eggs, three in number, May 23d, at which time incubation had just commenced. The birds remained about the mountain all the summer, and from the anxiety they manifested in August it appears not improbable that they laid a third time, and at this late period had unfledged young.

The first set of eggs and the female parent, collected April 19th, 1864, are in the Museum of Natural History at Springfield, as also a male killed subsequently at the same locality in April; the second set, collected in April, 1866, are in the cabinet of Mr. E. A. Samuels; the third and fourth sets, collected April 28th and May 23d, 1869, are in that of Dr. William Wood, of East Windsor Hill, Conn. Although in each set the different eggs sometimes varied considerably from each other, neither of the three last present that remarkable range of variation exhibited by the first.* It is probable that some years more than one pair have nested on Mount Tom, but only one nest-site had been discovered before the present year. I learn from Dr. Wood that this bird is every year seen also about Talcott Mountain, and that it probably regularly breeds there. The young

* See Proceedings of the Essex Institute, Vol. iv, p. 157.

obtained from it in 1862 Dr. Wood kept till the following fall, when they were sent to Professor Baird, and died at the Smithsonian Institution the succeeding spring. Mr. G. A. Boardman informs me that the Duck Hawk in summer keeps about the islands in the Bay of Fundy, and "breeds upon the high cliffs all along this bay.*"

As stated by me elsewhere,† the Duck Hawks repair to Mount Tom very early in the spring, and for a month or six weeks, as Mr. Bennett informs me, carefully watch and defend their eyrie. They often manifest even more alarm at this early period when it is approached than they do later when it contains eggs or young.

SPARROW HAWK. *Falco sparverius* Linn. In reference to this species, Dr. Wood communicates the following interesting fact. "A few years since a pair of Sparrow Hawks attacked and killed a pair of doves and took possession of the dove cot and laid four eggs. Being too familiar with the farmer's chickens they were shot, and I had the good fortune to obtain two of the eggs."

GOSHAWK. *Astur atricapillus* Bon. This species varies most remarkably in the number of its representatives seen in different years, and also in the same season at localities in Southern New England not far apart. Some winters—the only season at which it is usually seen in Massachusetts—it is extremely rare, while the next it may be one of the most numerous species of its family. In years when it is generally common some of our most careful observers do not meet with it. Dr. Wood writes me, under date of October 22d, 1868, that with him "it has been a very rare winter visitor until the last winter, when they were more common than any of our rapacious birds. I mounted five specimens and sent away several for exchanges. I think twenty were shot within a radius of five miles. I have resided at East Windsor Hill twenty-one years, and have

* In epist., Sept. 19, 1864.

† Proceedings of the Essex Institute, Vol. iv. p. 155.

known only three specimens taken here prior to 1867." At Springfield, less than twenty miles in a direct line north of East Windsor Hill, and at nearly the same elevation above the sea, I have known them to be quite common during several winters within the last ten years. Mr. J. G. Scott says it was common at Westfield in 1867, and not rare during the three or four winters immediately preceding. When numerous this species is very destructive to the Ruffed Grouse, which forms its principal food. In some localities they sometimes hunt them almost to extermination.

Mr. C. J. Maynard informs me that he is confident that this species sometimes breeds in Massachusetts. He says he once observed a pair at a locality in Weston until the latter part of May; after this time he had no opportunity of observing them, but he feels sure that they bred there. This is not improbable, since its usual breeding range embraces the greater part of northern New England, and probably the mountains of Western Massachusetts.

Dr. Wood mentions in his letters another interesting fact respecting this bird, which I think all careful observers are apt to notice, not only in this species but as a general fact; namely, that the birds in immature plumage are often larger than any specimens obtained in mature plumage. Dr. Wood observes, "the young are very unlike the adult both in size and markings; the young is the largest until after moulting, when the wing and tail feathers never again acquire their former dimensions. The same difference is observable in the Bald Eagle between the young and the adult."* I have myself observed it in *Ardea herodias* and other Herons, in Thrushes, and in *Larus argentatus*, and other species of *Laridæ*. This difference in size between the adult and the young has also been reported to me by Messrs. Maynard and Bennett.

RED-SHOULDERED HAWK. *Buteo lineatus* Jard. This species was placed in the list of "Summer Visitants" instead of

* See also American Naturalist, October, 1869.

among the "Resident Species," as it should have been, in my Catalogue. At Springfield, I have rarely observed it in winter; but I learn from Dr. Brewer, Mr. Maynard and others, that it is in some sections of the state a quite common species at that season.

CALIFORNIA HAWK. *Buteo Cooperii* Cassin. A specimen of this species was shot in Fresh Pond woods, Cambridge, November 17, 1866, by Mr. William Brewster, of Cambridge, in whose collection it was detected a few months since by Mr. Maynard. It seems to be the first specimen yet reported from east of the Rocky Mountains. It is one of the most characteristic of the *Buteones* of this continent, and there seems to be not the slightest reason to question its capture in Cambridge.

ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK. BLACK HAWK. *Archibuteo lagopus* Gray. (*A. lagopus et Sancti-Johannis* Auct.) Generally not uncommon in winter in the Connecticut Valley.

Dr. Wood is of the opinion that the Rough-legged Hawk and the Black Hawk are the same. "I have," he says, "all shades of color from the light to the black, and I am unable to find the dividing line; both have the same measurements, the same claws and bill, the same habits, come and leave at the same time, and hunt together. I have them almost black with the faint markings of the lighter bird, showing to my mind that the lighter markings become extinct as the black increases, or as the bird increases in age. Those who claim that they are distinct say that in some localities the Rough-legs are common and no Black Hawks are to be seen. This proves nothing. The young of the Red-throated Diver are very common in Long Island Sound, yet the adult is never seen there. So it is with the Crested Grebe; the young are found here in winter — never the adult." *

On another occasion, when writing on this point, Dr. Wood expressed his views still more strongly, as follows: "The Rough-legged Falcon and Black Hawk are the same. I have

* In epist. Oct. 22, 1868.

taken and examined, I presume, forty specimens. *They are the same bird*, but not of the same age. The black is the adult. . . . The differences in markings between them are not as great as in many birds, as, for example, in the Bald Eagle, the Golden Eye, Sheldrake, etc. I have taken them from those with the lightest markings to jet black, with all the intermediate varieties in color. So gradually do they become more and more black till jet black is reached, that I will defy any one to draw the separating line. It would be as difficult as to tell when the 'pig becomes a hog.'"*

The late Mr. Lucius Clarke, of Northampton, I have been informed, had a similar series, and that from an examination of a large number of specimens he had arrived at the same conclusion. I have not yet had an opportunity of comparing a very large number, but from a study of those I have seen, and of the accounts given by authors, I believe the view taken by Dr. Wood and Mr. Clark to be the correct one.

TROUT FISHING IN THE YOSEMITE VALLEY.

BY HON. J. D. CATON.

By far the hardest day's work the tourist has in "doing" the wonderful valley is the visit to the Vernal and the Nevada falls, where the Merced River makes a clear leap of three hundred feet over the first, and seven hundred feet over the second. Our guide, Mr. Cunningham, assured me that not a fish of any kind is found in the river, or any of its tributaries above the first or lower fall. Below these falls several varieties occur, the most interesting and the most abundant of which is the Speckled Trout (*Salmo iridea* Gib.). It differs materially from its cousin, the Speckled Trout of the Eastern States (*Salmo fontinalis*), especially in habit and

*In epist. Sept. 5, 1864.