



*The Ornithologist Takes His Wife  
Collecting. To Her It Becomes—*

## TURNEFFE ADVENTURE

*By Mary F. W. Bond*

OFF British Honduras lie two long coral reefs, running almost directly north and south and roughly paralleling the shore. The first is about ten miles out in the Caribbean Sea, marking the edge of the continental shelf. A dozen miles beyond, separated by two hundred fathoms of water, extends the outer reef which presents, when the sun and the wind are right, a thrilling strip of white breakers against the wide horizon. Here lies the atoll of Turneffe, a compact group of cays about twenty miles long and a dozen wide forming two large lagoons, but never, to our knowledge, properly surveyed. Of the various maps we studied, British and American, no two were alike and none fitted what we ourselves discovered. No wonder naturalists have been discouraged by such a labyrinth of waterways, lagoons, coconut cays and mangrove swamps! Until our expedition in January, 1954, only one other ornithologist had investigated Turneffe. Ninety

years ago, the British Osbert Salvin spent a fortnight in a native sloop among the creeks and lagoons, collecting water birds. We were not interested in lagoons and swamps but sought solid ground where among the sapodillas and palms we were bound to find land birds—the expedition's objective.

This was my first foreign expedition as the wife of a naturalist and every step in the arrangements was tinged for me with a Joseph Conrad-Somerset Maugham quality of romantic adventure. To an ornithologist experienced in adventure, the desire to collect bird specimens among islands inconsistently charted on the map was "all in the day's work." To me, however, it was far less matter-of-fact. It pushed into motion a chain of events involving colonial secretaries, the harbormaster of Belize, the chief of police, and the collector of the port, all of whom became characters in my exciting story, as well as Senor Alphonso Gutierrez, better known as El Gordo, the Fat One.

As lessee of the whole Turneffe atoll, where he carried on a crayfishing business, El Gordo

knew better than anyone else, even better than the charts, where most of the solid ground lay. His permission for our collecting had to be obtained by the government, and when this was done, we went around to thank him. We met him in the middle of a typical Belize street scene, with swarming Spanish, Negroes, Indians and Caribs. The sound of a radio came through a shuttered upstairs window; there was the smell of open drains; a rooster crowed in a littered backyard; bicycle bells rang and children played in gutters dotted with orange peels.

El Gordo fulfilled the meaning of his name, his white teeth, in marked contrast to his mahogany skin. He invited us to his house and we followed him through a gate and up an outside stairway to his livingroom where we were asked to sit down. After informing us that Spanish *es la idioma de la casa* he offered us a glass of beer which we accepted. The conversation then turned to the physical geography of Turneffe. Most of the "high" land—meaning an elevation of scarcely three feet—lay around the northern lagoon and this was where we planned to concentrate our activities.

On our way back through the town we bought supplies and carried them directly to the *Lolette*, the launch put at our disposal by the harbormaster, complete with Diesel engines, an icebox, a roomy cabin and a crew of four. Three loaves of bread, all of different shapes and flavors, cost 47 cents in British Honduras money which brings seven British Honduras dollars to our five. Tea, coffee, canned soup, canned butter, tomato juice, beans and tongue; fresh eggs, bacon, cheese and fruit, all went into the icebox, where 400 pounds of ice had been stored. A day or two later I found in that icebox a large boat-tailed grackle and an oriole as yet unskinned, lying between the bacon and the butter! Cuddled up to the milk and eggs were two huge hunks of raw barracuda, caught when we were going through the reefs near Dog Flea Cay! Barracuda steaks cooked in cocoanut oil provided us twice with delectable supper dishes.

One of the most satisfying moments of my life was the night when we walked from the hotel carrying our things down the dark lane to the wharf a hundred yards away where the *Lolette* waited. The air was soft and balmy with the smell of oleander in it. A full moon hung over the bay. Against its silver path,

sitting with the native's innate grace, four men were silhouetted, waiting. We stepped aboard and one of them said, "All ready, sah?" Jim answered, "Yes," and the engines started. We put our things below and came back on deck. Presently a dark figure came aft and set up two deck chairs for us. It was all simple, easy, not the least bit mysterious, quite matter-of-fact yet—fabulous! We slipped away from Belize with scraps of music following us from the hotel on shore. Presently the lights of the town were concentrated in a cluster, then disappeared. Ahead lay the dark little mangrove cays of the first reef. Beyond them, out in the Caribbean, lay Turneffe and the unknown!

Life was quickly stripped to essentials. Washing became a matter mostly of swimming. All our meals were served with extreme informality on deck where Johnny, the cook, spread a not-too-clean cloth on the cabin roof. Here under the awning we drank our strong tea at breakfast, our soup at lunch, and ate our barracuda steaks at supper. My most serious problem was the usual feminine one of clothes. My Byrd-cloth trousers and jacket were fine on board but too hot on shore. I would be quietly sitting on deck studying the broken shore line of Turneffe and trying in vain to match it up with the maps; spotting osprey nests above the green mangroves, or peering through the openings in the cays to the lagoons inside, impressed with the sameness of the scenery and feeling that despite the *Lolette's* steady progress we weren't getting anywhere. Suddenly a couple of bells ring. The engines stop. Action all at once! Jim reaches for his gun and in that single motion is ready for hours of collecting on shore. The boys lower the dory. But I have to scramble desperately down the hatch, rush into my blue jeans, tie on a large Panama hat, and make sure that my dark blue canvas bag is complete with sunburn oil, insect repellent, binoculars, camera, bathing-suits, towels, notebook, and a couple of bananas!

Sometimes I deserted the collecting of specimens to find a nice smooth beach where I could swim, make notes and listen for the sound of the gun. I soon became scientific about specimens and each time the quiet was broken by a shot I'd wonder what was being added to the collection—a tiny brown hummingbird? A mangrove warbler? A kingbird with his lovely yellow breast?

For the most part, however, I trailed in the wake of the collector. The ability to "squeak" up birds instead of having to seek each one out never failed to astonish me. While this process was going on and the warblers and vireos came close, I had time to watch the land crabs scuttling into their holes, and the little black lizards scrambling around the mangrove roots or along the branches of a banyan or sapodilla tree. The latter provides chicle for American chewing gum. Its round sweet fruit about the size of a plum is a great attraction to birds.

No orchids were in bloom but there was an orange-flowered bush much beloved by hummingbirds which O'Brien, the Negro boy, called the serracotta bush. Checking later we learned that it was *Hibiscus tiliaceus*. O'Brien had two superb qualities. He could walk barefoot over rough cocoanut fronds and coral rock that I could scarcely manage in sneakers, and he created wonderful compositions of primitive grace in every setting. On board he sat cross-legged for hours at a time on a shelf behind the wheelhouse looking like an idol, but in reality reading comics! When he stood at the bow of the dory poling us to and from shore, his blue-black legs and arms and the white of his shirt and rolled-up trousers created color schemes against the turquoise water that matched the satisfying grace of his movements.

One unforgettable picture occurred at Cockroach Cay. We had anchored for the night on the windward side of that sandy spit of land in quiet, mint-green water. Before sun-up we were breakfasting on deck. Through the dark silhouette of waving coconut fronds a pinkish light was breaking over the sea beyond. Jim and O'Brien went ashore for a woodpecker and a flycatcher Jim had heard on the cay the night before. Within five minutes of landing "Bang!" went the gun. The sky grew brighter, the green of the coconuts began to show, and the sea turned blue. Within the next few minutes "Bang!" went the gun again. Through my binoculars I saw Jim's khaki-clad figure, gun in his right hand, birds in his left, slowly walking along shore toward an oval opening in the palms near a thatched hut where the dory had been beached. Into that opening, now a brilliant lemon yellow, O'Brien appeared. Waiting for Jim he stood there, balancing on one hand a single coconut held like a votive offering. The other arm hugged several. For a moment,

motionless against the flat radiant background, the two men stood like painted figures in a Gauguin setting. Then they vanished into the mangroves, appearing a moment later in the dory.

We anchored for two nights at Cockroach Cay, taking a run from there and back to Northern Two Cays which lie beyond an even wider and deeper stretch of sea and offer to the collector possibilities different from those on Turneffe. One of the crew told us that the larger of the two cays held a fresh-water pond in the middle—not on the map of course! On the smaller was a lighthouse. The weather being favorable, we made the dash through the opening in the reef just south of Cockroach Cay, passing from Turneffe's double reef to the sea outside. It's tricky threading your way through coral reefs, and the engines did not turn at full speed. The water varied in color according to its depth, the shallows tinted chartreuse, the deeper places egg-plant purple. Once out beyond the reef the color turns to deep ocean-going blue and the waves are ocean-going size.

The *Lolette* all at once seemed to me to shrink in size! I had every confidence in her but as we climbed obliquely over the watery mountains and slithered down into the valleys on the other side, I kept my gaze concentrated on the flying fish to leeward. They provided us with a good show over that two-and-a-half-hour stretch. On our arrival, after some hot water and lime juice, Jim, despite having been seasick, stepped ashore as usual without losing a moment.

It was here on Northern Two Cays that I saw my first iguana, a black fellow about two feet long clinging almost invisibly to a charred mangrove root. Later we saw many iguanas on Turneffe at our final collecting spot, straw-colored with handsome black bars on their backs. They were quite tame. It was here too, that I collected for myself, by myself, a cocoanut. Having deserted the more important aspects of collecting for the shade of a coconut palm on a sandy beach, I decided that a tantalizing bunch of succulent green nuts on a certain palm were not really beyond my reach. Clutching the trunk in both hands as I'd seen native boys do in pictures, I was able to walk three steps up the curving trunk. Then I lost my balance, and clutched at a dead frond which promptly loosened another that fell on me and knocked me to the ground. I tried again, was successful, twisted



James Bond, Curator of the Birds of the Americas in the Academy, as he appeared on the collecting expedition described in the accompanying article by his wife.

off the nut, cut a hole in it with my penknife, and seated again under the sheltering palm, drank the sweet refreshing liquid!

But Northern Two Cays provided us with a major defeat. We will long remember it for the rail we didn't get. Only one "Two-penny Chick" has ever been taken in British Honduras. Ours, the prize that got away, was moving secretly through reeds in a brackish marsh when Jim shot, but missed. The rail flew up, dropped, then ran. I got a good look at him but Jim would have rather had the skin. Although we waited a long time and Jim later returned alone to the marsh, this "Two-penny Chick" was never seen again.

Terrifying to me was my first meeting with a huge hermit crab. Its dark red fingers clawed at my foot as if some Zombie-like creature were making a superhuman effort to struggle from interment. He was living in a large conch shell and I subsequently took him on board the *Lolette* for a pet, carrying him cautiously in half an old cocoanut shell on which he fed.

We made the return run to Cockroach Cay the same day, threading our way back through the reef in time for a swim, followed by supper on deck, with the lazy flight of white herons against the inner mangrove cays, stars in the

sky, and our water "fireflies." These were tiny transparent fish or eels that lit up the waters at night, radiating intermittent flashes lasting six to seven seconds. The crew called them worms.

Cockroach Cay is memorable for several things—two of our best specimens collected in a matter of twenty minutes; excellent swimming; our prettiest scenery and—cockroaches as bed-fellows! That was the night I tried to sleep on deck in my Yucatan hammock. But it grew too cold and the trade wind too persistent. There were no blankets on board and I had to creep back to my bunk below!

On the way back we stopped at the clearing of a fisherman whom we called "The Old Man of Turneffe." He collected cocoanuts, fished, and lived with his wife on a narrow strip of land between the sea and the lagoon. Here was quiet life! An enormous pile of pink conch shells made a spot of color near his two thatched huts. Close by were a dozen decoy turtles painted in bright colors for use in the crawls. Hawkbill turtles are abundant on the reef and in the Belize market later, I saw one freshly brought in from the cays. The Old Man's huts were wretched affairs but his dugout was a splendid skiff painted light blue.

The Turneffe lagoons are sea-gardens under glass-like water. Corals grow in fantastic shapes and sea fans of delicate colors wave gently on the edges of sun-flecked reefs that suddenly plunge sheer to dark blue depths. Schools of brilliantly colored small fish play in this won-



Empty conch shells against a background of coco palms attract attention of the ornithologist's wife on her Honduran adventure.



derland, darting to safety in tiny caverns when chased by barracuda or sharks.

Fresh water, such as it is, can always be obtained on the cays by digging a hole in the sand some distance from the beach and burying a tub with the ends knocked out. The water that filters through in a few hours has a brackish taste but is drinkable. Soon it becomes too salty and the tub has to be moved to another hole.

The Old Man's place proved disappointing for land birds and we pulled up anchor to move to Rendezvous Point, our final collecting spot. Even here it became clear that we were now "squeaking" up but a repetition of species already collected. This indicated that the naturalist's work was done.

Back in Belize we could look over the bay with new satisfaction. Now we *knew* something about Turneffe! But when the sunset touched the mangrove cays with a lush golden light; when the Big Dipper came out in the dark blue velvet sky, Turneffe's quiet lagoons—remote, baffling and inaccurately charted—resumed in our memories their air of mystery. It was hard to believe we'd ever really been there.



Dwellings on the cays off Honduras are simple but they please the contented residents of the island paradise.

