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BIRDS OF PREY AS OCEAN WAIFS.

BY H. W. HENSHAW.

It is no unusual event, as every ornithologist knows, for land birds to board ships, when a greater or less distance off land, or to be seen from their decks as they wing an aimless course over the ocean. It is fair to infer that such known cases are very few, compared to the number of birds that are forced off land by unfriendly gales and that finally perish miserably in the depths of ocean unseen of human eye. After once losing sight of land, few of the comparatively weak-winged land birds are likely ever to regain it, and no doubt many of the powerful-winged species become hopelessly lost when once the friendly land has faded from view. The ocean is no friend to the land bird, but annually exacts its deadly toll with unflinching certainty.

Two unusually interesting instances of birds taking refuge on board ships have recently come to my notice, and, as they possess special interest to American ornithologists, I here record them. Both cases have been communicated by Capt. Peter Johnson of the bark 'Roderick Dhu' which sails between San Francisco and Hilo.

In May or June of 1897 a brown hawk boarded the 'Dhu' when some 200 miles outward bound from Hilo and, as one sure of its rights, took through passage to California. The bird chose the end of the starboard royal for its perch, and maintained its place all the way over, save when it made excursions from the ship after "small birds." Just what the latter were is not certain, though the Captain surmised, with much probability, that they

were petrels. The hungry hawk seemed able to descry its prey when a long distance off, for it frequently flew out of sight on its predatory excursions but, sooner or later, it always returned to the same perch.

Though the certain identification of this "brown hawk" is not possible, there can be little doubt that it was the Hawaiian *Buteo solitarius*.

This particular individual must have been more expert at catching birds than its fellows usually are in Hawaii, for during the voyage it was seen to return to the ship from at least a dozen successful bird catching expeditions. Necessity is indeed a sharp spur. Though the Io sometimes catches birds in Hawaii, the occasions are comparatively rare, rats and mice, the larvæ of the sphinx moths, and large spiders constituting by far the larger part of its food.

That the prey of this particular individual consisted of birds there is not the slightest doubt, for the feathers plucked from the body of its victims frequently floated to the deck below. The litter thus made excited the wrath of the mate who more than once suggested shooting the hawk by way of retaliation. Fortunately this was not done, and, about the time when the California coast was sighted, Io left the ship flying landwards and was seen no more. Possibly it was shot later by some enterprising collector, and may yet figure again in ornithological literature.

The particular interest of the voluntary (in part at least) voyage to California of this particular hawk appears when are recalled the facts relating to the specimen described in 1879 by Mr. Ridgway as *Onychotes gruberi*. This bird, as Mr. Ridgway himself has shown, is a typical *B. solitarius*. At first supposed to have been shot near San Francisco, if I remember correctly, the presence of this specimen in a California bird collection was afterwards otherwise accounted for, and the occurrence of the species in California as an accidental visitor was discredited. The facts here recorded, however, considerably increase the probability that the specimen upon which *Onychotes gruberi* was based actually reached California alive, possibly by the same means as the individual here mentioned.

Buteo solitarius, though sluggish of movement and slow of wing,

is a powerful flier, like its congeners, and I have little doubt of its ability, unaided, under favorable conditions, to fly from Hawaii to the California coast (about 2000 miles), provided a straight course was maintained—a most unlikely supposition. The chances, however, of an individual actually making this long flight are of course extremely slight.

In October, 1900, when some 500 miles to the northwest of the Hawaiian Islands, the 'Dhu' was boarded by an owl, which, from its size and description can have been no other than the Short-eared Owl (*Asio accipitrinus*). The bird alighted in the rigging, and was so fagged as to be easily caught by hand. It was placed in a coop but would eat nothing and died in a week or so.

The chief point of interest regarding this waif is as to the place it came from. Its proximity to the Hawaiian Islands when it flew aboard the ship may be thought to indicate that it was blown out to sea from one of these, every member of the group being inhabited by this species.

Upon the other hand, the season of the year, the direction of the wind (which was from the northeast), and the evident exhaustion of the bird point to the possibility, if not the probability, that the owl was from the northeast and was of American origin.

There is little doubt that the owls which originally stocked Hawaii came from America and, although the island residence of the species has been long enough to firmly fix the owl in Hawaiian mythology and even to elevate it to a place in the Hawaiian Pantheon, it has not sufficed to impress upon it distinctive or varietal characters.

My own opinion upon this latter point is entitled to but little weight, since I have had no opportunity to directly compare island birds with specimens from the mainland; but so far as I can judge the island specimens are not distinguishable. In confirmation of this opinion I quote the following remarks of Dr. Stejneger: "The four specimens of Short-eared Owls from the Hawaiian islands before me do not justify the retention of *Asio sandwichensis* as a separate race." (Proc. U. S. Nat. Museum, p. 85, 1887.) Mr. Scott B. Wilson states that this opinion was shared by the late Mr. J. H. Gurney (*Birds of the Hawaiian Islands*).

So far as I am aware there is no evidence to show that the owls

of the Hawaiian Islands are migratory. I have little doubt, as stated above, that the island strigine stock was derived from America; probably from Alaska. The occurrence of the bird above mentioned, 500 miles at sea and under the circumstances narrated, is most reasonably accounted for on the supposition that it had flown from the Alaskan coast, from which, at this season, thousands of plovers, turnstones, ulili, and ducks are migrating to the islands. An owl might readily follow the track of these birds, and be piloted directly to the islands which, otherwise, there would be small chance indeed of its reaching.

Once here, however, the wanderer is likely to remain, though, of course, it is impossible to say that a stray bird from the mainland might not choose to return home in the spring when it would find plenty of plovers and other birds bound for its own home.

It must not be forgotten, however, that the Short-eared Owl breeds abundantly upon the islands, where its distribution is local and the pairs seem to inhabit the same locality indefinitely. New additions from America (and these probably are few in number and arrive at long intervals) are much more likely to mate with the island birds already established than to part company with them and to undertake the hazardous experiment of a return. The islands appear to be well adapted to the habits of this, the only owl that so far has reached them, and although persecution of late years has diminished its numbers it is still far from uncommon.

DESCRIPTION OF A SUPPOSED NEW SUBSPECIES OF *PARUS* FROM NEW MEXICO.

BY FRANCIS J. BIRTWELL.

IN THE valley of the Rio Grande, about Albuquerque, New Mexico, during a residence covering two winters, the writer has noticed a peculiarity existing among the chickadees which pass through in the brief migrations from the high mountains and those wintering in the valley.