

A REMARKABLE WEST INDIAN GOATSUCKER.

BY JAMES BOND.

Plate XVI.

ON the tenth of February, 1917, a small Goatsucker was secured by the well-known collector, Mr. Rollo H. Beck, near the village of Túbano, in the Province of Azura, Santo Domingo, which became the type and only known specimen of a genus new to science—*Microsiphonorhis*, of F. M. Chapman. Further collecting on the island failed to reveal the bird, though Dr. Alexander Wetmore writes me that its remains have since been found in cave deposit material collected near St. Michel de l'Atalaye in Haiti.

Dr. Chapman in his description mentions that the closely related *Siphonorhis* from Jamaica "is now believed to be extinct and the fact that *Microsiphonorhis*, although an inhabitant of the tropical zone of Santo Domingo, has not been taken before, indicates its extreme rarity."

Fortunately, however, this interesting Goatsucker is not as rare as is believed, for during a six months sojourn in the Republic of Haiti, I found it not only a local resident on the mainland, but a distinctly common bird on the island of La Gonave, where it most certainly outnumbered all other night birds.

My acquaintance with this little Nightjar began in February of the present year—1928. I had taken a short excursion into the hills above Pointe-à-Raquettes, on the south coast of Gonave Island, and had put up at a small deserted hut in a ravine, the steep slopes of which were covered by arid scrub and low trees. Just before darkness set in, curious sounds emanated from the woods on either hand—evidently Nightjars, and probably, I thought, the little-known *Microsiphonorhis*! All attempts to find the bird failed, and it was not until my second trip to the island, in May, that I was able to secure specimens. On this occasion I arrived equipped with a powerful flashlight which I had brought with me to Haiti on the chance of encountering Goatsuckers. With this I intended to "jack" the birds. However, this method was doomed to failure, partly on account of the difficulty of clambering up the steep slopes of the ravine at night, but principally because the birds were constantly on the move.

I then secured a competent native and combed the neighborhood during the daytime. This proved successful and a nice series was secured. On this occasion and in June, when I visited the island for a third time, I was much aided by the fact that the natives had burned considerable areas of scrub, thereby restricting the birds to comparatively small strips of woodland.

The skins show considerable variation in color. Some are in a rufous phase, while others are very much darker, the rufous or cinnamon markings being much restricted. Still others are intermediate, as is the type taken by Beck. Moreover, there are marked differences in the size of the nasal tubes, both in life and in the dried skin. They vary in dried skins from 1.5 to 2 millimeters in length. There is also some variation in the strength of the rictal bristles. These conditions appear to be irrespective of sex, age, or season.

I have not, as yet, had access to any skins of the extinct *Siphonorhis* for comparison, but it will be noticed that certain of the characters separating the two genera are not constant, and it seems probable that in future the two birds will be considered congeneric.

There appears to be little, if any, difference in size between the sexes. The average length of wing of four females is 114.5 mm., four males—114.4 mm. The average length of the tail of four females is 110.5 mm., of four males—111.3 mm.

The males, however, can be readily distinguished in series, as they are considerably darker, both above and below, than the females. The black streaks on the crown are bolder, the black vermiculations on the underparts more extensive, and the ochraceous-buff markings darker and more rust colored.

Two young, of indeterminate sex, have the underparts grayish-buff faintly barred with dark gray and vermiculated with ochraceous on the upper breast. The streaks on the crown are more "drop-shaped" and are margined with rusty brown, somewhat darker than the ochraceous-tawny of the adults. The sub-terminal band and bars on the tail feathers are darker brown. A third immature, a female, is very dark and resembles the adult male, but retains the "drop-like" crown markings and the dark barring of the tail feathers, and has the ochraceous-buff of the breast finely speckled with black.

The first specimen of *Microsiphonorhis* that I secured was a female which was about to lay. Two days later one was flushed from the nest. The eggs were placed in a slight hollow formed by the bird, on the top of a narrow ridge at the edge of burnt land, and I secured the female (Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila. 82275). On June 27 a native brought me a second set. The eggs of *Microsiphonorhis* are very different from those of the apparently closely related *Nyctidromus*, the "parauque" of the mainland of South and Central America. In the set taken May 16 the background is dull white with rather evenly distributed markings of pale violet-gray and numerous buff or pale brown spots or scrawls.

The eggs of the second set are more oval, and less elliptical. The violet-gray markings are brighter and are restricted to the larger end. They also lack the brownish-buff spots. The first set measures in millimeters: 23.5 x 17.5: 24 x 17.5 and the second 23 x 17.5: 25 x 19.

I usually found *Microsiphonorhis* perched lengthwise on a horizontal branch of a bush, from one to five feet above the ground. The protective coloring of the birds, combined with their immobility, made them exceedingly difficult to make out. Occasionally, however, I flushed them from the ground, on which occasions, they would flit a short distance through the scrub like large moths and either settle again on the ground, or, as frequently happened, would fly up into a nearby bush like some passerine! It will thus be seen that the bird once found, was not difficult to collect and in fact in no case did I fail to secure a bird which I had followed up.

In May and June, which is evidently their breeding season, the little Goatsucker is more noisy at night, and at times I heard it during the day! The notes may be described as half croaks, half whispers, and can be recalled by the syllables *gu-eck*, sometimes followed by a drawn-out *goo-ré-caw*, with the accent on the *ré*. The bird also emits at times a clear rising whistle, which reminded me forcibly of a Canada Jay.

Partly because of its note, partly because of its habit, typical of the family, of quivering its wings when flushed from the nest, the little Goatsucker is known to the natives as the "Grouillé-corps," or "shaking-body."

Though *Microsiphonorhis* is common on Gonave, it is distinctly rare and local on the mainland of Haiti where I came across it in a hot, arid district near Magasin Caries, a small settlement between St. Mark and Port-au-Prince. Here it was found in small numbers at sea-level. I heard, on several occasions, the unmistakable notes of the bird but was unable to secure a specimen.

Its abundance on Gonave Island is interesting but not entirely unexpected. The whole balance of bird life there is very different from that of the mainland, due, I believe, to the absence, or at least rarity, of many well-known Haitian birds. The Piculet, *Nesocites*, is far more numerous on Gonave than on the mainland, and it seemed to me significant that during the entire time I spent on the island I never saw the much larger *Chryserpes*, which is abundant in Haiti! Likewise, *Lawrencia*, the little flat-billed Vireo, though of wide distribution in Haiti, is far more common on Gonave. Never on the mainland did I find the Tanagers *Spindalis* and *Calyptophilus* at sea-level, nor *Phoenicophilus* so abundant. Cannot this be due to the absence of Crows, which could so easily locate the nests of these birds in the open scrub? And cannot the apparent absence of *Tyto*, *Speotyto*, and *Chordeiles*, result in such rare birds as *Asio noctipetens*, *Nyctibius* and *Microsiphonorhis* becoming the dominant night birds of the island? It is impossible to say. But it is, I think, apparent that Gonave, hitherto rather ignored ornithologically, is a most interesting island, far more so than Tortuga, which has, despite its proximity to Haiti, a Bahaman element in its fauna and flora, and apparently lacks all the endemic Hispaniola genera as well as many common mainland species, including the Tody.

Finally, a word of warning! When the Mongoose was brought to Jamaica, *Siphonorhis* disappeared rapidly. The Mongoose has now been introduced into the Dominican Republic. Will *Microsiphonorhis* also go? Perhaps; but let us hope that the island of La Gonave, apparently so favorable to the abundance of the bird, will prove an effective sanctuary for this remarkable little Goatsucker for all time.

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