

THE FLIGHTLESS CORMORANT IN CAPTIVITY.

BY CHAS. HASKINS TOWNSEND.

(Plate XI.)

THE existence of this peculiar and large-sized bird remained unknown until twenty-one years ago. Although it has been taken several times since its discovery, it was completely overlooked by all the earlier expeditions to the Galapagos. It is the only Cormorant known to the archipelago and has been found only on Narborough and the adjacent parts of Albemarle Island.

Looking, at least in the water, like other Cormorants, the collectors of the earlier expeditions may have regarded it as one of the common mainland species and thereby missed a prize. That it escaped ornithologists so long is singular, as one of its few known nesting localities is in Togus Cove, an anchorage visited by all Galapagos collectors.

It is probable that this Cormorant was formerly distributed throughout the group, but being unable to fly has been destroyed by wild dogs which have long been very numerous. Its habit of nesting on the islands instead of on off-shore rocks as do most sea birds, may cause its extermination by dogs. These pests have not been reported on Narborough but abound on Albemarle. Nesting groups of Cormorants are few and seldom contain more than half a dozen pairs and the birds are not sufficiently wary to seek refuge in the water when disturbed.

This Cormorant and the marine iguana which shares its habitat, are outstanding examples among the peculiar animal forms indigenous on the Galapagos.

The first living examples to reach this or any other country were those brought to New York by the Zoological Society's expedition of 1923. One of these did not survive long, possibly for lack of sea water to drink, as the first action of the survivor when sent to the Aquarium was to drink sea water. This bird was quarrelsome in the extreme and would soon have killed a Galapagos Penguin brought by the same expedition had it not been removed to another pool. After a few months it fell a victim to draughts

during alterations in the building. Three flightless Cormorants were received at the Aquarium in March, 1928, the gift of Mr. W. K. Vanderbilt who captured them on Albemarle Island.

After prolonged swimming in their pool, the birds stand upright in Cormorant fashion and spread their abbreviated wings to dry much as a Buzzard does on a sunny morning. The wings look as useless as they really are, the feathers being thin and scarcely touching each other. When the bird swims or chases minnows under water the wings are closed against the body. While Cormorant and Penguin were living together it was interesting to see them moving under water with equal celerity, one depending entirely on its widely-webbed feet, the other entirely on its paddle-like wings. In watching the performance there was an added interest in recalling that the sole habitat of both was the same group of equatorial islands. The Cormorant has no counterpart elsewhere and the Penguin is the sole representative of its family in the tropics.

After feeding the birds seek their perches where they often sleep standing on one foot with the head laid diagonally across the back and the beak tucked under the wing feathers—not underneath the wing itself. In this position the eyes are not always covered by the feathers. One of the birds liberated in the office, soon hopped upon a box and thence to the window sill where it remained for hours, enjoying the sunshine, preening its feathers or sleeping. Later while the Cormorant was moving about the floor it suddenly found itself before a large mirror leaning against a radiator. Finding itself closely confronted with its image it jumped back with a loud squawk of surprise. This action was followed by a long inspection of the mirror, the bird raising its head high and gazing intently. When the mirror was shifted a little to one side the Cormorant began looking about among some boxes apparently disconcerted by the disappearance of the bird it had seen. When it came again in line with the mirror and equally close, it shuffled back and squawked again. Here it remained stretching its neck, raising and lowering its head, but did not approach closer. It finally went to sleep without leaving the spot. The bird did not hesitate to jump from the height of an ordinary table and made a good landing on the floor.



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FLIGHTLESS CORMORANTS,
NANOPTERUM HARRISI ROTHSCHILD, IN THE NEW YORK AQUARIUM.

It then walked to a live tortoise which it inspected and carefully touched with its beak. Later, hearing a few low croaking sounds, the bird was found to be standing opposite the glass door of a bookcase intently regarding its dimly reflected image. The Flightless Cormorant is a fighter, uses its sharply-hooked beak effectively and must be handled with gloves. When picked up it always squawks loudly. The weight of one of these birds on September 18, when apparently in good health, was five and a half pounds.

New York Aquarium.