

SOME NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS.

BY ALLAN BROOKS.

A LONG cherished scheme of the writer's to visit the lower Rio Grande was put into execution during the winter of 1927-28, when a stay of a little over two months, from December 28 to March 1, was made at Brownsville with trips to Point Isabel on the coast and to several points on the river below the town.

The accounts of this region by many naturalists who have visited it, commencing with the narratives of Sennett's expeditions in 1877 and 1878 had given the present writer a very erroneous conception of the physical characters of the district. A tropical region was expected with at least some stretches of heavy timber. Instead a typical thorny scrub country was encountered, mesquite, ebony, huisache and other thorny leguminous trees were the rule with scattering ashes and hackberries, none of which were much more than big bushes. The largest trees were imported ones, palms and willows, the native palm being a comparatively low tree and confined to one or two localities.

Two important changes have taken place since the visits of Sennett and Dresser. First, there is much more water, the irrigation schemes have resulted in the filling with water of most of the dry channels which had grown up to large mesquites, the latter are still standing but have been killed in such situations and resacas formed which wind through the bush for miles. Second, the wide coastal prairie belt has been greatly encroached upon by advancing mesquites; according to the late R. D. Camp, who had resided at Brownsville for over twenty years, the tree line had advanced over five miles in many places during his residence, and it still continues to advance. This change will not benefit the many species of birds which now find a home on these wide plains. The first named change however, provides suitable retreats for ducks, herons, waders and rails where formerly there was heavy brush with only a few water-filled resacas. These winding sloughs are all full of fish, and cormorants and many species of herons and ibises are probably more plentiful than they were fifty years ago.

The small Texas Kingfisher has certainly increased for the same reason.

The scarcity of small birds in general was a disappointment; in the city and its environs these were fairly plentiful but the further one left the city behind the scarcer the birds seemed to be.

Hawks were plentiful, especially Marsh Hawks which found ideal hunting conditions along the resacas, one of the latter within the city limits was vocal with various notes of several rails when first visited in early January. One of these notes was new to me, a loud clear baying like a beagle hound; the owner of this voice was never detected and within two weeks this marsh was silent and the Marsh Hawks and Harris' Hawks which hunted it were pursuing blackbirds and herons. Even the remains of a Pauraque were found with a Marsh Hawk rising from them.

The finest display of hawks however, was encountered one sunny afternoon on the open prairie near Point Isabel. A prairie fire was in progress and hovering in front of the advancing belt of flames were about fifty hawks of five species together with a number of Turkey Buzzards, and coyotes also were in waiting. The attraction was the number of cotton rats (*Sigomodon*) and large locusts that were fleeing in front of the flames while the carcasses of large snakes and cotton rats were conspicuous on the blackened ground in their wake.

Unfortunately my field work was curtailed by the amount of other work I had undertaken to finish in a given time, less than half my time being devoted to collecting.

The late Mr. R. D. Camp who has for so long been identified with this region was more than kind in his efforts to see that I got what I wanted. To Mr. Wm. J. Tucker, Game Commissioner, I must also express my gratitude for the ample permit to collect and for assistance from his game wardens in the field.

The following notes should be read in conjunction with the excellent list of the birds of the Brownsville region by Ludlow Griscom and Maunsell Crosby in 'The Auk' Vol. XLII Nos. 3 and 4, and Vol. XLIII, No. 1.

Additions to this list are marked with an asterisk.

Colymbus dominicus brachypterus. MEXICAN GREBE.—This little grebe was common throughout the winter, not "rare or casual." The iris is bright yellow.

***Phalacrocorax auritus floridanus.** FLORIDA CORMORANT.—A flock of about thirty seen at a resaca very close to Brownsville on January 7, one of these was in the fullest nuptial dress with a regular mane of white feathers and the gular pouch orange yellow. Mexican Cormorants were nearby for comparison.

Anhinga anhinga. WATER TURKEY.—Common throughout the winter.

Butorides virescens virescens. EASTERN GREEN HERON.—Fairly common throughout the winter.

Nyctanassa violacea violacea. YELLOW-CROWNED HERON.—A large colony near the mouth of the Rio Grande.

***Branta canadensis** subsp. The very small goose, to which Taverner proposes to restrict the name *hutchinsii*, proves to be a winter resident in the region. A specimen taken at El Sauz was purchased from R. D. Camp who informed me that the main wintering ground was some forty miles south of Brownsville. The specimen agrees with the series in the National Museum of Canada in every way, a very diminutive goose the size of *minima* but pale in coloration, the bill still smaller than that species but the tarsus and toes with the portions (comparative) of the bird that has so long been called *hutchinsii*. To the writer this tiny goose represents a very distinct species.

Anas rubripes rubripes. RED-LEGGED BLACK DUCK.—Very red legged Black Ducks were twice seen in flocks of Pintails, they certainly were not Mottled Ducks. Camp knew the bird well and looked upon it as a regular winter visitor.

Buteo lineatus texanus. TEXAS RED-SHOULDERED HAWK.—I found this hawk not uncommon and collected two specimens.

Buteo albicaudatus hypospodius. SENNETT'S WHITE-TAILED HAWK.—This Buteo is not generally credited with a large variation in color but when more specimens are collected a wide variation will be proved to exist.

Adult specimens were handled that presented a range from a dark brown bird with a narrow white stripe on the breast widening to the white ventral region, to a very pale individual with pale ashy upper parts and the whole lower surface from chin to lower tail coverts pure white. Young birds all seemed to be of the almost uniform brown type.

Urubitinga anthracina anthracina. MEXICAN BLACK HAWK.—A bird of the year in an advanced state of decomposition was picked up on the beach near Point Isabel, January 9; an adult was taken and another seen on the Rio Grande about 15 miles below Brownsville January 27. In flight this hawk presents an exceptionally broad wing with a small clear-cut splash of white at the base of the primaries below.

Falco fusco-caerulescens septentrionalis. APLOMADO FALCON.—This graceful falcon is not much in evidence until a prairie fire is started on the wide coastal plain, when they quickly arrive, sweeping gracefully backwards and forwards in front of the advancing flames and deftly cap-

turing the large green locusts that are driven to flight. These are eaten on the wing, the falcon rising in the air as it picks its prey to pieces, returning to the lower level to resume its hunting as each capture is disposed of.

***Rallus longirostris** subsp. CLAPPER RAIL.—A few miles south of Point Isabel the shore is fringed with patches of small mangroves in thickets. Here Clapper Rails were found and they are probably resident there. The thick-set mangroves and sticky mud made collecting them difficult and only three were secured (January 9 and February 1). These are small, dark-colored Clapper Rails very like, if not identical with, *scotti* from western Florida, they measure as follows:

♂	wing	142.5,	culmen	61,	tarsus	49,	mid-toe	43
♀	"	131.5,	"	55,	"	44,	" "	39

The third specimen is in the American Museum of Natural History, Sanford Collection.

***Rallus limicola limicola.** VIRGINIA RAIL.—The unmistakable hoarse quacking of a Virginia Rail was heard at a resaca within the city limits of Brownsville several times in January and the remains of one eaten by a Marsh Hawk were seen at another resaca a little later.

Tringa solitaria solitaria. EASTERN SOLITARY SANDPIPER.—One specimen taken January 23, unquestionably the Eastern form, and three others seen in January and February, place it as a regular winter resident.

Rynchops nigra. BLACK SKIMMER.—Common at Point Isabel throughout the winter and twice seen inland above Brownsville on the Rio Grande.

Corvus cryptoleucus. WHITE-NECKED RAVEN.—Until January 23 these ravens were scarce and confined to the sea-coast. On that date about 200 came in from the south and hundreds arrived on the following days until the species was common everywhere, even on the streets of Brownsville where they were very tame. The numbers of horses and mules that had died through the winter were not touched, not even the eyes were picked out nor did the Black and Turkey Vultures seem able to break into a carcass. All these carcasses were eaten by coleoptera in a comparatively short time. No ravens were seen feeding on carrion at any time.

Passerherbulus maritimus subsp. SEA-SIDE SPARROW.—Six Sea-side Sparrows were collected among the mangroves on the sea-coast a few miles south of Point Isabel where they appeared to be resident, the shore being suitable, with salicornia and other growth.

Griscom and Crosby list specimens collected by Armstrong at this place as *severnelli* but my birds do not agree with Ridgway's description of this subspecies. They are very green looking on the back and have an absence of buff areas. Dr. Wetmore considers them a new race.

Aimophila cassini. CASSIN'S SPARROW.—This sparrow should be regarded as a permanent resident: first taken by me January 12 but seen in numbers previously. I found it to be the tenderest of all the passerine birds I have ever handled, with an extremely delicate skin, losing its feathers almost at a touch.

Pyrrhuloxia sinuata texana. TEXAS PYRRHULOXIA.—The very small proportion of adult males of this grosbeak is very noticeable. At least six dull-colored birds to every pink one is the ratio.

Sporophila moreletii sharpei. SHARPE'S SEEDEATER.—This tiny sparrow was common throughout the winter; no black-colored males were taken nor are there any in a small collection I have of Rio Grande birds taken by the early collectors, Sennett, Armstrong, and Abbott Frazar.