

NICOLAS DENYS' BIRDS

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A READING of Mrs. Elsa G. Allen's paper on Nicolas Denys in the July 'Auk' suggests that a revision of the identifications given in the English translation of his 'Description Géographique et Historique des Costes de l'Amérique Septentrionale, avec l'Histoire Naturelle du País' (1672) may be needed. The translator, Professor Walter F. Ganong, of Smith College, was well equipped for his work by years of study of Denys' life and an intimate acquaintance with the country, and as a botanist he could identify Denys' plants with authority. In ornithology, however, he was not so well equipped, and although he approached the birds with a scientific conscience, his lack of a firsthand knowledge of the avifauna of Acadia and of birds in general led him into some evident errors. Denys used the old French fishermen's names, some of which are still in use in France or in Canada, while others have fallen into disuse and in some cases cannot be positively identified. After delving into dictionaries of both modern French and old French and consulting such ornithological works as those of Brisson and Buffon, besides some of the old French explorers, I am now offering the results of a research that does not pretend to be exhaustive.

Taking up the birds as they appear in Mrs. Allen's article, we have first the 'happefoye,'¹ which Ganong identifies—correctly, I think—as the Fulmar. The French name signifies 'liver-snatcher.' Dr. Ganong says in a footnote that it is "not to be confounded with the related Hagdon, or Greater Shearwater," but his confidence in that conclusion is not explained until we find that Dièreville in his 'Relation du Voyage du Port Royal' (Rouen, 1708) speaks of the 'Hape-foye' as having the back gray and the belly white. To be sure, Dièreville gives 'fauquet' as the name by which the bird is called by the Normans, and it appears that *fouquet* (with an *o*) is variously defined as a petrel of Mauritius and a tern; but no tern has the hooked beak (*bec crochu*) mentioned by Dièreville, and the 'gray back' seems to make it certain that these liver-snatchers were Fulmars.

Next we have the 'Croiseurs,' which Ganong identifies as Wilson's Petrels in a footnote, though in his text he calls them simply Petrels. In this identification I think he must surely be mistaken. The description seems to fit the Greater Shearwater perfectly. Denys says of the 'Croiseurs,' "Their flight is different from that of other birds in this, that they fly, so to speak, crosswise, having one wing up towards the sky and the other towards the sea, so that, in order to turn, they bring the upper wing undermost."

¹ I follow the original as to capitalization.

Compare that with this from Dr. Charles W. Townsend's description in Bent's 'Life Histories of North American Petrels': "Now they turn on their side with one wing just grazing the water, the other high in the air." And what can be more descriptive of the shearwaters' ways than Denys' "They are called Croiseurs because they are ever crossing on the sea from one side to the other"? On this habit of the shearwaters see my note in the 'Auk' for July, 1936, pp. 320, 321. In modern French *croiseur* signifies 'cruiser,' and Littré's great dictionary gives, as one definition of the word, '*hirondelle de mer*,' that is, 'tern,' but *croiseur* seems not to be commonly used for any species of tern, and no tern could have been "found always from the time one is at sea a hundred leagues from land as far as New France." To be sure, *hirondelle de mer* might be an appropriate name for Wilson's Petrel, but, as a matter of fact, it seems to be confined to the terns, just as the name 'sea-swallow' is in English.

Denys' 'Poule de mer' is probably correctly identified as the Guillemot, or, as we call it in this country, the Murre, and of course his 'Pennegoin' is the Great Auk. He begins his account of the other waterbirds, those found near the shore, with the Canada Goose, which he calls the 'Outarde,' or Bustard, as the French Canadians do still. As Mrs. Allen did not quote these first paragraphs, and in order to complete the account, I am including them here in my own translation, which is not very different from Dr. Ganong's, though perhaps a little more literal.

"It [the *Outarde*] is of the size of a turkey. Its plumage is gray brown like that of a goose, white beneath the throat. The savages make robes of it. They lay only every two years; the year in which they do not lay they moult.

"The young *outardes* do not lay till they are four years old. Their clutch is fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen eggs. They make their nests on islands or in marshes, usually on the ground. Nevertheless, there are some that make them in trees, and when their young are hatched, they place themselves on the back of the father or the mother, who carries them to the water in one or two trips. Those that nest on the ground lead theirs also to the water as soon as they are hatched. At night the mother leads them back to land to brood them, and always on some island or marsh on account of the foxes, which make war on them.

"There is another species which is smaller [not 'much smaller,' as Ganong has it], but otherwise it is just the same. Its flesh is good and very excellent to eat roasted and boiled. They make very good soup. Their broth is white. The flesh is also good salted; its taste is much better than that of a goose [*oye*], and it is not so hard to digest. Those that have not yet laid have a better taste than the others. Their food is only grass.¹ They feed

¹ The original is *de l'herbe*, which in French can mean either grass or any herbaceous plant.

in marshes or meadows on the seashore. If they find themselves in places where the sand is muddy, where grows grass of the length of a fathom and more, very narrow and reaching nearly to the surface of the water [eelgrass, of course], that is the pasturage they like best. In those places one never fails to find them, besides which they like better to be on the water than on land for fear of surprise.

"Wherever they are, there are always one or two, if they are in large numbers, that mount guard and do not eat, walking from one side to the other looking all about: if they see or hear anything in the woods, at once they cry out and all the others raise the head and remain like that for a time. If the sentinel says not a word, they begin eating again, but if he hears or sees anything, he utters another cry and makes off, and so do all the rest at the same time."

This smaller species that was so fond of eelgrass was evidently not the Brant, because that bird is described in the next paragraph under the name 'Cravan,' which is known to be a synonym of the *bernache* of the modern French Canadian. Dr. Ganong thought that it could not have been Hutchins's Goose because "that species is not a resident of Acadia" and suggested that Denys might have referred to "smaller forms, perhaps young birds, of the Canada Goose." The description of it, however, as smaller and in every other respect just the same, together with the statement later that "the *Cravan* is scarcely smaller than the small *outarde*" really does seem to fit pretty well with *Branta canadensis hutchinsi*, or *Branta hutchinsi*, as described by Taverner in his revision of the group. Is it possible that in Denys' time this form may have been a regular visitor to some parts of Acadia on its way to and from its breeding grounds on Baffin Island?

Nothing further need be said of the *Cravan*, or Brant, but the 'macreuse' to which Denys compared it except for the taste, was not the Widgeon, as Ganong has it, but a Scoter. *Macreuse* is the name for Scoter, not only in France but in French Canada (see Taverner's 'Birds of Eastern Canada').

As to Denys' ducks, anyone is at liberty to do his own guessing. Perhaps he distinguished between *Anas rubripes rubripes* and *A. r. tristis*! Dr. Ganong's suggestion of the Labrador Duck for the species of which "the male is white, with black at the end of the wing" may be a good guess. It could hardly have been the Greater Snow Goose, because Denys knew that bird and mentioned it in an earlier passage not quoted by Mrs. Allen, where he spoke of 'oyes blanches et grises,' geese white and gray. When Denys said that this duck tasted of oil like the 'macreuse,' he was comparing it, as in the case of the Brant, to a Scoter, not a Widgeon.

For 'Sarcelle,' 'Plongeon,' and 'Poule d' eau,' Teal, Loon, and Coot are obviously the correct translations. 'Palonne' has escaped both the modern and the Old French dictionaries that I have consulted, but the masculine

form *palon* was an old French name for a particular kind of spatula, and *spatule* is modern French for both 'spatula' and the European Spoonbill. The fact that no Spoonbill inhabits Acadia, except the Shoveller Duck sometimes so called, together with the extremely long bill described, makes it seem as if Denys must have confused the duck with his recollections of the Spoonbill in France. The Night Heron may very likely have been the 'aigraite' with 'three little feathers straight up on its head,' even though the Night Heron's plumes are not commonly erected. At any rate, Ganong's guess appears to be a good one. For 'bec de scie' Sheldrake, or Merganser, is right, of course, and so is Long-tailed Duck, or Old-squaw, for *Cacaoiyy*, 'Cockawee' being still used for that bird in Canada. Ganong's identification of Denys' 'Marionnettes' (two *n*'s in the original French) is clearly correct, too, for he was informed that the Acadians still used that name for the Buffle-head, and he cites Baird, Brewer, and Ridgway as stating that it is used for it about New Orleans, presumably brought there by the exiled Acadians. As a matter of fact, Baird, Brewer, and Ridgway got the name from Audubon, who considered it a very appropriate name for the species. Razor-billed Auk seems to be correct for 'Gode' (Taverner gives 'Godd or Gudd'), and there can be no doubt about the Cormorant—except that Ganong in a footnote assumes that the species was the Common Cormorant.

The paragraph on the shorebirds badly needs revision. In the first place, the 'Alloüettes' (modern French *Alouettes*), though the name literally means larks, are, according to C. E. Dionne in 'Les Oiseaux du Canada,' *Maubèches*, that is sandpipers, not plovers. Ganong thought it likely, as stated in a footnote, that the two largest species mentioned were the Black-bellied and Golden Plovers, but the Golden Plover, the smaller of the two, has a shorter, not a longer, bill. It is useless to try to guess what they really were. *Alouette de Mer*, it should be said, however, was a term used by Brisson and some other French naturalists for certain small sandpipers, but also in the case of the *Alouette de Mer à Collier* for the Ringed Plover of Europe, as is shown by a figure in Buffon. It seems very probable, therefore, that the name was loosely applied to any small shorebird. By the way, it is probable that the reference to 'long feet' in connection with the 'Alloüettes' should have read 'long legs.' It seems to be not uncommon for the French to call the tarsi of birds *pieds* (feet), which, of course, they actually are. Thus the Stilt Sandpiper is called in Canada *la Maubèche à longs pieds*, and the Redshank of Europe was called by Buffon *le Chevalier aux pieds rouges*. Ganong translates 'Chevalliers' by 'Sandpipers,' but the *Chevaliers* (to use the modern spelling) are, in modern usage, the tattlers, such as our Yellow-legs. In the present case, however, it seems clear from the description that the name is applied to the Dowitchers. Denys says they are a kind of

'beccasse' with a very long bill and that they are of the same size and have legs as long as the 'beccassine,' and the plumage redder. *Béccasse* and *beccassine* are French for 'woodcock' and 'snipe' respectively, not 'Snipe' and 'Small Snipe,' as Ganong translates them; but of course Denys uses *béccasse* loosely. The terns, Herring Gull, and herons of the next paragraph are undoubtedly correctly identified.

We now reach the land birds. The eagle with a 'white ruff' Ganong identifies in a footnote as the Bald Eagle, and very properly, though 'ruff' (*fraise*) seems an inappropriate word. He thinks it probable that the 'smaller species' referred to was the Gyrfalcon, but we are at liberty to suppose that it was a commoner bird. The 'Faucon' and the 'Autour' are probably correctly identified as Duck Hawk and Goshawk, but it is not so clear that the 'Tiercelet' was the Pigeon Hawk. That word was applied to the male Peregrine and the male European Sparrow Hawk, according to Larousse. The hawk that captured only fish is identified by Ganong in a footnote as the 'fish-hawk' (Osprey), naturally.

Just what the 'three kinds of Partridges' were that Denys recognized is not entirely clear. Obviously the red one must have been the Ruffed Grouse and the black the Spruce Grouse, or at least the male of that species. His description of the gray partridge, however, presents a little difficulty. Both the Canada Ruffed Grouse and the Nova Scotia subspecies have red and gray phases, so that we cannot assume that his red and gray birds were necessarily of different races. He might have found the two colors together in any part of his domain. But he found a difference in taste between the red and the gray, the latter having a taste of venison, and I believe there is no detectable difference in flavor between the two color phases of any subspecies of *Bonasa umbellus*. Of the black partridge he says that its venison flavor is so strong as to make it 'less good than the others,' that it tastes of juniper berries and fir (or spruce, *sapin*). It is well known that the flavor of Spruce Grouse varies with the season, and it is at least possible that Denys, who certainly was not the most accurate of observers, may have considered the female Spruce Grouse with its taste of venison, eaten by chance when the flavor was not at its strongest, to be of a different species from the male. At all events, the female Spruce Grouse is a gray bird rather than a black one, and it may be safest to leave Denys' 'gray partridge' unidentified.

Before leaving this subject of the three grouse I find I must give a more literal translation of the section that describes the tails of the birds, so that it shall be clear that the colors there given are those of the tails alone and that all three kinds are included. Punctuated as in the French it reads: "All these kinds of partridge have the tail long, they open their tail like a turkey fanwise, they are very beautiful, the red *has il* mingled of red brown

and gray, the gray of two grays, one clear the other brown, the black of gray and black, they have been taken to France and have been given to sundry persons who have made fans of them which have been thought beautiful." The italics are mine.

All things considered, it seems unsafe to assume that two subspecies of *Bonasa umbellus* were at that time present in any one part of Denys' Acadia; and as to the Gaspé Peninsula in particular, so far as the record shows, Denys never lived there for any length of time, though he did make his home for some years at Nepisiguit (now Bathurst) just across the Bay of Chaleurs in what is now New Brunswick.

The 'becasses de bois' were Woodcock undoubtedly. The 'corbeaux' were probably both Crows and Ravens, since both species inhabit the region. The name *Corbeau* is now applied only to the Raven, *Corneille* being used for the Crow, but formerly it was used for any bird of the genus *Corvus*.

Denys' 'Orfrayes' present a peculiar problem in vernacular nomenclature, though the description points, unmistakably I think, to the Nighthawk, as Ganong concluded. *Orfraye*, or *Orfraie*, is really the word for the Sea Eagle of Europe (*Haliaeetus*), not the bird known in English as the Osprey, but, as Larousse says, the name is often confounded with that of the *Effraie*, a species of owl, apparently the Short-eared Owl. I cannot find that it was ever used for the Goatsucker, and I judge that Denys thought these birds were owls. And if he did, he came nearer to the truth than the Englishmen who called them Night Hawks!

Ganong's identification of the 'Chat-huant' as the Barred Owl may very well be correct, as that name is applied in France to the Tawny Owl, a bird of the same genus. As Ganong says in a footnote, however, the 'white ruff' suggests the Great Horned Owl, so that we may leave the matter in some doubt. But it may be remarked incidentally that the well-known fondness of the larger bird for including skunks in its menu would not tend to make it 'better and more delicate eating than the chicken'!

The 'Merle' is, of course, our Robin. The woodpeckers that were called *Gays* seem to me unlikely to have been Red-headed Woodpeckers, a species that is now of only casual occurrence in the region. I suggest that, with the help of an active imagination, the Yellow-bellied Sapsucker might have seemed to have the head all red and the neck of a real flame-color. The hummingbird is unmistakable. The swallow ('Hyronnelle') was, I feel quite sure, the Barn Swallow, now considered by many only subspecifically different from the European bird and therefore very properly thought by Denys to be 'the same as in France.' Ganong's footnote suggesting the Cliff Swallow is probably mistaken.

Mrs. Allen quoted in her 'Auk' paper Dr. Ganong's translation of everything Denys had to say about Acadian birds in the pages devoted to the

natural history of the region, with the exception of the passage that I have myself already quoted about the geese. There are, however, scattered through the book a number of mentions of birds that it may be well to speak of for the sake of completeness. On pages 199 and 216 of the translation the huge flocks of Passenger Pigeons are described. Their numbers are spoken of as 'incredible' and 'an infinity.' Denys once stayed eight days near the mouth of the Miramichi River, and every morning and evening saw flocks passing of which the smallest were of five or six hundred. "Some alighted on the meadows and others opposite upon a point of sand on the other side of the river. They did not remain on the ground more than a quarter of an hour at most, when there came other flocks of them to rest in the same place; the first ones then arose and passed along." The Pigeons fed on strawberries and raspberries and abounded on Bonaventure Island, where grew large quantities of those berries (page 225).

On pages 384-385 Denys tells how foxes caught geese and ducks by decoying them out of the water, and on pages 435-436 he tells how the Indians drifted down upon the flocks of geese, brant, and ducks in their canoes and upon reaching them lighted birchbark torches and knocked down the bewildered birds with sticks.

Other birds that are mentioned casually are Eiders (*Moyaques*), Puffins (*Perroquets de mer*), Black Guillemots (*Pigeons de mer*), cranes (*Gruës*), which, as Ganong says, were doubtless Great Blue Herons, plover (*Pluviers*), and curlews (*Corbegeos*, or, in modern French, *Corbigeaux*).

On page 129 a list of birds found on the Tusket Islands of Nova Scotia includes Turnstones. The original has the word 'tournevires,' and Ganong in a footnote says, "*Tournepierres* in modern French, unmistakably the well-known and common turnstone of the region," but gives no authority for Denys' form of the word as applied to the Turnstone. Denys himself in another place employs the word in the singular for a rope used to move boats back and forth between moorings and wharf. It is possible his use of the word for a bird was a bit of carelessness, but the verb *tournevirer* in Old French meant 'turn around,' and the noun *tournevire* would be so appropriate for a phalarope that it seems not at all unlikely that the Northern Phalarope, a species that is extremely abundant in migration in some parts of Denys' Acadia, may have been the 'tournevire' (whirligig?) he had in mind. Here in this same sentence, and elsewhere too, Ganong translates 'beccasses' and 'beccassines' as 'snipe, large and small,' whereas the correct translation would seem to be 'woodcock and snipe.' Here, too, 'Sandpipers' (*chevaliers*) should probably read 'Yellow-legs,' if not 'Dowitchers.'

Denys' natural history would be more interesting historically if we could always be sure what he was talking about, but in default of any such certainty we can get some amusement out of it as a sort of series of puzzle

problems. Professor Ganong has had his fun, and I have had mine. Perhaps somebody else would like to try his hand. Meanwhile we must thank Mrs. Elsa G. Allen for including Denys in her series of studies in the incubula of American ornithology and thus reintroducing him to a world that had nearly forgotten him.

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