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BREEDING OF *TIARIS CANORA*, AND OTHER NOTES FROM THE U. S. NAVAL STATION, GUANTANAMO BAY, CUBA

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WITH THREE PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

THE COLLECTOR who selects the southeast coast of Cuba for his first trip to the tropics is apt to find his early impressions somewhat disappointing. Steep hills rise abruptly from the water's edge, their gray sides seamed and gashed by erosion. Instead of waving palms and luxuriant verdure, such as one pictures in imagination, we find here cacti and thorny shrubs in endless variety. Upon their branches epiphytes crowd in rank profusion, while trailing vines bind the whole into thickets well-nigh impassable. In short, the terrain is in many places semi-arid and the vegetation distinctly xerophytic. Here and there clumps of palms struggle successfully for existence, but the general tone of the landscape is gray, rather than green, and closer acquaintance impresses one with the easy transition from leaves to thorns. First impressions, however, are proverbially misleading, and it is only fair to say that our traveller has no real cause for discouragement. In the first place he can probably find all the tropical luxuriance his heart desires by going a few miles inland, while even within the coastal region itself there is much of interest to the ornithologist. If I have somewhat emphasized the other aspects it is because there seems to be a rather prevalent impression that all tropical localities are much alike, whereas it is quite otherwise in fact, and a collector is apt to find plenty of variety without going far afield to look for it.

Guantanamo Bay lies on the south coast of Cuba, some 65 miles from Cape Maysi, the eastern extremity of the island. It is a beautiful sheet of water about eleven miles long and perhaps six wide at the most, with a comparatively narrow entrance, in fact one of those "bottle-necked" affairs so common on the Cuban coasts. The shore-line is tortuous and irregular in the extreme, be-

ing indented by an endless variety of inlets and bayous where one may cruise for days in a "kicker" and continually run across vistas that are new. In many places a dense growth of mangroves fringes the water's edge, forming a congenial retreat for pelicans, frigates and herons. To the botanist a mangrove swamp is said to offer points of peculiar interest; but the practical ornithologist, whose chief concern is to find a way through, is not likely to share his enthusiasm; the growth is absolutely impenetrable by boat, and locomotion over the slippery aerial roots sooner or later is apt to land one in the black and sticky mud below. These trees find their greatest development on the banks of the so-called Guantanamo River, a narrow, canal-like stream that flows along the west side of the bay and empties near the harbor mouth. Its quiet waters afford good fishing and plenty of alligators, while herons of several species frequent the banks. The local headquarters of this family, however, is a big swamp at the upper end of the bay beyond the limits of our reservation. When I last visited this locality, several years ago, I found a native family—wretched victims of "calentura"—established on its outskirts busily, and suc-

Fig. 40. View on Guantanamo River, Cuba

cessfully, occupied in "plume hunting". Since then this traffic has diminished, not only from lack of material, but also, let us hope, from some enforcement of the excellent protective laws promulgated by the Cuban government.

While my various trips to this station, since our occupation in 1898, include nearly every month in the year my longer visits have usually been during January, February and March; consequently most of my observations pertain to late winter and early spring, the latter part of the dry season. Without attempting a complete or even provisional list of birds found on the Station the following brief remarks on a few that have seemed to me particularly interesting or characteristic may help to give some general idea of the local avifauna as a whole.

Pelecanus occidentalis. Brown Pelican. Pairs or single individuals seem to preempt certain small inlets and stick closely to their own particular locality. Still common at all times and doubtless breeds in the vicinity.

Fregata aquila. Frigate Bird. Formerly very common and probably bred on or near the Station. Now much less abundant, at least during the winter months when

the Atlantic Fleet makes this harbor its rendezvous. Those that remain soon get accustomed to the ships and are not at all shy. These big birds seem to fall easily to the gun. Upon one occasion I took a chance shot with no. 8's at one sailing high overhead and to my surprise he tumbled into the boat.

Herodinidae. Away from the immediate vicinity of ships and houses one or more species are always in evidence. *Florida coerulea coerulescens* (Little Blue Heron) seems much the commonest, and *Butorides virescens maculata* (Antillean Green Heron) the most generally distributed. In running up the Guantanamo River I have observed small parties of the former keeping just out of gunshot by making repeated short flights ahead of the boat. They seemed loath to leave the stream, and sometimes kept this up for a mile or more before swinging up over the mangroves.

A few years ago Egrets and Spoonbills were fairly common, the latter occurring in good-sized flocks of a dozen or more; but during my last visit (1915) I saw no specimens of either species. While not harrassed within the actual limits of the reservation, there was doubtless much persecution in the vicinity outside. Being shy anyway they may not be yet as rare as they seem, simply avoiding the harbor while the ships are in port.

Zenaida zenaida. Zenaida Dove. Common in the chaparral, but shy and difficult to approach even at the nest. Two fresh eggs were taken from a nest in a low bush June 8, 1914, probably a late date. On March 27, 1915, while out with a friend, he brought me two eggs which, from his description of the bird, were almost certainly of this species, as the only others he might have found breeding locally were the White-winged and Carolina doves. This nest also was several feet from the ground.

Columbigallina passerina aflavida. Cuban Ground Dove. Very abundant and extremely tame. They probably begin to breed early, as I found a nest (six feet from the ground) with half-fledged young early in March.

Falco dominicensis. Cuban Sparrow Hawk. Common and much more tame than their northern relatives. I have walked past within twenty feet of one by the roadside. I was particularly anxious to find a nest of this species but never succeeded, though I once flushed two of the birds from a likely looking hollow stub. Like several other species, birds dissected in March failed to show development of the reproductive organs, and I am in doubt as to their breeding season.

Glaucidium siju. Cuban Pigmy Owl. Not uncommon among palms, and frequently abroad in the brightest sunlight. When I first heard its note I mistook it for that of a flycatcher.

Crotophaga ani. Ani. "Judio". Still common, but perhaps somewhat less so than formerly. Usually seen in small flocks of a dozen or less, their shrill cries and black dress making them much in evidence. Easily approached, and I have had no difficulty taking them with my little .44 calibre. Their well-known habit of "dribbling" along, so to speak, is very characteristic; that is, a flock seldom moves as a unit, but one bird flies ahead and alights, then others follow at intervals, either singly or by two's and three's, until in a short time they are all together again. I never found a nest, though I made a point of looking for it, and birds dissected during February and March did not seem to be breeding. Ordinarily these birds are seen along the trails and about the more open spaces, but they may retire to the denser scrub to breed.

Saurothera merlini. Cuban Lizard Cuckoo. This bird has the same shy and retiring habits as its allies farther north; keeping well to the chaparral it would seldom be observed were attention not attracted by its note. Its flight is slow and seldom prolonged more than a few yards, but once on the wing its enormous outspread tail makes it conspicuous enough. Usually seen in pairs and quite common.

Priotelus temnurus. Cuban Trogan. This exquisite bird I saw but seldom and then only in thick scrub where it is not easily distinguished in spite of its brilliant plumage. But I think it is really comparatively rare. The collector who can put up a good skin of this species with neatness and dispatch has skill and experience; the skin itself is like tissue and the feathers fall out in bunches at every touch.

Centurus superciliaris. Cuban Ladder-backed Woodpecker.

Xiphidiopicus percussus. Cuban Green Woodpecker. Both species fairly common wherever there is a sufficient growth of palms; not observed elsewhere. On March 30, 1915, I shot a male of the former species from a newly excavated hole in a palm stub some eight feet from the ground, but unfortunately the eggs had not yet been deposited.

The cavity was neatly made and chips of soft palm fibre at the bottom formed quite a comfortable bed for a woodpecker.

Todus multicolor. Cuban Tody. Common in the scrub, and ridiculously tame and friendly. One is usually first made aware of their presence by their curious clattering note, which seems much too loud for such a tiny body. By keeping quite still I have often had them hop up almost within arm's reach, apparently through sheer curiosity. The coloring is bold and beautiful.

Tolmarchus caudifasciatus. Cuban Kingbird. Very common. During March these birds seemed to be always in small groups of five or six individuals, and I saw no evidence of nesting up to the time I left last April. On June 8, 1914, I found a nest with small young, in the upright forks of a large cactus, and I have observed many old nests probably of this species in similar situations. Apparently May is the month for fresh eggs and I have just missed it in recent years.

Icterus hypomelas. Cuban Oriole. Fairly common in more open places, particularly among palms, where it builds its nest. It also frequents trees about houses and gardens like some of our northern species. On the 25th of March, 1915, I located a nest by watching a pair of the birds. The structure was entirely invisible from the ground, being attached to the under side of a dead and pendant palm frond. It is composed entirely of fine fibres of the same material, neatly and substantially woven in the usual icterine manner. On the above date the nest was empty but apparently ready for eggs, so I returned six days later expecting a set. No birds were about but there was one egg, which, to my surprise, was quite unlike that of any oriole familiar to me, being decidedly *Molothrus*-like in type. Although I had seen no cowbirds at any time, I suspected that it might have been deposited by one of these vagrants, but upon subsequent enquiry Dr. Richmond informed me that there was no cowbird in Cuba. It is experiences like this that make egg collecting a difficult matter in foreign countries.

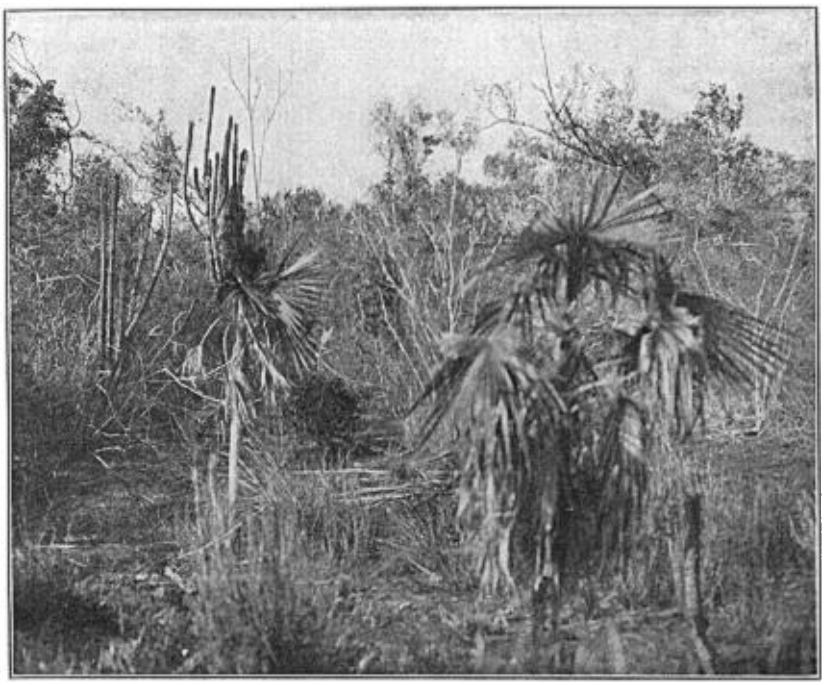

Fig. 41. BETWEEN THE TRAILS: U. S. NAVAL STATION, GUANTANAMO BAY, CUBA

Melopyrrha nigra. Cuban Bullfinch. This bird, which is not a true bullfinch, Dr. Richmond tells me, is found only in Cuba, though there is an allied species in Grand

Cayman. It did not seem to be common, though the black and white of the males is conspicuous enough to attract attention. A nest with three well-incubated eggs was taken March 18, 1915. Nest globular, with entrance in side; built in a dense thorny tree by side of trail through scrub; twelve feet from ground; male on nest. The nest resembles closely that of the Melodious Grassquit. The eggs are unlike any others known to me, although the description does not seem peculiar. Ground color yellowish white, spotted with lilac and brown, chiefly about larger end. Size .73x.53 inches.

Tiaris canora. Melodious Grassquit. This species finds a place on the A. O. U. List by virtue of its accidental occurrence on Sombrero Key, a tiny islet off the southern end of the Florida peninsula. As its eggs are not too common in collections, and little information regarding its nidification appears to have been recorded, I was particularly pleased to find this species generally distributed, and breeding abundantly on the reservation. My first set was taken March 9, 1915; and, as no fresh eggs were observed after the 18th, it seems probable that the breeding season, for the bulk of this species at least, is comparatively restricted. The nests vary little in structure, being globular in shape, with a side entrance, the whole affair about the size and shape of a Marsh

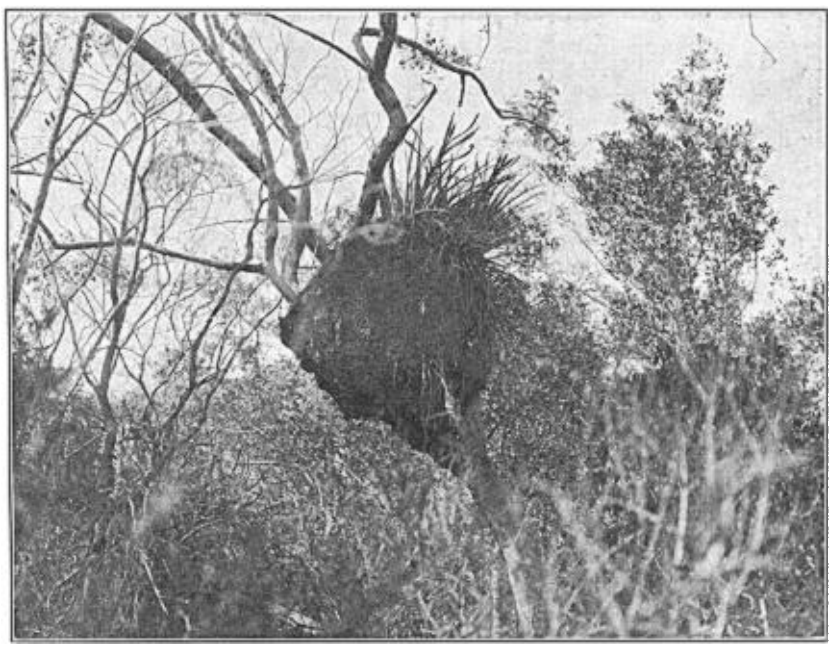

Fig. 42. ARBOREAL ANTS' NEST WITH GROWTH OF EPIPHYTES: CUBA

Wren's. On the whole, they are very neatly constructed, of fine grey fibres so compactly woven that they seem to last for several seasons. Old nests were so common and fresh looking as to make collecting difficult, for it was not usual to find a bird at home even when a nest held incubated eggs, and as they were always in thorn trees it was no small matter to investigate each one individually. The parents, in fact, seem to take little interest in their household duties; usually they appear after some waiting and then show no great concern about the operations of the intruder.

As the trees and shrubs in this locality have generally very small leaves the nests are very conspicuous objects where the ground is at all open; naturally most of mine were taken in such situations or along the trails, but I saw others in very dense scrub. With one exception all were in thorny trees, one particular species being generally selected. The exception noted was taken from the upright triple fork of a cactus growing in an open glade. The nest was about eight feet high and I hooked it out, eggs and all, with a forked stick. In some cases the nests were so firmly entangled among thorns that it was difficult to displace them intact, and still more difficult to remove the eggs;

I destroyed one fresh set in a vain attempt. The lowest occupied nest was six feet from the ground, the highest nearly twenty; probably the majority were not above twelve.

The full complement of eggs appears to be generally three. A good many incomplete sets were observed which for one reason or another could not be revisited, but of the nine actually collected there were seven three's, one incubated set of two, and another of four.

The eggs are white, more or less spotted with various shades of brown. In some cases the spots are pretty well distributed over the entire surface, but usually most thickly about the larger end. The set of four, recorded above, is particularly pretty, the color forming a wreath about the base of each egg, while the greater part of the surface is white. The sizes, in inches, of three specimens, selected from different sets, are as follows: .61x.48, .60x.47, and .57x.45. They are thus somewhat smaller than the average given by certain writers (*e. g.*, Reed, .65x.50).

Mimus polyglottos orpheus. Cuban Mockingbird. This form, which occurs in Cuba, Grand Cayman, Jamaica and Porto Rico, has either increased of late on the Station, or it has become more sociable, for it seems much more in evidence than formerly, particularly about the houses. The breeding season must be very prolonged and perhaps more than one brood is raised. At any rate fresh sets were common the latter half of March when I also took young on the wing. The full complement of eggs seems to be only two or three, in about equal numbers, and in no instance out of many did I find more. But small sets are the rule for most species all over the tropics. Eggs, nests and habits generally do not appear to be peculiar.

Mimocichla rubripes schistacea. Gray-bellied Red-legged Thrush. While neither very common nor conspicuous, I cannot omit mention of this species on account of its singular grace and beauty. The first specimen I secured, some years ago, was apparently feeding on a bit of stony beach on the bay shore, probably a very unusual proceeding as I never afterwards observed one except in the dry thickets.

In conclusion it may be as well to remark that the oologist who makes a flying trip to the tropics is likely to have his work cut out for him if he expects to collect many eggs. Unless he is thoroughly prepared beforehand most of the birds will be new to him and their eggs and nesting habits may be quite unknown. He is thus at a great disadvantage in finding eggs and must use extra care in identifying them afterwards. It is not always easy to shoot a parent, and when one does do so the bird is not infrequently lost in the dense vegetation. All this means much loss of time and physical effort. Personally, I believe in "going light" in the field. Of course where skins are a main object a gun is indispensable, and it is well to remember that birds shot in the morning will not always keep over until one gets home at night, and I have sometimes had to skin in the field.

For a day's hike after eggs I found the following outfit convenient. *Clothing*: Cotton underwear, khaki trousers, flannel shirt (nothing thinner will stand the thorns and prevent sunburn), straw hat (cork helmet or army "campaign" hat would be better headgear, but they are much in the way), leggings, and stout laced shoes. *Equipment*: Collecting gun. Marble's "Game Getter", with 18-inch barrels, appeals to me; it has two barrels, .44 shot and .22 rifle; with folding skeleton stock it carries well in a holster and its weight is a trifle. It is good for anything up to a crow and beyond that one can try the rifle. It shoots hard and my only trouble last year was having shot too large—no. 8; "dust" to 10's would be about right, as my small birds were blown to bits. Basket of woven palm leaf (locally an article which is common and cheap but exceedingly light and strong); "grub" (but not too much of it), and last, but *most important*, a canteen filled with good water. If the canvas is kept wet the contents will be drinkable in the hottest sun. Such an utensil drags at the belt and is awkward to carry, but one risks serious ill-

ness by leaving it behind. To the above I sometimes added a folding butterfly net, for it is well to take what comes along in out of the way places. Butterflies were individually common but I found no great variety. I suppose the season was too dry and the locality over-exposed to the strong trade wind.

In this season and locality the heat is greatly tempered by the trade wind by day, and at night one needs a blanket, though it is very different in humid places away from the coast. In Cuba there are no *poisonous* snakes (though I have seen some good big ones); but insect pests are at times somewhat too varied and abundant. In short there are minor drawbacks—and one should take reasonable precautions against illness; but in spite of all these the collector who longs for new fields and change of environment will find pleasure in both in the sunny island off our southern shores.

U. S. S. Maine, New York, February 4, 1916.

MEETING SPRING HALF WAY

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

I

"TEXARKANA", the porter announced to a curtained aisle on that April morning. Texarkana! May all men know by these presents just where they stand. We raised the shades to find that in the night winter had been left behind, spring had come in Texas, spring with its birds and flowers and green things growing. "The trees are all green!" a boyish northern voice exclaimed with fervor born of snowbanks passed in the Alleghanies. And so they were, all green, not with the dark heavy green of summer's fulfillment but with the delicate green of the first blush of spring promise, at whose delicacy you fairly hold your breath; a green that is almost white with the young hickory leaves, a tender pink with the oaks, making the woodland pools reflect a veritable fairyland forest. Blooming apple and peach trees gathered butterflies, leaf-crowned oak tassels swayed in the wind, and as the train passed through a stand of pine we breathed the velvety air of sulphuring pineries—nature was full of rich promise. All the warmth of the woods centered in the red bud, all the light of the woods focused in the snowy thorn and the dazzling white sprays of the dogwood. The ground flowers were blooming also—exquisite spring beauties, Baptisia, mandrake, and deep magenta phlox in luxuriant bunches.

Through the open windows came the spring songs of Tomtits, Cardinals, and Mockingbirds, and as if to furnish appropriate setting, there passed in rapid succession cotton fields with last year's bolls hanging, darky shanties flanked by outside chimneys, groups of pickaninnies, colored women in sunbonnets driving mule plows, and oak woods in which small brown pigs rooted for acorns. The handsome red horse-chestnut blooming in the woods recalled Audubon's famous painting of the Carolina Wren. At a wayside station the squawk of a Bluejay came in through the window, while from a passing swamp came the call of the Maryland Yellow-throat, not to be heard in Washington for fully two weeks. The first palmettos and bunches of cactus were followed near the Trinity River by the first gray moss, in which appropriately enough Parula Warblers were singing, also two weeks ahead of Washington. The