

FROM FIELD AND STUDY

The Probable Breeding of the Aleutian Tern in Southeastern Alaska—a Query.—

A record in the May, 1920, number of *THE CONDOR* (page 111) of the probable breeding of the Aleutian Tern near Yakutat appears to rest on "sight" identification only, and the actions of Mr. Walker's birds were so different from the usual habits of this species that I am forced to doubt if the birds seen really were Aleutian Terns.

Sterna aleutica has always been a decidedly rare bird, and authentic eggs have been taken in North America at three places only. A single egg was taken by Bischoff on Kadiak Island in 1868 together with the parent which is the type of the species; but since that date it has not been found breeding in southeastern Alaska, and the supposition that it bred in the Aleutian Islands (which was responsible for the bird's name) has not been substantiated by any of the ornithologists who have visited the chain. Mr. E. W. Nelson was the next ornithologist to take eggs. During his stay at St. Michael from 1877 to 1881 he found two breeding colonies. One was on an island in St. Michael Bay and the other on a small island near the village of Kegikhtowik about eighteen miles away. Nearly all the islands in this region are rocky and rise abruptly from the sea or else are low and marshy. The two islands where these terns breed are of a different character, rising from the sea in a sharp incline for some 25 or 30 feet and being level on top, or fairly so, with a covering of dry matted grass and moss. Apparently these birds require this type of nesting ground.

No one seems to have found the Aleutian Tern breeding in North America since Mr. Nelson's records were published until 1915 when the present writer visited St. Michael and collected eggs on the island in St. Michael Bay.

There are a number of supposed eggs of this species in American collections taken by a whaling captain on Stuart Island. These eggs I believe are eggs of the Arctic Tern; at least all that I have seen show none of the characteristics that render the eggs of the Aleutian Tern distinguishable at a glance from those of *Sterna paradisaea*.

There are certain ways in which the Aleutian Tern can be identified in life with certainty. The best field mark I consider to be its voice. The usual note is a three-syllabled whistle suggesting one of the small sandpipers (*Ereunetes*) and not in the least tern-like. I heard the harsh grating note that other terns use, but once, and that was from a wounded bird. The second distinguishing characteristic is its habitual shyness. Even when a person is walking over its nesting ground the birds usually keep out of gun range and it is rare for them to dart down at one's head. I never had an Aleutian Tern strike my head although this is a common habit with the Arctic Tern. Even a wounded bird on the ground, which will usually attract other species of terns, only serves to draw this shy bird a little nearer. It took me a number of visits of several hours each to collect a small series of these birds, while the same number of Arctic or Common Terns could be taken in any colony in a few minutes. *Aleutica* can be distinguished from *paradisaea* by its flight, but this distinction is less noticeable except upon direct comparison between the two species. *Aleutica* has slower wing beats and there is a certain lack of directness about its flight that once learned is diagnostic. In general appearance the Aleutian Tern seems larger and darker colored than the Arctic, but these impressions are often lost in poor light. The white forehead and black feet and bill, so noticeable in the bird in the hand, can be seen in life under exceptional light conditions only.

There is one way in which the Arctic Tern might be confused with the Aleutian Tern by a person who was not familiar with the latter species. In a certain stage of plumage, summer specimens of *paradisaea* show considerable white on the forehead. This plumage was described many years ago under the name *Sterna portlandica* and probably represents birds one year old that, because of deficient vitality, or from some other cause, have failed to acquire the full nuptial plumage at the spring molt. This plumage is somewhat rare and many colonies show no birds in this stage, but I have seen others which contained a considerable number of these, so-called Portland Terns. I believe it is not definitely known if birds in this plumage breed; but such birds in a colony might act as described by Mr. Walker and their markings lead to the impression

that they were Aleutian Terns. I have even known of several of them having been collected for this species and their identity not discovered until some time later.

In view of the above facts it seems as if the probable breeding of the Aleutian Tern in southeastern Alaska is open to doubt unless specimens of the birds were actually taken.—F. SEYMOUR HERSEY, *Taunton, Massachusetts, August 14, 1920.*

Comments upon the Safety of Sea Birds and upon the "Probable" Occurrence of the Northern Bald Eagle in California.—In THE CONDOR for May-June, 1920, appear two articles upon which the undersigned seeks the privilege of commenting.

The article by J. Grinnell on page 101, entitled "The Existence of Sea Birds a Relatively Safe One," appears to the writer, after a number of years careful study of this very question, to be most timely and accurate and not open to any criticism whatever. The only reason for taking up the matter here is a desire to enlarge somewhat on the theme of the original article.

We are all familiar with the frequent allusions to the "sea birds killed by storms" that have appeared in print in times past. A number of years ago the writer began to visit the California beaches after severe storms, expecting to find dead and crippled sea birds plentiful. This was not found to be the case, however, and, after several years observation along the beaches and the examination of hundreds of dead birds, the conclusion was arrived at that the storms have nothing whatever to do with the birds found dead along shore. In fact the greatest numbers of dead birds were noted at times when there had been no storms for weeks. Another point to be considered is that birds killed or crippled by storms blowing on-shore would still be fat when they reached the beach. On the contrary, a great percentage of the shearwaters, fulmars and other birds found dead along our beaches are in a more or less emaciated condition, evidence that they died of disease. Furthermore, in many cases their internal organs were swarming with parasites. It is the writer's belief that sea birds, particularly those that migrate in companies, are at times subject to epidemics to which large numbers succumb and that this fact is responsible for the numbers of dead birds on the beaches at certain times, storms having nothing whatever to do with it.

The most striking example known to the writer of the ability of sea birds to withstand severe weather conditions is that of the young of the Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*). At midnight, with the aid of the light of a lantern, the writer has watched these downy chicks, not more than three or four days old, dive through the surf in response to the cry of the parent bird and head out to sea into the teeth of a southeasterly gale, and this at a time when boulders weighing a hundred pounds or more were being rolled up and down the beach like so many pebbles. Furthermore, all evidence points to the fact that these young birds remain on the open sea many miles from land until fully grown, in spite of the fact that in this latitude severe gales are frequent through the summer months. In eight seasons spent in this region the writer has never seen a young murrelet anywhere near the shore after it had once taken to the water. In fact, the half-grown young had never been noted at all until this season (1920), when, on July 21, A. M. Bailey and the writer secured a pair of adult birds and a pair of young about two-thirds grown in the middle of the channel between Forrester and Dall islands, ten or twelve miles off-shore.

The second article upon which the writer desires to comment is the one by Mr. J. H. Fleming, entitled "The Northern Bald Eagle as a Probable Californian Bird" (page 110). Now, with all due regard to the high ornithological standing of the author of this note, it seems to the writer that the evidence submitted is far too inconclusive to serve as a basis for recording the Northern Bald Eagle as a "probable" Californian bird.

Let us consider briefly the evidence as presented. In the beginning of the article Mr. Fleming states that the Northern Bald Eagle "should occur at least as a migrant". This statement is made arbitrarily without presentation of any facts tending to show that the Northern Bald Eagle in the southwestern portion of its range is to any extent migratory. The writer, whose experience with this bird in southeastern Alaska covers a period of eight years, finds that it is, in the extreme southeastern part of Alaska at least, resident throughout the year, being fully as abundant in winter as in summer. Near Craig, Prince of Wales Island, during the winter of 1919-20, several pairs of birds