

NOTES ON BIRDS OBSERVED ALONG THE WEST  
COAST OF HUDSON BAYBy GEORGE MIKSCH SUTTON<sup>1</sup>

On August 16, 1930, I left Southampton Island, Hudson Bay, on the Hudson's Bay Company steamer *Nascopie*, to begin a tedious return to the United States after a year in the Arctic. The *Nascopie*, in continuing her annual mid-summer itinerary, went from Southampton to Chesterfield Inlet, reaching this point on August 18. Here I learned there was a possibility of my getting passage on a smaller boat or on an airplane down the coast as far as the new railroad terminus at Churchill. By so doing I could, I foresaw, get out to civilization much more promptly than by remaining aboard the *Nascopie*. I decided to take the chance, so left the steamer after making certain that my shipment of specimens would be cared for properly. I took no collecting equipment with me since all my effects were packed in ponderous crates in the hold of the vessel; and furthermore I knew that I should be prepared to "travel light" were I to go south in an airplane. I took with me scarcely even enough field clothes; but I knew I would be able to make satisfactory identifications with my six-power binocular, and kind friends at the Hudson's Bay Company Post and at the Northwest Mounted Police Barracks offered me their shot guns should I need them.

I remained at Chesterfield Inlet until August 29. During this ten-day period we had much fog, wind and rain, and very little sunshine. It was not pleasant to be in the field; but I succeeded in getting out, at least for a brief walk, every day. In my work here I was courteously assisted by Messrs. James Spence and R. Welby Stewart, both of the Hudson's Bay Company, and by Mr. Turney of Revillon Frères.

The region about Chesterfield was typical Barren Grounds. Near the coast I found but little willow growth. Between the smooth-topped rock ridges were mossy and grassy valleys. Everywhere were small lakes. At this season the taller varieties of grass were fully grown and already turning yellow or brown. Just back from the sandy beaches were stands of coarse grass which grew about waist high. Quantities of edible berries were to be found everywhere; and the moss was dotted with fleshy fungi of several varieties—red, blue and yellow. The familiar birds, such as the Snow Bunting and Lapland Longspur, were silent and secretive; and many of them were yet in the post-nuptial or post-juvenal molt. Flocks of shorebirds frequented the beaches and mud-flats or the shores of some of the low-lying coastal lakes. There was, near the Post, one small, mud-margined puddle where ducks and shorebirds were often seen; and here I made observations every day. Along the higher, rock-edged lakes few, if any, shorebirds were to be found.

Near the Post a series of large wire enclosures had been constructed. Here many Arctic Foxes, yet in their brown and yellowish summer pelage, were kept captive. Small birds, especially Lapland Longspurs, spent much of their time in these enclosures, apparently feeding, not far from the couchant animals. The foxes did not attempt to catch the birds so far as I could see. The wire fencing was

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quite a menace, however, for I found outside the cages the remains of five birds which had been killed by flying into them: three of these were longspurs; one was a Semipalmated Sandpiper, and one a Snow Bunting.

The most striking form of mammal life at Chesterfield was the *Shik-shik*, or Ground Squirrel, probably *Citellus parryi* (Richardson), which I had heard of again and again from the Eskimos at Southampton who were acquainted with the Repulse Bay region, but which I had never seen. These *Shik-shiks* were abundant near the Post. Among the birds which I had not seen on Southampton were the Lesser Yellow-legs and Pintail Duck; and the Northern Phalarope and Savannah Sparrow, which were very rare at Southampton, were here common. I did not collect many specimens. I made a vain attempt to secure a male Rock Ptarmigan in late summer plumage, and shot a Savannah Sparrow so as to check the subspecific status of this form.

On August 29, I accepted Mr. Hugh Conn's<sup>2</sup> kind invitation to travel southward with him to Churchill in his neat little motor-yacht *Nowya*. There was scarcely room for the nine passengers, but we all crowded in and had a jolly trip. Our first stop was at Marble Island where, feeling that we had plenty of time, we paused long enough to enter through a narrow, swift channel and examine briefly a remarkably well protected harbor. The entrance to this harbor, while deep and perfectly suited to the needs even of medium-sized boats, appeared at a short distance to be little more than a tiny brooklet utterly unfit for navigation. We made Tavane, or Mistake Bay, by evening, and here Mr. Sam Voisey welcomed us; Mr. Spence and I had time to walk over the grassy barrens to a nearby sandy ridge. We did not see many birds, but we caught a Red-backed Mouse among the willow bushes. I had not seen this species of mouse at Southampton or at Chesterfield.

On August 31, late in the evening, we made Eskimo Point. Here I had no opportunity to do any field work. Near the Post was a large lake on which were a few birds. I scarcely had the opportunity even to look at the country, though in coming into the harbor I noted that the general contour of the ridges was not greatly different from that farther north.

On September 1, after weathering a most disagreeable, all-night gale, we made Nunalla, a desolate, rocky place, where, in a wild wind, three of us rowed to shore through choppy waves whose heavy crests, blown into hissing mist, constantly threatened to swamp us. We were soaking wet on reaching the house. I could not do any field work here, though Mr. Edwards, the local representative of the Hudson's Bay Company, gave me some interesting information on the bird-life. My notes on Nunalla do not, apparently, include any statement as to the distance one must go inland from the coast to encounter trees; I have a hazy recollection, however, of having seen some spruce trees on the distant horizon westward from the little house where we stopped. The bush country probably was not more than fifty or sixty miles inland.

On the following day we reached Fort Churchill where, to my great pleasure, I met a fellow bird-man, Mr. Bert Lloyd, who had been making a collection for the Canadian National Museum. The trees at Churchill thrilled me; and Mr. Lloyd's interest in birds was so keen that I decided to try to help him a little rather than to make any collection of my own. The following list does not pretend to include any Churchill records. The data gathered while there I turned over to Mr. Lloyd.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Conn was a General Inspector of the Hudson's Bay Company.

This list includes, therefore, only such species as were actually encountered from August 19 to September 2, or identified from specimens or parts of specimens examined at various points along the coast; it is not at all exhaustive, and is offered only in the belief that any information whatsoever on this comparatively little known region is likely to prove of interest.

*Gavia arctica pacifica*. Pacific Loon. Recorded several times at Chesterfield where it was regarded as a fairly common summer resident. I did not see it elsewhere, but the Hudson's Bay Company representatives at Tavane, Eskimo Point and Nunalla said they were accustomed to seeing it frequently in summer.

*Gavia stellata*. Red-throated Loon. A pair seen at Chesterfield on August 25. Said to be a common summer resident all along the coast.

*Anas rubripes rubripes*. Red-legged Black Duck. Remains of several individuals killed on August 28, at Nunalla, were examined on September 1. The feet of these were bright red.

*Dafila acuta tzitzihoa*. Pintail. I was considerably surprised to find this species common at Chesterfield. Every day we saw from thirty to one hundred birds on some of the small, low-lying, partially tidal lakes not far from the Post. Here the birds rested or fed, rising with amazing speed and buoyancy whenever they were disturbed, or running about on the shore over the grass. I did not collect a specimen, but on the night of August 24 almost captured one in my hand by stalking it with a powerful flashlight. The birds seemed to be feeding on weeds that grew on the bottoms of the ponds as well as on the grass which lined the shores. I did not see any Pintails on the lakes farther inland; nor did I ever see one alight in any of the bays or inlets. They were noted every day from August 19 to 27, and had been seen for weeks previously according to the men at the Post. All the birds had short tails, and all flew perfectly. A good many feathers were to be seen along the shores of the ponds which they frequented, so I believe the molt was in progress.

At Eskimo Point I examined the wings of a Pintail which had been shot on August 26 by the Rev. D. B. Marsh. The natives called this bird a *Kashluak*, meaning "long-neck". At Nunalla, on September 1, I examined three fresh specimens which had been shot on nearby lakes by Mr. Edwards. Two of these were young males in a handsomely patterned plumage.

*Nettion carolinense*. Green-winged Teal. Wings and head of a male which had been killed during the spring were examined at Nunalla. Mr. Edwards told me the species had been known to nest in the vicinity.

*Clangula hyemalis*. Old-squaw. A female and three half-grown young were seen daily at Chesterfield on a small lake near the Post. These birds spent much of their time standing or lying on a grassy bank. They were not at all wild. None of them could fly.

On August 25, I saw two birds, apparently a mated pair, on an upland lake. The male was distinctly in the mating plumage, with black head and neck, but, like the female, could not fly. Both birds swam quietly about, diving easily and rapidly now and then. When they stood up in the water to flap their wings they moved with unusual deliberateness and beat their wings with obvious care, this, I think, to prevent any possible injury to the heavy, partly grown quills; and as they swam about they wiggled their tails a great deal. Old-squaws were noted elsewhere along the coast, but nowhere in great flocks.

*Somateria mollissima borealis*. Northern Eider. No male Eiders in black and white plumage were seen along the entire coast. Females with small rafts of young were noted in the inlets (not in the lakes) at Chesterfield on August 20, 21 and 25, however; and a few flocks of brown-colored birds (sex uncertain) were seen at a distance near Marble Island. These may have been King Eiders. Since I did not examine any specimens at Chesterfield or elsewhere along the coast I am not at all sure that the form encountered was *borealis*. A. P. Low (The Cruise of the Neptune, 1906, p. 316) states that the American Eider is "common everywhere in Hudson Bay and to the northward wherever small islands are found along the shore suitable for nesting", so *dresseri* may be the characteristic subspecies of the west coast of the Bay. At Southampton Island, however, only *borealis* was found.

*Somateria spectabilis*. King Eider. I examined a young male at Chesterfield on August 21 and learned that the species nested rather rarely in the vicinity. It was not possible for me to identify with certainty flocks of brown-colored Eiders seen at a distance.

*Melanitta deglandi*. White-winged Scoter. Near Eskimo Point, on August 31, a flock of large black ducks with much white on the wings flew near our boat as we were making our way across a sandy reef not far from shore. I do not see how these could have been anything but White-winged Scoters.

*Mergus serrator*. Red-breasted Merganser. One was noted at Eskimo Point, on the lake near the Post buildings, on August 31. I could not learn from the natives the local status of the species. Mr. Edwards told me that "saw-bills" had been known to nest a short way inland from Nunalla.

*Aquila chrysaetos canadensis*. Golden Eagle. One was shot a short way inland from Eskimo Point during the fall of 1929. This specimen, roughly skinned, was turned over to the Hudson's Bay Company Post at Churchill, where I examined it. It appeared to me to be a female.

*Falco peregrinus anatum*. Duck Hawk. A pair, seen at Chesterfield on August 21, was chasing or flying about among a loose flock of Arctic Terns.

*Lagopus lagopus lagopus*. Willow Ptarmigan. I did not see this species at Chesterfield. One of the men at the Post, however, had found a nest containing fourteen eggs during the summer. The nest was placed among some low shrubs some distance inland from the Post. At Nunalla I examined several young birds which Mr. Edwards had recently killed for food.

*Lagopus rupestris rupestris*. Rock Ptarmigan. At Chesterfield I saw Rock Ptarmigan several times. On August 21, we came upon a flock of five young birds, one of which was badly crippled in the right foot. These birds called in a subdued voice: *peer, peer*. We killed two females with pebbles. On August 25, we encountered a family of nine birds: a handsome male in full late summer plumage, a rather poorly plumaged female, and seven young which peeped as they ran about among the rocks gathering buds and berries. We killed the adult female and one of the young (a female) with stones; but the adult male was too wary for us. On the following day I went after him with a gun but could not find him. I did run across a fine flock of fourteen young birds, however, one of which, a male, I collected. All these birds had short and irregularly developed tails. Men at the Post told me that nests of the Rock Ptarmigan found thereabouts usually contained eleven eggs.

*Grus americana*. Whooping Crane. At Eskimo Point there was described to me a "large white bird with long legs and black on the ends of the wings" which had been killed about seventy miles inland during the summer by an Eskimo named Koonook. The wings and feet had, I believe, been saved, but I did not have opportunity to examine them, nor to talk with the man who had killed the bird. The natives had called the bird *Tuteeguk*, which is precisely the name given to the Little Brown Crane of Southampton Island by the Eskimos there; but all spoke of this bird as being much larger than the gray *Tuteeguk* with which they had all their lives been familiar, and from their remarks I knew they regarded the white *Tuteeguk* as exceedingly rare.

*Grus canadensis canadensis*. Little Brown Crane. Mr. Edwards saw two cranes, which may have been of this species, at Nunalla on August 31. We did not see any along the entire coast though we frequently heard reports of them.

*Charadrius semipalmatus*. Semipalmated Plover. Noted daily from August 19 to 27, at Chesterfield. Some of the young birds seen on the 19th were barely able to fly.

*Pluvialis dominica dominica*. Golden Plover. Noted at Chesterfield on August 20 and 27, two birds on the former date, and a family group of six on the latter.

*Arenaria interpres morinella*. Ruddy Turnstone. Noted daily at Chesterfield from August 19 to 25. Some of the young birds in fresh winter plumage were very tame. Few adults were seen.

*Capella delicata*. Wilson Snipe. At Eskimo Point on August 31, I saw and heard distinctly a Wilson Snipe as it flew up in front of two natives who were returning to the Post with water from a nearby lake.

*Phaeopus hudsonicus*. Hudsonian Curlew. Three were seen flying over the Post at Chesterfield on August 27, and five were noted at Nunalla on September 1.

*Totanus flavipes*. Lesser Yellow-legs. One was observed off and on for an hour at Chesterfield on August 19. It was very tame—so tame in fact that I once hit its tail with a pebble tossed in fun, without even frightening it into flight; and I was able to note the color pattern, yellow feet and size with perfect satisfaction. I was much surprised to find this species here in view of its absence at Southampton Island. At Nunalla, Mr. Edwards told me that these "Nan Serries" were often common thereabouts in migration. I do not know, of course, whether the birds he referred to were Lesser or Greater Yellow-legs; but they must have been one species or the other, judging from his comments as to the color of the feet.

*Pisobia fuscicollis*. White-rumped Sandpiper. Many were noted daily about Chesterfield, along the sandy beaches and the muddy margins of the coastal lakes. On August 21, I was amused at noting White-rumped and Semipalmated sandpipers and Semipalmated Plover hopping about on one foot. At first I thought the birds were deformed; later, however, I decided they were trying to keep one foot warm or dry, or simply did not care to exert the effort required in putting down or lifting up a foot which had been drawn into the belly plumage. I noted this at noon, during a period when many of the shorebirds were evidently resting. It was interesting indeed to watch a little flock of eight or ten birds of three different species thus hobbling along with heads drawn in and eyes half closed as if in some sort of noon-day somnambulism.

*Pisobia bairdi*. Baird Sandpiper. On August 20, I satisfactorily identified about ten individuals among the flocks of shorebirds which fed along the beach not far from the Post at Chesterfield. Most of these were single birds which stood here and there apart from the other waders. I noted especially the dark feet and the scaly appearance of the back. The tips of the folded wings, as in the White-rumped Sandpiper, extended noticeably beyond the end of the tail.

*Pelidna alpina sakhalina*. Red-backed Sandpiper. Very common at Chesterfield on August 19 and 20; less commonly noted thereafter, and not seen at other points along the coast.

*Ereunetes pusillus*. Semipalmated Sandpiper. Abundant at Chesterfield from August 19 to 27. Not noted elsewhere along the coast north of Churchill.

*Crocethia alba*. Sanderling. Several noted every day at Chesterfield from August 19 to 27. About one-third of the birds seemed to be adults in changing plumage, with rusty blotching on the head.

*Phalaropus fulicarius*. Red Phalarope. A few were seen at Chesterfield from August 19 to 21. Three immature birds were noted several times along a rocky beach where, in the shallow, sea-weed filled pools, they searched diligently for food. They were more deliberate in their movements than the Northern Phalaropes, did not twirl about as much, were less suspicious, and were not noted at all in the inland pools where the Northern Phalaropes characteristically gathered. The call-notes of the two species were strikingly different, that of the Red being a hoarse *phoe-eeep*, those of the Northern a rather abrupt *tik* and a peculiar sucking disyllable.

*Lobipes lobatus*. Northern Phalarope. Many were seen on a small mud-margined lake near the Post at Chesterfield on August 20 and 21. At one time I counted twenty-seven individuals on this lake; they were exceedingly restless, flying about erratically, plopping into the water abruptly, twirling about with heads directed downward toward the food they were seeking, but ready to be up and off at any hint of danger. This species was much commoner at Chesterfield than the Red Phalarope.

*Stercorarius parasiticus*. Parasitic Jaeger. Recorded several times at Chesterfield but not elsewhere along the coast. Dr. L. D. Livingstone secured a male not far from the Post on August 25. It was very fat. The stomach contained the remains of a White-rumped and a Semipalmated Sandpiper. It is noteworthy that no other species of Jaeger was seen at Chesterfield, and that Jaegers in general should apparently be so rare along the coast.

*Larus kumlieni*. Kumlien Gull. A handsome adult was noted several times and observed at close range on August 29, near Marble Island. This bird, a solitary individual, was tamer than the Herring Gulls which flew about the boat. It

appeared to be a little smaller than a Herring Gull, and was, of course, quite different in general appearance. It flew about the *Nowya* several times, settling on the water nearby to eat the food which we threw to it and extending its wings in such a way as to permit me to scrutinize the gray tips.

*Larus argentatus smithsonianus*. Herring Gull. Noted all along the coast. A large nesting colony was reported near Chesterfield. At Nunalla I caught a fully fledged young bird which had been crippled in some way, and which had come to feed upon the fish caught in the natives' nets which had been exposed at low tide. The wind was so strong that this unfortunate bird could scarcely stand upright. When it tried to run away it was blown over and over through the mud and water.

*Sterna paradisaea*. Arctic Tern. Abundant at Chesterfield from August 19 to 27. Not seen anywhere thereafter until we reached Churchill, where a single tern, probably though not certainly of this species, was noted early in September, flying over one of the larger lakes. On the night of August 19, and again on the night of the 21st, I heard terns calling loudly in the harbor. I do not know whether the presence of the ship or the noise of the unloading of cargo disturbed them, or whether they were restless on the eve of their autumnal departure. On August 20, I watched young birds, some of them laughably tame, begging for food as they flew near or after their parents. On the same date a great band of adults was observed fishing in the shallow water not far from shore. Most of these birds seemed to disappear under water at each dive. They rarely came up without a fish. These fish they swallowed in mid-air, sometimes dropping and grasping them again in such a way as to be able to swallow them more easily.

*Otocoris alpestris hoyti*. Hoyt Horned Lark. Horned Larks, presumably of this subspecies, were noted daily at Chesterfield. Most of the birds appeared to be in their new winter plumage. One which stayed about the Post, however, was yet in full juvenal plumage, with heavily spotted head and back. The species was noted also at Tavane on August 30.

*Anthus spinoletta rubescens*. American Pipit. Noted at Chesterfield on August 23, 24 and 25 (two seen on the last date); at Tavane on August 30; and at Eskimo Point on August 31, where it was the most noticeable species about the Post.

*Passerculus sandwichensis* subsp. Savannah Sparrow. I was much surprised to find this species fairly common at Chesterfield where, among the rank grass and on the piles of wet sea-weed along the beach, it was seen frequently. It was especially common in the grass about the fox cages. The flight, general appearance and fine call notes of this species attracted my attention to it at once. An immature male was collected on August 27. This specimen was so badly mutilated that I consider it best, for the time being, not to attempt to place it subspecifically. Mr. Taverner, in a letter to me dated January 7, 1931, expresses the opinion that the birds of this region belong to the race *labradorius* of Howe. Mr. Taverner's exact words are: "From a casual inspection I should judge that these northern birds are the heavily colored ones we have noted often passing through southern Ontario, and so forth, in migration. I have noted these a good many times and am inclined to refer them to Howe's *labradorius* which I suspect is a good race and extends right across the north."

*Calcarius lapponicus lapponicus*. Lapland Longspur. Noted everywhere along the coast; one of the commonest and most widely distributed birds of the region. At Chesterfield many frequented the wire enclosures where the captive foxes were kept.

*Plectrophenax nivalis nivalis*. Snow Bunting. Noted daily at Chesterfield from August 19 to 27. Most of the birds were juveniles changing into their first winter plumage. Recorded also at Tavane on August 30, but not seen farther to the south along the coast.

*Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, February 5, 1931.*