

PRIOR DESCRIPTION OF TWO MEXICAN BIRDS
BY ANDREW JACKSON GRAYSON

By LOIS CHAMBERS TAYLOR

On January 30, 1871, George N. Lawrence read a paper before the Lyceum of Natural History of New York describing several new species of birds (Ann. Lyc. Nat. Hist. New York, vol. X, nos. 1-3, 1-21, issued in February, 1871). Lawrence introduced these descriptions as follows:

"Some of the birds described in this paper were obtained by the late Col. A. J. Grayson, of Mazatlan, most of them on the Island of Socorro, off the Pacific coast of Mexico. Col. Grayson's collection, with others made in Northwestern Mexico, were kindly placed in my hands by Prof. Henry, of the Smithsonian Institution, for examination, with a view to furnishing a catalogue of them, in which the notes of Col. Grayson are to be incorporated. As some time will elapse before this can be prepared and published, I have thought best, preliminary to its appearance, to describe the new species.

"Several of the species have MS. names given them by Prof. Baird, which in all such cases have been retained." The paper referred to by Lawrence appeared later in the same year (Proc. Bost. Soc. Nat. Hist., vol. XIV, 1870-71:261-302, June 7, 1871).

Among the birds described in this paper, two concern us here, the Socorro Wren, *Troglodytes insularis* "Baird MS." Lawrence and the Socorro Towhee, *Pipilo carmani* Lawrence. In both cases, the type specimens indicated by Lawrence were collected by Andrew Jackson Grayson.

We may assume that both Baird and Lawrence were unaware that Grayson had described these two birds three years previously in a flourishing San Francisco paper known as "The California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences." This weekly had a wide circulation and published many popular articles on scientific subjects as well as some of a more serious nature.

Among the "Farmer" contributors in natural history were Dr. J. G. Cooper, Dr. C. F. Winslow, F. Gruber, and Alexander S. Taylor. But in ornithological bibliographies checked, no mention of the "California Farmer" has been found.

One might wonder why Grayson failed to inform Baird that he had described these species. And why had not Baird or Lawrence become aware of the publication in the "California Farmer"? The oversight is probably to be explained by the difficulties of correspondence and transportation between the Pacific and Atlantic coasts in the 'sixties. It is apparent from the Grayson papers deposited in the Bancroft Library of the University of California that many letters written by Grayson or Baird to the other never reached their destinations. Possibly Grayson did not realize fully that his published descriptions in the "California Farmer" would or could stand as original descriptions which, because they appeared first, would nullify the work of his eastern collaborators. Grayson died a short time later, in August of 1869. It is probable that Grayson's descriptions were overlooked heretofore because many files of early California journals were destroyed in the San Francisco fire of 1906, making them unavailable except in certain historical archives. Nevertheless, Grayson must have been somewhat aware of the significance of this publication, as indicated by a letter in the papers of Colonel James Lloyd LaFayette Warren (Bancroft Library). In this letter to Warren, who was editor of the California Farmer, Grayson wrote as follows on October 5, 1867:

"If you have no objections, I propose making the 'Farmer' a mechanism in which to make known the new discoveries I have made in Ornithology. This is customary in all Scientific Journals, although to the general reader of Newspapers these articles doubt-

less are very dry—particularly the technical description, which is, however, the most important to the ornithologist, and particularly to me, as it gives preeminence, as the first to describe a new species.

“Enclosed you will find a MS of one, which if it suits, will be followed by others, mostly from Socorro and the Tres Marias Islands and new facts of others upon the mainland.”

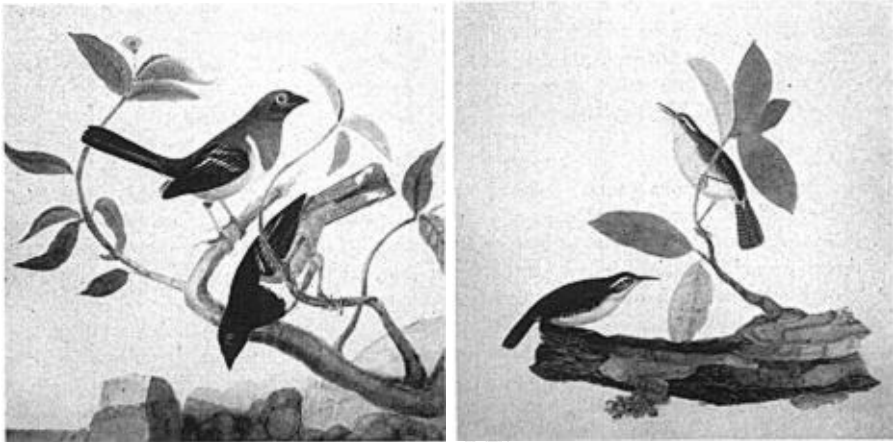


Fig. 1. Left, *Pipilo socorroensis* Grayson. Right, *Thryomanes sissonii* (Grayson). Photographs of original paintings by A. J. Grayson made in 1867.

The manuscript was doubtless that describing the Socorro Towhee, for some weeks later the following article appeared in the “California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences” (vol. 28, no. 16:127, October 24, 1867):

New Discoveries in Ornithology
(By Col. A. J. Grayson, of Mazatlan)

We are very much gratified to say to our readers, and especially to all who are interested in the Science of Ornithology, that the “California Farmer” has been selected by this very distinguished artist in the science as a medium of making known all discoveries he has made and shall make, and which he is desirous of communicating to the world abroad.

We lay before our readers the first number of the series, which will be regularly furnished, and which will be gladly hailed by the scientific world.

[New Series—No. 1]

Socorro Tawhee [*sic*] Finch, or, The Water Finder. *Pipilo Socorroensis*. (G) Nov. sp.

I was not a little surprised on finding in this remote and isolated locality a bird so nearly allied to and so closely resembling in its general appearance a common species found in the Atlantic Southern U. S. (*P. Erythrophthalmus*), . . .

The three *Pipilos* that closely resemble each other described in Baird’s “North American Birds,” *P. Oregonus*, *P. Arcticus*, *P. Megalonyx*, are all Western species; but they are all larger than the present bird, which I am sure is a new variety hitherto unknown, or described. I have given it the provincial name of the Island upon which it is found, meaning in the Spanish language, Succor, and which is the most appropriate name that could be given to it, from the fact that this bird led to the discovery of the only water found upon the Island, . . . thus preserving the lives of the whole party.

It is strange that this should be the only representative of the extensive family Fringillidae found upon the Island, where this species appears to be the most abundant of the feathered inhabitants of this locality. Like its congeners, it is modest in its attire and its habits; generally confining itself to

the low bushes, or on the ground, where it seems to be constantly engaged in scratching up the dry leaves and grass with its stout claws in search of insects or small seed upon which it subsists. They also feed upon the numerous land crabs, or the remnants of those left by the yellow crowned night heron, or red tailed hawk . . . They are remarkably tame; numbers of them came around our camp, picking up the crumbs of bread and even bits of fish . . . Its song is rather feeble, but resembling the other members of this genus.

From appearance, the breeding season was near at hand, (this about the middle of May) although I found no new nests, but several of last year's nests: These old nests were composed of leaves and coarse grass, round and compact in form, and lined with a softer material.

A fact may be related here in regard to the breeding season of all land birds of these latitudes. It does not commence with many species till about the setting in of the rainy season, which is the latter part of June, and I believe this to be the case with all the birds of Socorro Island.

Specific Characters

Form robust, bill strong conical, commissure and culmen gently curved, angulated at base, the cutting edges convex. Nostrils basal. Feet and claws very stout, nails compressed, moderately curved and very long, that of the hind toes as long or longer than its digits, and with the toe nearly as long as the tarsus. The middle toe with nail a little longer than the tarsus. Wings short, rounded and concave, 4th and 5th primary quills longest. Tail moderate length, and rounded.

Adult male. Bill Black. Iris reddish hazel, feet brown, nails brown. Head, neck, and upper parts of breast all around black with a brownish tinge, terminating on the breast in irregular spots of white and black, extending from which is a broad streak of dirty white as far as the ventral region. Sides and under tail coverts chestnut red, the latter rather paler. The entire upper parts except head and neck, including the tail, is of a dark brown, with a tinge of alivaceous [*sic*] more conspicuous upon the outer webs of the quills and tail feathers. Upon the back or interscapular region there are a few rather obscure dark streaks of brown. The inner webs of the two lateral tail feathers tipped with white for about a terminal 3rd of an inch on the outer feather, and still less on the next. The greater and lesser wing coverts distinctly tipped with white on the outer edges. The outer webs of the scapular and two inner secondaries slightly margined with dingy white.

Female and younger birds similar, but the colors are of a paler hue.

Total length, 6 in. . . .

Remarks

This bird differs from the other species of this genus which have been described by its smaller size. It seems to approach near to *P. Megalonyx* (Baird) which is found in Southern California, but of smaller size, and a considerable difference in the markings of the plumage. It is closely allied, but decidedly a new species. Specimens . . . sent to Prof. Baird, of the Smithsonian Institute.

It is thus clear that *Pipilo carmani* Lawrence 1871 is a synonym of *Pipilo socorroensis* Grayson 1867. Since Lawrence in his description of *Pipilo carmani* had named as types two specimens collected by Grayson it seems suitable to make the first of these, number 50843 U. S. Nat. Mus., the type of *Pipilo socorroensis* Grayson.

A manuscript invoice in Colonel Grayson's handwriting states that he sent to the Smithsonian Institution July 20, 1867, five specimens of the Socorro Towhee and five of the Socorro Wren. Among those sent to the Smithsonian were the individuals indicated as the models for his paintings. Grayson's field catalogue shows that he collected a total of 12 specimens of the Socorro Towhee and 12 of the Socorro Wren. A clue as to the disposition of the remaining skins may be found in a letter written to Colonel Grayson by Spencer Fullerton Baird on July 19, 1868, from which I quote the following:

"I was very sorry to learn that you had been obliged to sacrifice your collection and hope that you had sent specimens of all the species previously to us. Were there any Tres Marias and Socorro species among them? Let me know particularly if this was the case. Also who the parties were that bought them, and to whom they were to be sent in England. I have not yet been able to finish up the paper on the Island birds, and fear lest Sclater or Salvin may get hold of the species and describe them before I do."

Grayson's description of the Socorro Wren appeared on January 9, 1868 (The California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences, vol. 29, no. 1:7). From it, the following is quoted:

Exploring Expedition to Socorro Island from Mazatlan, Mexico.

By A. J. Grayson, of Mazatlan.

Thryothorus sissonii. Socorro Wren. (New sp.) . . .

Number Two . . .

This diminutive species is very abundant, and well distributed over the island. As other members of this family, its attire is modest and unpretending, but its song may be heard throughout the day, either among the trees, or brushy-covered rocks, that crop out everywhere. . . . I never tired watching them climbing about over old logs, or the trunks of standing trees, creeper like, and often turning up the leaves on the ground at our feet, in search of food. . . .

They had not yet, during my stay, fully commenced nesting. I however found a nest without eggs, in a knot-hole of a decayed tree, which sufficiently proved to me, that they rear their young in such situations, or in the cavities of rocks, and not in the branches of trees or bushes, as one species does on the main shore. (*Thryophilus* Sinaloa.) Baird . . .

As a compliment to my esteemed friend, the U. S. Consul at Mazatlan, and for his generous disposition and good will in aiding me in various ways, not only in the expedition to the Island of Socorro, but his appreciated friendship in the cause of which I am daily at work, I have as a poor recompense dedicated this species to his name.

Specimens of this, as well as all the land birds of the Island, have been sent by me to the Smithsonian Institute, where they will remain in the National Museum for Identification.

Specific Characters:

Form small, Bill compressed, rather lengthened, longer than the head, culmen and commissure gently curved throughout, no perceptible notch at tip. Nostrils in the lower edge of anterior extremity of the nasal groove, narrow, elongated, overhung by a stiff, scaly like roof of the membrane of the upper part of nasal groove.

Wings short and rounded, fifth and sixth quill longest; the first very small or spurious. Tarsus long—longer than the middle toe. Anterior scutellae distinct. Lateral toes equal. Hind toe long, and rather stout. Tail moderate length; slightly rounded.

Iris dark brown. Bill dark brown above, paler below—under mandible pale yellowish flesh color. Feet brown. Entire upper parts of plumage ashy brown. Wings distinctly barred with black on the outer webs. Tail broadly barred with black. Sides of head pale rufous, with spots of brown—dirty white streak above and behind the eye, as far as nape. Entire under parts dirty white, or pale ochreous; flanks and sides darker. Under tail coverts barred with dusky transverse bands. Concealed spots of white on the ends of the rump feathers.

Total length, 5 inches. Wing, 1.80; Tail, 1.75; Tarsus, 0.75; Bill, 0.60; Gape line, 0.78.

Hab. Socorro, one of the group of Islands known as the Revillagigedo Isles, off the coast of Mexico, in the Pacific Ocean.

Troglodytes insularis Lawrence 1871 is thus a synonym of *Thryothorus sissonii* Grayson 1868. This wren is a geographical representative of the continental Bewick Wren, *Thryomanes bewickii* (Hellmayr, Cat. Birds Amer., part 7, 1934:215), and its name therefore stands as *Thryomanes sissonii* (Grayson). As Lawrence also designated Grayson's specimen as the type of *Troglodytes insularis*, it seems quite in order to make this specimen, number 50810, U. S. Nat. Mus., the type for *Thryomanes sissonii* (Grayson).

Grayson made paintings of both the Socorro Towhee and the Socorro Wren which are here reproduced for the first time (fig. 1). These paintings as well as the documents and other materials used in this report were made available through the courtesy of Dr. George P. Hammond, Director, and the staff of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, California.

Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, Berkeley, California, November 15, 1950.