

OBSERVATIONS ON THE FARALLON RAIL (PORZANA JAMAICENSIS COTURNICULUS Baird).

BY

ROBERT RIDGWAY,

*Curator of the Department of Birds.*

The type of this species or subspecies, first described in 1874, still remains unique, the ascribed locality (Farallon Islands, near San Francisco) having been repeatedly, but unsuccessfully, scoured for additional specimens by competent collectors, who unanimously assert that no spot suitable for a bird of this family exists on those islands. All that is now known concerning the history of the type specimen (mounted and now in the National Museum collection) is, that it is one of four birds presented to the Smithsonian Institution in 1859 (entered October 13) by Mr. T. C. Martin, the locality given being "Farallones, Cal.", without date or other data. The other birds presented at the same time by Mr. Martin are from various localities, as follows: *Agelaius gubernator*, "S. Francisco;" *Turdus rufopalliatus*, ♂, Tehuantepec, and *Progne chalybea*, ♀, Tehuantepec; the last two collected by Colonel Grayson.

The bird in question was originally described as a variety or geographical race of *Porzana jamaicensis*, and it has been given that rank in the A. O. U. Check List. In his "Birds and Eggs from the Farallon Islands" \* Mr. Walter E. Bryant refers to it as follows:

FARALLON RAIL.—Regarding the claim of the unique specimen of this bird as a valid variety, there does not appear to be sufficient grounds for its retention as a separate form. In the light of Mr. Emerson's investigations, and that of others who have visited the islands and found no rails or suitable places for them to live, there seems to be but one conclusion to draw concerning it, and that is that it is an abnormal specimen of *P. jamaicensis*.

Whatever doubt there may be, however, of the present occurrence of the bird on the Farallons, or even of the type specimen having really been obtained there, there can not, I think, be any question as to its distinctness from *P. jamaicensis*. That it is not an "abnormal specimen" of the latter is almost certain, from the fact that specimens of *P. jamaicensis* from the mainland of California do not, apparently, present any differences either of size or coloration from those from the Atlantic States, the West Indies, or Chili, notwithstanding numerous examples have been compared. The possibility of its identity with a little-known species inhabiting the Galapagos Islands has, however,

\*Proceedings of the California Academy of Sciences, 2d ser., vol. 1, 1888, pp. 25-50.



recently occurred to me, though unfortunately I am unable, from lack of specimens, to settle the matter. In the "Zoölogy of the Beagle" (1841), Mr. John Gould described a *Zapornia spilonota* from a specimen obtained on James Island, Galapagos, by Mr. Darwin, the description being accompanied by a colored figure (plate 49). This description and colored figure agree closely in certain characters with the Farallon Rail, the back being without white spots, and those of the wings and posterior under parts much smaller and less numerous than in *P. jamaicensis*. Additional specimens were obtained in 1868 on Indefatigable Island, by Dr. Habel, these being mentioned by Mr. Salvin in his important paper "On the Avifauna of the Galapagos Archipelago" (Transactions of the Zoölogical Society of London, vol. ix, pt. ix, 1876, pp. 447-510, pls. 84-89).

The descriptions given by Messrs. Gould and Salvin, respectively, differ considerably, especially as to the color of the upper parts. Mr. Gould's is as follows:

Head and all the under surface blackish-gray; *all the upper surface dark reddish brown*, fading off on the rump into deep grayish-black, the wings, hinder part of flanks, and under tail-coverts slightly sprinkled with white; bill blackish-brown; feet, reddish; iris, bright scarlet.

Mr. Salvin's description (translated from the Latin) is as follows:

♂ (Indefatigable Island) blackish-cinereous, nearly uniform, the back and outer surface of the wings washed with oily rufous; the lower flanks and under tail-coverts obsoletely spotted with white, the wings externally, back posteriorly, and rump sometimes marked in the same way; iris scarlet; feet olive-brown; bill black. \* \* \*

*Obs.*—Species similar to *P. jamaicensis*, but with the nape entirely blackish-cinereous and the dorsal spots almost obsolete; allied to *P. tabuensis* so far as colors are concerned, but to be distinguished at the first glance by the short tail.

Regarding individual variations, Mr. Darwin says that "with respect to the specific description I must observe that in one of the specimens the small white spots on the wings and abdomen are wanting. This is not a sexual distinction, but possibly may be owing to immaturity." Mr. Salvin also says that "a specimen in Dr. Habel's collection has no spots on the wings and lower back, but does not otherwise differ from the rest of his examples." He adds that "these spots are somewhat variable, being well defined in some, obsolete in others, and entirely wanting in a few;" and that "in none are they so well developed as in *P. jamaicensis*, the nearest ally of the present bird."

Unfortunately I have not been able to compare specimens of *P. spilonota* with the type of *P. jamaicensis coturniculus*, but the descriptions and plate referred to above show that the two are very closely related—much more closely, indeed, than either of them is to *P. jamaicensis*. Points in which they agree and at the same time differ from *P. jamaicensis* consist mainly in the restriction, both as to size and the surface which they cover, of the white spots on the wings and posterior under parts, these markings always covering the back in *P. jamaicensis*, while



in *P. spilonota* and *P. jamaicensis coturniculus* the back is entirely unspotted.

The type specimen of the Farallon Rail is probably in autumnal or immature plumage, which in *P. jamaicensis* differs from that of the fully adult bird in spring in having the chin and throat dull whitish, instead of deep slate-gray, like the breast and belly. The plate of *P. spilonota* in the "Zoölogy of the Beagle" represents a bird in full plumage, the chin and throat being concolor with the other lower parts, but doubtless younger birds of this species also have the chin and throat whitish.

Except in the color of the chin and throat and the larger dimensions, there is nothing in the original description of *P. spilonota* that would not exactly fit *P. jamaicensis coturniculus*; but Mr. Salvin's description, taken from examples from a different island (Indefatigable), will not apply in one particular, namely, in the color of the nape, which is said to be entirely blackish cinereous, whereas in *P. jamaicensis coturniculus* the entire hind-neck is exactly the same deep brown color as in *P. jamaicensis*.

As stated above, I have been unable to examine specimens of *P. spilonota*; but I think there can be no doubt that the Farallon bird is decidedly more closely allied to that of the Galapagos than to the widely-distributed continental species, Californian (mainland) examples of which appear to be exactly like those of the Eastern United States, the West Indies, and Chili.\* In view of these facts, the technical name of the Farallon Rail should be changed by the elimination of the middle term, leaving it to stand as *Porzana coturniculus* (Baird) until its relationship to *P. spilonota* can be more definitely ascertained.

Recent explorations have considerably increased the number of species of water birds common to the Galapagos and California (or Lower California), *Sula gossi* (Galapagos to Lower California) and *Pelecanus californicus* (Galapagos to Oregon) being among the number, while *Hæmatopus galapagensis* and *H. frazari* (of Lower California) are hardly separable. May not, therefore, this puzzling rail, of which it seems to be impossible to obtain a second example, prove to be a straggler of another Galapagoan species? Or, as an alternative possibility, might it not have been a straggler from one of the more southern Californian islands, of the Santa Barbara group? This question brings to mind the case of the Swallow-tailed Gull (*Creagrus furcatus*), the original specimen of which is said to have been obtained at Monterey, California, while no example has subsequently been taken north of the Galapagos Islands, the only certainly known breeding-ground of the species. It is known that localities of the specimens obtained by the *Venus* expedition were more or less mixed in the process of labeling; still, in view of what we now know of the distribution of water birds along the Pacific coast of America, the correctness of the alleged locality of the original *C. furcatus* does not seem so very improbable.

\* See Water Birds of North America, Vol. I, p. 378.



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