

NOTES ON THE BIRDS OF CAPE BRETON ISLAND.<sup>1</sup>

BY CHARLES W. TOWNSEND, M. D.

THE following notes on the birds of Cape Breton were made during a visit to that island between the 17th of August and the 5th of September, 1905. This region has already been visited in summer and its birds noted by Dr. J. Dwight, Jr.,<sup>2</sup> F. H. Allen,<sup>3</sup> and the late Frank Bolles.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Dwight and Mr. Allen confined their observations to the Bras d'Or region.

My own trip was by water to the island and through the Bras d'Or Lakes, and on foot from South Gut near Baddeck, "down north" as far as Neil's Harbor; also by boat from Ingonish to Sydney, and up the Myra River, with a drive through the eastern part of the island.

Ninety-eight different species of birds were noted; a number of which at this late date were of course migrants. The following twenty-one species may be added to the lists above referred to.

**Cephus grylle.** BLACK GUILLEMOT.—Common along the shore from Englishtown to Neil's Harbor.

**Larus marinus.** GREAT BLACK-BACKED GULL.—A not uncommon migrant.

**Larus delawarensis.** RING-BILLED GULL.—One on the beach at Ingonish.

**Sterna paradisæa.** ARCTIC TERN.—Common everywhere along the shore. At South Bay, Ingonish, out of eight Terns, six appeared to be of this species, two *S. hirundo*. Dr. Dwight<sup>5</sup> corrected his first note of this species as all his specimens proved to be *S. hirundo*.

**Puffinus gravis.** GREATER SHEARWATER. **Puffinus fuliginosus.**—SOOTY SHEARWATER.—Four of the latter and one of the former were seen at sea south of the island, the numbers of the two species being in inverse order to their usual proportion.

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<sup>1</sup> Read before the Nuttall Ornithological Club, December 4, 1905.

<sup>2</sup> Auk, Vol. IV, 1887, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Auk, Vol. VIII, 1891, p. 164, and Vol. XII, 1895, p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> From Blomidon to Smoky. Boston, 1894.

<sup>5</sup> Auk, Vol. VI, 1889, p. 186.



**Oceanodroma leucorhoa.** LEACH'S PETREL. **Oceanites oceanicus.** WILSON'S PETREL.—Petrels, apparently of both species, were seen at a distance off the Nova Scotia coast south of Cape Breton.

**Sula bassana.** GANNET.—An adult flew directly over the steamer half way between Ingonish and Sydney on September 1. Several were seen south of Cape Breton on August 17.

**Phalaropus lobatus.** NORTHERN PHALAROPE.—Several were seen at sea south of the island on August 17.

**Actodromas fuscicollis.** WHITE-RUMPED SANDPIPER.—Several were seen at Ingonish.

**Calidris arenaria.** SANDERLING.—Two were seen at Ingonish.

**Numenius hudsonicus.** HUDSONIAN CURLEW.—One seen at Ingonish.

**Squatarola squatarola.** BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER.—A flock of 14 were seen at Englishtown on August 21.

**Accipiter velox.** SHARP-SHINNED HAWK. **Accipiter cooperi.** COOPER'S HAWK. **Buteo lineatus.** RED-SHOULDERED HAWK. **B. platypterus.** BROAD-WINGED HAWK.—One of each of these species of hawks was seen.

**Pinicola enucleator leucura.** PINE GROSBEAK.—Two adults and two young were watched within a few yards near Neil's Harbor on August 27. The female was feeding the young.

**Passerella iliaca.** FOX SPARROW.—I saw one individual of this species at Neil's Harbor on August 26.

**Passer domesticus.** ENGLISH SPARROW.—W. P. Coues<sup>1</sup> reports that this species "made its first appearance in Cape Breton coincidently with the completion of the Cape Breton Railroad, during the month of November last [1889]". I found it abundant at towns along the railroad, as at Hawkesburg, St. Peters, and Sydney. It was also abundant at Baddeck, Englishtown, and at Sandy MacDonald's at the mouth of French River. Fortunately it did not seem to have extended north of that point, and may Smoky long block its way!

There were eighteen species recorded by Dwight, Bolles or Allen which I did not see, namely: *Clangula clangula americana*, *Harelda hyemalis*; *Oidemia deglandi* (the entire absence of Scoters along

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<sup>1</sup> Auk, Vol. VII, 1890, p. 212.



the coast even during the latter part of my visit in September seemed to me strange), ?*Rallus virginianus*, *Philohela minor*, *Coccyzus* sp.?, *Picoides arcticus*, *Sphyrapicus varius*, *Antrostomus vociferus*, *Trochilus colubris*, *Empidonax minimus*, *Poæcetes gramineus*, *Melospiza georgiana*, *Zamelodia ludoviciana*, *Dendroica castanea*, *Seiurus noveboracensis*, *Wilsonia pusilla*, *Hylocichla guttata pallasii*.

I also failed to find *Compsothlypis americana usneæ* and *Melospiza lincolni*, both recorded at Cape Breton by Mr. Wm. Brewster<sup>1</sup> in his 'Notes on the Birds observed during a Summer Cruise in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.'

The following notes are added on several species previously reported for the Island.

**Chætura pelagica.** CHIMNEY SWIFT.—The houses outside of the large towns at Cape Breton are generally very poorly supplied with chimneys. In fact, brick chimneys are rarely seen, but small stovepipes are used. Chimney Swifts, which are common, have therefore to adapt themselves, and I was told that it is usual for them to nest in barns and sheds. At French River, close to the sea, I observed on August 22 a Swift flying in and out of a window in a small hay barn. Inside on the end wall opposite the window and close under the apex of the rafters the nest was fixed and it contained the half-grown young. The nest was a rather bulky affair, made of spruce twigs, and the glue-like substance with which the twigs were stuck together was smeared like varnish on the boards above and below the nest. Below the nest was a large pile of droppings, as if the place had been used for several years. This accumulation was added to from time to time by the young, who carefully disposed themselves so as to avoid soiling the nest. When the adult bird flew in with food, chirping loudly, there was a loud reply from the young. The old bird generally alighted on the wall below the nest, clinging in a vertical position, and later fluttered up to the edge of the nest where it fed the young. The shrill twittering of the young was almost deafening in the small hay loft. The next morning early I found both parents at the nest, one on the wall, the other sitting on the nest, spreading one wing at times, and brooding the young.

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<sup>1</sup> Proc. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist., Vol. XXII, 1883, p. 364.



**Corvus brachyrhynchos.** AMERICAN CROW.—In 1881 Mr. Brewster<sup>1</sup> was impressed with the familiarity of the Crow with man in these regions, owing to the fact that, as no corn is planted, there is no cause for dispute. Along the roads, in farm yards and even in remote places at Cape Breton one may walk within a short distance of crows. At Grand Narrows I was interested in watching a crow on a fence within 20 yards of me pick a chicken bone. He held the bone with his foot during the process but flew off with it in his bill. It is common for crows to alight on buildings, and I once saw four together on the roof of a small outhouse at Ingonish. In eastern Massachusetts such familiarity would be very surprising.

**Corvus corax principalis.** NORTHERN RAVEN.—Along the northeast coast of Cape Breton, between Englishtown and Neil's Harbor, I found Ravens fairly common. Four or five were seen nearly every day. In searching for some good field mark to distinguish this species from the Crow, I found that the shape of the tail was diagnostic. The tail of the Crow when spread, or partly spread is evenly and but very slightly rounded, for the length of the outer feathers is nearly the same as that of the middle ones. In the Raven, however, the middle feathers are noticeably longer than the outer, and the gradation between the two or four middle feathers and those outside is especially marked. I found that the tail of a *Corvus*, once well seen, always showed definitely whether the bird was *corax principalis* or *brachyrhynchos*, and the *croak* or *caw*, if afterwards heard, always confirmed the diagnosis. The harsh croak of the Raven is of course always diagnostic. I have noted it as *errroak*, *errraa* and *errruk*, and once near the top of Smoky I was startled with a coarse cry that sounded like *helup*. As is well known, the larger size of the Raven is of but little help in distinguishing the two species, unless they are near together for direct comparison. Neither is the greater tendency of the Raven to sail or soar conclusive for this purpose, for Crows at times disport themselves in similar fashion.

The road to Ingonish winds along near the summit of Mount Smoky, and gives an unobstructed view into a huge ravine which

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<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*



nearly divides the great rocky mass into two parts, the sea lying close at hand on the east. This is a favorite resort for Ravens, and one can look down on the great birds showing glossy and purplish in the sunlight as they sail from one side of the ravine to the other. A couple of these birds sailed over this ravine, one close above the other, and as I watched them with my glasses, the lower bird turned completely on its back and both birds grappled for an instant in mid air. Later at Ingonish I saw a similar performance, but in this case the upper bird dropped its feet first, and the lower at once turned over to grapple with it.

At French River one morning I watched four Ravens performing some interesting evolutions about the cliffs. Each in turn or together would fly up almost vertically against the wind, and then swooping or darting down turned at times a complete somersault. That evening four Ravens, possibly the same birds, flew by hoarsely croaking and sailed off to the woods beyond the river.

***Loxia curvirostra minor*.** AMERICAN CROSSBILL. ***Loxia leucoptera*.** WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL.—Both species of Crossbills were abundant everywhere in the island, owing probably to the abundance of food, for the black and the white spruces, particularly the latter, and the balsam firs, were loaded with cones. The natives said it was an unusually abundant crop.

The American Crossbill sang but rarely and then with but little enthusiasm, but the white-winged species was everywhere in full song. One of these I shot and found the testes as large as peas. This and the singing certainly suggested breeding. I saw no fledglings and had no time to look for nests. The great variation in the time of breeding of Crossbills is well known, but it is certainly strange to think of these birds breeding in late August and early September.<sup>1</sup>

Ora W. Knight<sup>2</sup> in speaking of the American Crossbills seen at Jackman, Maine, from August 16–23, 1895, remarks: "What is very odd is the fact that I observed a number of the birds flying about in pairs. These were probably still nesting. Some of the Crossbills probably nest much later than is generally supposed."

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<sup>1</sup> Note.—Mr. Brewster tells me that he once found evidence of Crossbills breeding at Lake Umbagog in September.

<sup>2</sup> Auk, Vol. XII, 1895, p. 391.



The song was frequently ringing in my ears, and it is a song that is well worth recording, especially as most writers give such an imperfect idea of it. Wilson, Nuttall, Minot, Stearns and Coues, Langille, and Hoffmann do not mention it. Audubon says: "Its song is at times mellow and agreeable." Baird, Brewer, and Ridgway say of captive birds that "their songs were irregular and varied, but sweet and musical." Brewster<sup>1</sup> in his 'Notes on the Birds observed during a Summer Cruise in the Gulf of St. Lawrence' says: "The old males occasionally uttered a feeble, trilling song very like that of the Snowbird." Chapman says: "Their song is low, soft, and sweet, much like that of the American Goldfinch." G. M. Allen in his 'Birds of New Hampshire' says: "The song which I have sometimes heard in July is a series of trills alternately high and low."

The last is the best description of the song as I heard it at Cape Breton. The trills resembled so closely those of the Canary-bird, that several persons who heard it spoke of the bird as the "Wild Canary." Far from being low and feeble, the song was delivered with great vigor and abandon, the birds often flying about in large circles over the woods. Occasionally the song was delivered from the top of an evergreen, but usually its vehemence was so great that the bird was lifted up into the air, where it flew about slowly, pouring out meanwhile a great volume of music. This lasted for minutes at a time, and ceased only when the exhausted bird came to a perch. The song would often be at once taken up by another bird, and occasionally several were singing in the air at a time.

The volume of the sound was constantly swelling and dwindling, at times a low sweet warbling, then a rough rattling, more like a mowing-machine, then a loud all-pervading *sweet, sweet, sweet*, recalling exactly a Canary-bird. Anon the song would die down to a low warbling, and again burst out into a loud sweet trilling *wee, wee, wee*.

When singing from a perch, which was always the tip-top of a spruce or fir, the Crossbill frequently twitched its tail, and erected the feathers of its crown. One fairly good singer appeared to be rather immature, being mostly gray with but a faint tinge of red

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<sup>1</sup> *Loc. cit.*



in the breast. This full nuptial song is certainly very different from the song occasionally heard at other seasons, and would hardly be recognized by one who had heard the latter only.<sup>1</sup>

The American Crossbill, on the other hand, rarely sang. Occasionally one might hear the call-notes so rapidly repeated that they resembled a trilling song. One bird emitted this song as it flew, following it up by several high, quickly repeated squeaky notes.

**Parus hudsonicus.** HUDSONIAN CHICKADEE.—It is as easy to distinguish this bird by its notes from the familiar Black-capped Chickadee, as by its plumage. There are, however, very few descriptions in the books of these characteristic notes, and I can find no account of a song. Both Chickadees have a variety of faint notes that are very much alike, but there is one characteristic in most of the notes of the Hudsonian which at once distinguishes it from the Black-cap, and that is the *z* quality, delivered in a lower pitch. In a word, the Hudsonian uses *z* while the Black-cap uses *s* or *d*. The former says *pst zee-zee* or less often *pst zee-zee-zee*, while the latter repeats more frequently, and rattles off, *psik a dee-dee-dee-dee-dee*, and his notes are higher pitched.

Several times in different places I was treated to a pleasant little warble from the Hudsonian Chickadee, which appeared to my companion and myself to easily merit the name of song. It was a low, bubbling, warbling song, which I vainly attempted to describe in my notes. It began with a *pstt* or *tsee*, followed by a sweet but short warble. This song, if song it be, is quite different from the irregular rolling notes that the Black-cap occasionally emits, which cannot be considered a song. In one case I noted that the song was emitted by an adult. I heard the song several times from one bird at Englishtown, several times from another at Indian Brook, once at Skir Dhu, and once at North Ingonish. It is evident therefore that it was not the idiosyncrasy of one bird. While it would seem strange that the Hudsonian Chickadee should not have a song, it is stranger still that those who are familiar with the bird at all seasons should not have heard it, if it exists. As far as I know the only allusion to a song in this species is by Mr. Horace W. Wright

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<sup>1</sup> Since this was written, my attention was called to a very similar description of this glorious song by Olive Thorne Miller in her 'With the Birds in Maine' (Boston, 1904), pp. 10 to 12.



in the Auk, Vol. XXII, 1905, p. 87, in which he refers to a Hudsonian Chickadee seen at Ipswich, Mass., on November 12, 1904, as follows: "[he] was very finely seen while he gave a sweet warbling song." Of another bird, seen on November 25, he says: "The Belmont bird was also well seen and gave a few notes of the warbling song."

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## STRAY NOTES FROM ALASKA.

BY A. W. ANTHONY.

AS EVEN fragmentary notes on the avifauna of northwestern Alaska are by no means common I have ventured to offer the few disjointed records which I noted during the winter of 1904-1905 on the Seward Peninsula. These records are from a region somewhat closely adjoining those so well covered by Messrs. Nelson and Grinnell, and I would hesitate were it not for the fact that the country explored by myself is almost entirely open tundra, differing from the St. Michaels region or that of Mr. Grinnell's camp on Kotzebue Sound. The Seward Peninsula is more or less timbered along the streams and mountains of its eastern part but the spruce growth ceases abruptly between Long. 163° and 164°, west of which nothing larger than arctic willows are to be found, save for one or two small groves of stunted cottonwoods, which will be mentioned more in detail further on.

After the fall migration the Redpolls lingered along the willow thickets until I had hopes that they would winter with us, for I could not see any possibility of any other winter residents except the Ptarmigan. A march of over a hundred miles in early October failed to bring to light any other species but by October 15 the last Redpoll had departed for the timbered regions along the Yukon, leaving the tundras and wind-swept hills to the Rock and Willow Ptarmigan, large flocks of which had appeared by October 1, in more or less advanced winter dress.





Townsend, Charles Wendell. 1906. "Notes on the Birds of Cape Breton Island." *The Auk* 23, 172–179. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4070747>.

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