

## IN AUDUBON'S LABRADOR.

BY CHARLES W. TOWNSEND, M. D.

*Plates III-V.*

EVER since my boyhood when I read Audubon's 'Birds of America,' with its frequent references to the Labrador coast, I have longed to follow the great ornithologist's footsteps in those regions. In 1906, on a visit to eastern Labrador, I had a glimpse of Bradore and Blanc Sablon the termination of Audubon's trip, and in 1909 and 1912, I reached, from the west, the starting point of his trip at Natashquan and looked eagerly into the promised land. After another interval of three years, I was able, in 1915, to carry out my longed for plan and explore the intervening two hundred and fifty miles — *Audubon's Labrador.*

It was on June 6, 1833, that John James Audubon, the great ornithologist, sailed from Eastport, Maine, on his long contemplated trip to Labrador. With him, as assistants in his work of procuring specimens, were five young men, all between eighteen and twenty-one years of age. These were his son, John Woodhouse Audubon, the father of Miss Maria R. Audubon, who has preserved for us in 'Audubon and His Journals,' the valuable records of her grandfather's life; William Ingalls and George C. Shattuck, afterwards physicians of prominence in Boston, both of whom in their ripe old age, I was privileged to know; Thomas Lincoln and Joseph Coolidge.

Under the command of Captain Emery, the top-sail schooner *Ripley* of one hundred and six tons burden, carried this interesting company through the Straits of Canseau, touched at the Magdalen Islands, passed the famous Bird Rock, white as snow from the vast multitude of birds, and, on June 17, reached the coast of the Labrador Peninsula, at the little port of Natashquan or American Harbor, as it was then called. The young men, incited by the enthusiasm of their leader, were all eagerness to explore the new and strange region, a land of bog and rock, of dwarfed vegetation and lingering snowbanks. One of the first fruits of their



efforts was the discovery of a hitherto unknown sparrow, which was named by Audubon, Lincoln's Finch, after Tom Lincoln who brought it down with his fowling-piece.

At Natashquan, Audubon saw the Montagnais Indians, who had just come out of the interior for their annual trading at the Hudson's Bay Company's Post. He also met Captain Bayfield of the *Gulnare*, who was laboriously mapping the coast and whose chart, far from perfect, is the one on which the charts of today are based.

Delayed by repeated storms, it was not until June 28th that the *Ripley*, cleared from Natashquan, touched at the islands near Old Romaine crowded with breeding water-birds, and came to anchor in the wild and desolate harbor of Wapitagun. After a study of the great bird rookeries of this region, the *Ripley* took to sea and, by good chance, stumbled into that wonderful rock-enclosed harbor at Little Mecattina Island, now known as Hare Harbor. The ruggedness of the rocky hills, the arctic character of the vegetation, the presence of snow banks and the frequency of gales and cold rain storms, chilled the southern blood of Audubon, who sighed for the genial climate of his native Louisiana. Yet he persevered in his work of adding to our knowledge of the little known northern birds, often spending eighteen hours a day at the drawing table. Cold and wet, assailed by vicious mosquitoes and flies, sometimes homesick, often seasick, worn out by his long hours of labor, he exclaimed, "I am no longer young!" His worst handicap, however, was the pilot that was taken in by Captain Emery to guide them in this intricate coast. This man was so ignorant of the region that he was unable to sail through the many safe and quiet waterways among the islands, but put to sea between each harbor and subjected the whole company to all the perils and discomforts of the stormy Gulf.

From Little Mecattina, they sailed to Baie de Portage, now known by the more prosaic name of Mutton Bay. From here, Audubon visited in a small boat, a trapper and trader at Mecattina Harbor, Pierre Micheaux by name, as well as Samuel Robertson at Sparr Point.

Setting sail on July 26, he hoped to call at "Chevalier's Settlement" at the mouth of the St. Paul River, but unfavorable winds, stormy seas and the ignorance of the "ass of a pilot" prevented,



and the *Ripley* continued on to Bradore Bay. Here Audubon called on Mr. Jones, an interesting character, the foremost man of the place and visited Perroquet Island, where Puffins, or Perroquets as they are called, bred in countless thousands. He extended his explorations to Blanc Sablon and succeeded in finding the nest of a Horned Lark, long sought in vain. He also secured a pair of Black Gyrfalcons called by him *Labradorius*.<sup>1</sup> He refers to the now extinct Labrador Duck and saw many hundreds of Esquimaux Curlew.

On August 11, Audubon turned homeward by way of Newfoundland. His arduous trip was well worth all its hardships. He brought back seventy-three bird skins, as well as a large collection of plants and other objects of natural history. He observed or mentions some ninety-three different species of birds and recorded much that was hitherto unknown. Lincoln's Sparrow was discovered and described and twenty-three drawings of the birds were completed or nearly completed. He worked hard and had been well rewarded.

With my companion, Mr. Harold St. John, botanist, both of us for the time, members of the staff of the Canadian Geological Survey, I left Montreal on June 24, 1915, on the S. S. *Cascapedia*. My old friend Captain Hearn was in command and he had his usual stock of sea tales and witty sayings. Napoleon P. Comeau, the veteran naturalist of Godbout, an authority on the life history of our salmon and a recognized ornithologist, added to the pleasure and interest of the trip. Late at night, on June 27th, we landed at Esquimaux Point, where we found our pilot, Captain A. Edmond Joncas and his schooner, the *Sea Star*, and also my friend M. Johan Beetz, who had invited me to stay with him at his home in Piashte Bay.

The next morning, leaving Mr. St. John to get settled on the *Sea Star*, I sailed in the little mail schooner with M. Beetz and that afternoon arrived at Piashte Bay, where I had the pleasure of spending five delightful days with him and his charming family. We explored the neighboring land and waters and found an abundant

---

<sup>1</sup> In the original plates the Black Gyrfalcon, called *obsoletus* by Gmelin in 1788, is figured; while in 'The Birds of America,' although the details of the capture of the birds in Labrador are given, the bird is described and figured as the Iceland Gyrfalcon.



bird-life. Of warblers, the Black and White, Tennessee, Yellow, Myrtle, Magnolia, Black-poll, Yellow Palm and Wilson's were all in full song as well as a few Water-Thrushes, Maryland Yellow-throats and Redstarts. Yellow-bellied and Olive-sided Flycatchers were there and White-throated, White-crowned, Lincoln's and Swamp Sparrows and Juncos were common. Eiders with their dusky, downy broods and Great Black-backed Gulls with their speckled young abounded in the bay. On the river were broods of Black Ducks and I found a nest of a Red-breasted Merganser or "*Bec-sie*," with eight eggs under some spruce bushes and Labrador tea.

I had also the great pleasure of examining with M. Beetz his interesting collection of birds and found in it no less than six species new to the list of birds previously recorded from the Labrador Peninsula. These were Kumlein's Gull, European Widgeon, Lesser Scaup, Killdeer, Red-winged Blackbird and Cliff Swallow. M. Beetz also showed me specimens that were intermediate between the Northern and American Eider.<sup>1</sup>

On July 1, Mr. St. John arrived in the *Sea Star* and the next day we reached Natashquan, formerly called American Harbor, the starting point of Audubon's trip on the Labrador coast. This was familiar ground to me and we stayed at the house of the Captain's brother, Richard Joncas, the head of the "Labrador Fur Company." Here, like Audubon, we were detained by unfavorable weather, but the five days were well spent. Like Audubon also, I visited the Montagnais Indians at the mouth of the Great Natashquan River. They had recently come out of the interior for their annual religious festivities and for trading. I also followed the great ornithologist's footsteps up the shores of the Little Natashquan River as far as the falls. It was at Natashquan that Tom Lincoln shot the sparrow that Audubon recognized as new to science and named after this young man. "Three cheers," he writes in his Journal, "were given him when, proud of the prize, I returned to the vessel to draw it." In the plate he has drawn, the pale laurel, the cloudberry or bake apple and the Labrador tea, plants which, he says, were gathered by Tom Lincoln for the purpose.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Auk, 1916, XXXIII, pp. 286-292.



The song of Lincoln's Sparrow was to be heard everywhere. Audubon speaks of "the sweet notes of this bird as they came thrilling on the sense, surpassing in vigour those of any American Finch with which I was acquainted." It is a song of considerable beauty and great range of theme. At times I have recognized the general character of the melody of the Song Sparrow, at times the jingling notes of the Winter Wren, at times the impassioned warble of a Purple Finch. The song has generally a loud ringing character like the music of silver sleigh bells, with the interpolation of fine trills and deep flutelike notes. One bird I especially loved at Piashte Bay often ended his song with *Oh mieux* and occasionally followed it with an almost inaudible trill which sounded as if he were drawing in his breath after the supreme effort. It is an interesting and cheerful song, one which I always listened to with great pleasure.

The elusive Tennessee Warbler was really abundant here and in full song, and on several occasions it so far forgot its shyness as to appear in plain sight. It is a curious fact and possibly points to the recent increase of this bird, that Audubon, who knew it in the south, did not find it here, for he says in his 'Birds of America,' "Of its migrations or place of breeding, I know nothing."

I was glad to find a Piping Plover on the beach. Mr. Bent and I had seen a pair there in 1909 and I found a pair with young in 1912; this is apparently its most northern breeding point on the coast. I saw a Red-tailed Hawk as dark as the one I saw on the Little River of the Bear in 1912. I also saw a bittern that like the specimens in M. Beetz' collection, looked dark. I was unfortunately unable to secure either of these birds, which appear to illustrate the dark tendencies in plumage of Labrador birds.

The Fourth of July was hot for these parts, 62° in the shade at noon, and we found the last year's mountain cranberries or *graines rouges* still on the vines very refreshing. The botanical products of this region are most interesting but can only be lightly touched on here. I have referred to them in my previous Labrador papers. It is evident both from the vegetation and the birds that Natashquan is the boundary on the coast between the Hudsonian and Canadian regions to the west and the Subarctic coastal strip to the east. Another interest of the place was the Catholic Mission



Church, presided over by two Eudist fathers, Père Garnier, and Père Gallix, whose hospitality and interesting converse I greatly enjoyed.

On July 7, the wind was favorable and we set sail in the *Sea Star*. She was but forty feet long and seventeen tons burden, while Audubon's *Ripley* was over a hundred feet long and a hundred and six tons burden. The small size of our boat gave us an advantage, however, and we were most fortunate in our Captain, A. Edmond Joncas, a charming and interesting man and one who had navigated these intricate waters for over forty years and knew them as only one to the manner born could know them — for the charts are all but useless. I had brought with me a copy of Audubon's 'Labrador Journal,' which he read with great interest and not only recognized all the harbors mentioned but knew the descendants of the very people that Audubon met. We were indeed fortunate in our pilot, far more fortunate than Audubon.

From Natashquan to Grand Romaine, a distance of over fifty miles, is the only exposed strip on the coast, unprotected by islands, and we experienced the full sweep and heave of the stormy Gulf. We anchored that night at Grand Romaine, and at once visited the Indian encampment at the Hudson's Bay Post, where we were greeted by an outrush of Indian dogs, while the Indians, on the contrary, disappeared within their tents. By the judicious use of plug tobacco and by the aid of an interpreter, I was able to get some photographs of this interesting and picturesque people. The men wear their black hair cropt straight around their necks, while the women tie theirs up in hard round knots over their ears. Both sexes wear colored handkerchiefs about their necks and brilliantly variegated stockings, and mocassins or skin boots. The headgear of the women is made of red and black broadcloth, shaped like a classical liberty cap, with an embroidered band. Many of the younger men and women are handsome, with clear olive complexions and clean-cut features.

The view over the valley of the Romaine River with its thickly crowded spruce forest to the barrens or tundra, dotted with lakes and lakelets beyond, and the distant range of low mountains, is a characteristic one of this region. Black-poll Warblers were common in the stunted thickets, a brood of Golden-eye Ducks was dis-



porting itself in a pool and a pair of Pigeon Hawks attacked me fiercely in a sheltered valley where the trees were of larger growth.

On the ninth, we managed to reach the harbor of Old Romaine, a few miles down the coast and took refuge from the gathering storm which soon burst on us with great fury and prevented our departure for five days. It was somewhere in this neighborhood that Audubon made a brief exploration of one of the islands and found "two eggers just landed and running over the rocks for eggs." Much to my surprise, I found in one of the little Hudsonian islands of stunted spruce and fir and larch surrounded by arctic bog, a Maryland Yellow-throat in full song. Tree Sparrows were also nesting here and Horned Larks had their first brood on the wing and were singing and mating for the second brood. The Subarctic coastal strip is here of much larger extent than at its beginning at Natashquan.

Great Black-backed Gulls, with their interesting ways and varied conversational notes were our constant companions; their nests and downy young were distributed over the islands. Double-crested Cormorants were continually flying back and forth and a few Caspian Terns were to be seen. Audubon recorded these as Cayenne or Royal Terns. Frazar also found them here in 1884 and Mr. Bent and I saw one at the mouth of the Natashquan River in 1909. The Captain recognized the bird as "*le grand esterlette*," but failed to find for us their breeding place.

On July 14, we were at last able to get off and shaped our course for Audubon's first stopping place at Wapitagan. On our way we passed Audubon Island, so named doubtless, by Captain Bayfield in 1833, and we lay to at the mouth of Coacocho Bay at Outer Island, which was crowded with seabirds. A few great Black-backed Gulls flew about but every inch of the summit of the small rocky island seemed occupied by Double-Crested Cormorants and Murres. Most of the adults of the former species left as we advanced up the rock with cameras levelled and we soon found ourselves among the great nests of this species filled with young calling for food. Murres were everywhere about us and slow to take flight. The bare surface of the rock was covered with their eggs,—we counted one hundred in a space ten feet square,—but nearly all were befouled with the chalky, slimy excrements that covered every-



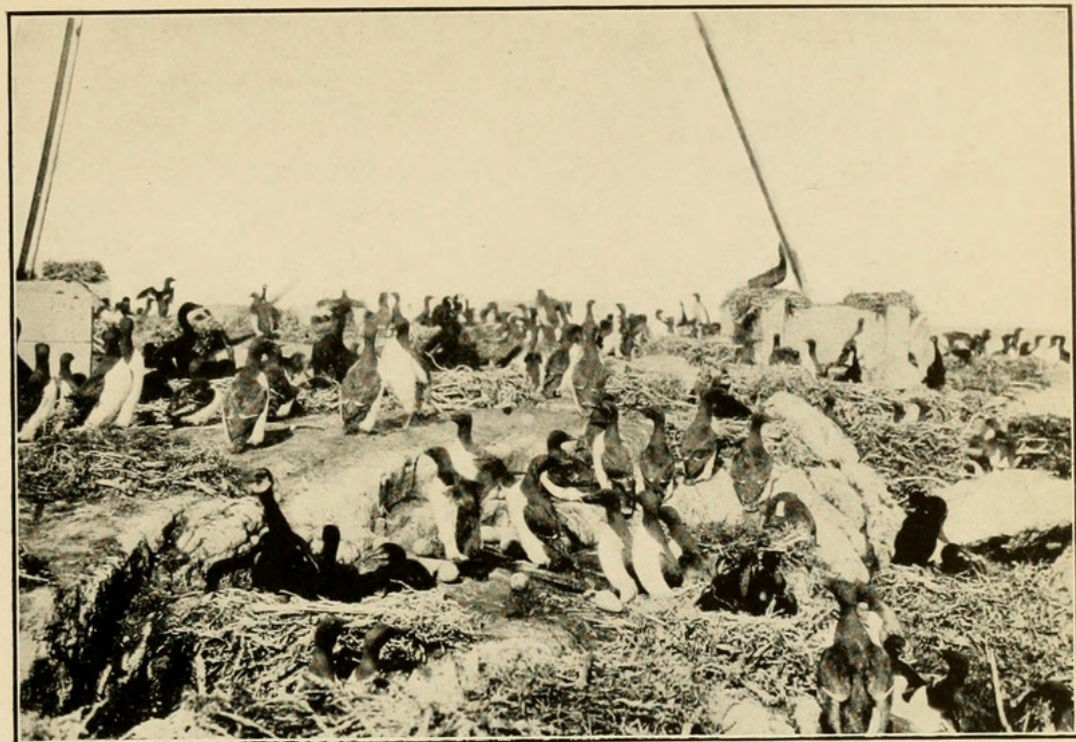
thing. The Cormorant nests, great basket affairs nearly two feet across and from three inches to a foot in height, were made of weed stalks intermingled with dry grass and sea weed, branches of curlew berry vine, spruce or fir. Many of the nests, although much soiled with the droppings of the bird, had some decoration in the form of a feather or two or a fresh green branch. A few of the nests contained eggs but in most of them were three young, sometimes four or only two. When small, the young were entirely destitute of down and were of the color and appearance of a black rubber doll. The larger ones from a foot to two feet long, were covered with a black woolly down suggestive of a toy black lamb. They were indeed weird objects as they thrust out their long snake-like necks and small heads. Their naked throat sacks, of a pale yellow color, tinged with pink, distended and quivered as they constantly called in hoarse, beseeching tones for food.

The Murres, or Marmettes, as they are called on the coast, stood about in crowds and anxiously made way for us, walking or running along erect, with legs apart in a comical manner as they waved their short paddlelike wings to aid them in balancing. In their anxiety and nervousness, they frequently fell over the Cormorant nests and sadly stained their white shirtfronts and often, in their attempts to rise on the wing, they would sprawl head foremost down the rocks, bounding from ledge to ledge. Ringed Murres were not uncommon and I came upon one group of fifteen or twenty together of this form or species, as it perhaps deserves to be called. There were no Brünnich's Murres.

We calculated there were about 1200 adult Double-Crested Cormorants nesting on the island and 2000 Murres. The Murres, although silent on the rock, uttered curious sounds as they flew, and, when they collected in groups on the water, their combined voices produced a long-drawn, moaning wail. At times it was a sharp snarl, at times it resembled the plaintive bleating of a forlorn lamb.

We sailed on and soon found ourselves under the cliffs of Cape Whittle, which rise from deep water to a height of about two hundred feet. The red rocks were painted white in places by cormorant droppings, but only fifteen or twenty nests were to be seen where up to a few years ago they were to be counted by hundreds.





1. DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANTS AND MURRES ON OUTER ISLANDS,  
COACOACHO BAY, CANADIAN LABRADOR.
2. DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANTS AND MURRES ON GULL ISLAND OFF  
CAPE WHITTLE.







Among the birds that flew away, I saw only one Common Cormorant. Fishing schooners for years have been in the habit of sailing close to the cliffs and the men have discharged their guns at the poor birds for the brutal pleasure of seeing them fly off in terror or fall wounded into the sea.

At Gull Island, off the Cape, we found an even larger nesting colony of double crested Cormorants than at Outer Island and Murres were also abundant. That afternoon we sailed into the harbor of Wapitagan, so graphically described by Audubon in his history of the Razor-billed Auk. Wapitagan is an appropriate name for this region, as it is the Montagnais for Cormorant. On shore, which is entirely destitute of human habitation, I found a pair of Red-throated Loons in one of the lakelets,—about fifty yards long,—of the barren. They rose into the air at my approach and deserted their son and heir, who, in a coat of light brown down was vigorously swimming about his native pool. Mr. W. L. McAtee<sup>1</sup> has recently called attention to this ability of the Red-throated Loon to spring into the air from calm water, an accomplishment that is necessitated by this habit of nesting on the edges of small pools. A Loon would not have been able to leave this small pool on the wing unless a strong breeze had been blowing.

I also found a Least Sandpiper that rose in the air like a mechanical toy, sailed in irregular circles twenty to fifty yards above the bog, with wings curved down and back, and emitted at frequent intervals a short trill almost as finely drawn as that of a cricket. The bird was in the air for five minutes by the watch and continued to trill after he had reached the ground. Here he was at once obliterated, for his streaked brown back was next to invisible in the bog. He continued trilling as long as I was within ear-shot and even followed me repeating his simple nuptial song. Horned Larks and Pipits were common and the water ways abounded in Razor-billed Auks and Black Guillemots.

The next day, we reached the little harbor of Seal-Net Point, also known as Point au Maurier. Near here I was so fortunate as to find a breeding colony of Ring-billed Gulls, some five hundred in

---

<sup>1</sup> Auk, 1916, XXXIII, p. 75.



number. Audubon found the birds on the coast in 1833 and Frazar in 1884, but aside from these records, very little was known of this interesting bird in Labrador. The nests thickly scattered among the rocks and vegetation of a small island, were made up of neatly arranged dried grass and weed stalks and moss and feathers. Some of them contained one, two or three eggs, some contained downy young and some were empty.

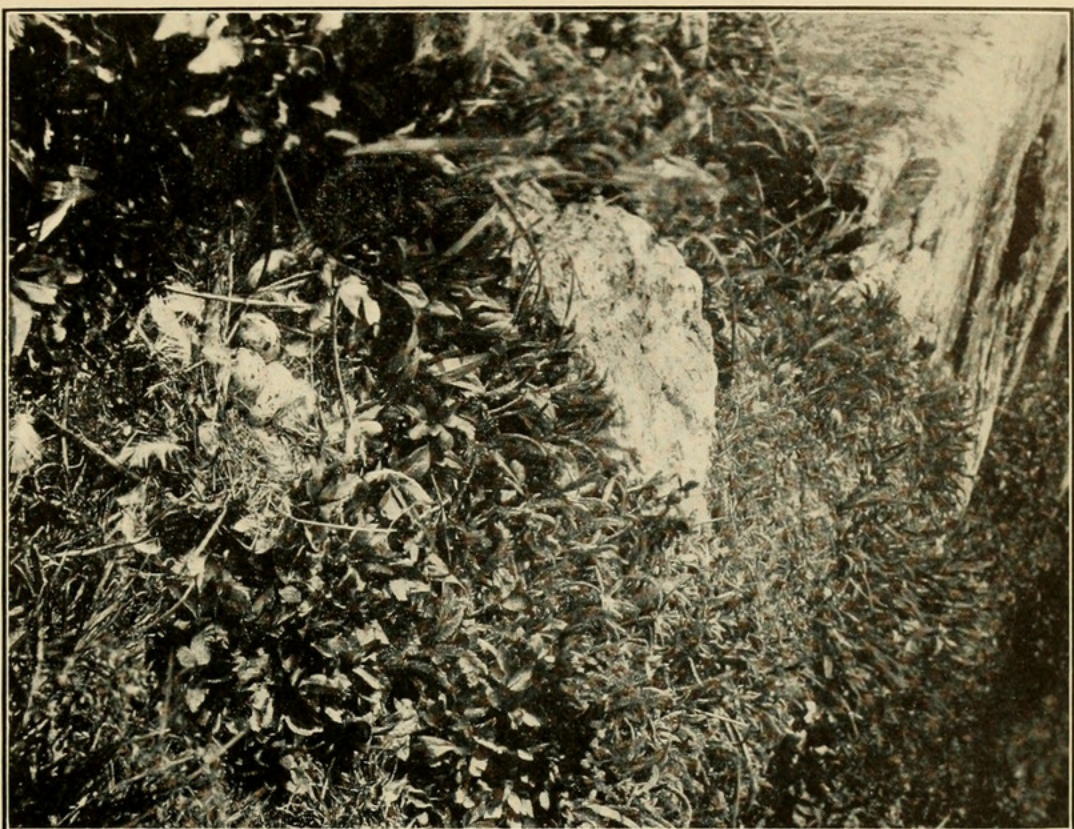
Derby Bay, thickly dotted with islands, proved well worth exploring. There were but few Eiders and Great Black-backed Gulls nesting, but numerous Razor-billed Auks and Black Guillemots. The last named were courting,—swimming about excitedly in small groups and dipping their heads nervously. A couple would circle about each other, their mouths wide open so as to display the bright scarlet lining. Occasionally, the excited birds bobbed or bowed towards each other and dabbed with their bills. Their tails were cocked up and their red feet showed plainly in the water. From time to time they emitted hissing, whistling notes.

On July 18, we reached Harrington, where is situated the westernmost of the chain of hospitals established by Dr. W. T. Grenfell. It was here we recorded the highest temperature on the trip, 68° in the shade and it was reported in the village to have reached the oppressive figure of 72°. The average temperature during the trip was between 50° and 60° Far.

Hare Harbor in Little Mecattina Island was our next port of call. In this "bowl," as in Audubon's day, Ravens were flying about the cliffs which rise sheer from the water. It is a wild and picturesque region. From there before "a stiff southwest breeze" Audubon sailed thirty-three miles to Baie de Portage in five hours. We had half a gale from the same quarter, and were driven across, under nothing but a reefed foresail in three hours.

From Baie de Portage or Mutton Bay, we followed Audubon's footsteps into Big Mecattina Harbor, where the grandson of his French seal catcher still lives and to Sparr Point where I had the pleasure of finding Samuel Robertson the 3rd, surrounded by his Eskimo dogs and read to him on the 20th day of July, 1915, Audubon's account of his visit to his grandfather at the same place on July 22, 1833. There had been very little change here in the general conditions of life during all these years.





1. RING-BILLED GULL'S NEST AND EGGS, SEAL-  
NET POINT.



2. HARE HARBOR, AUDUBON'S "BOWL," LITTLE  
MECATTINA ISLAND.









Townsend, Charles Wendell. 1917. "In Audubon's Labrador." *The Auk* 34, 133–146. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4072478>.

**View This Item Online:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/54047>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.2307/4072478>

**Permalink:** <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/86565>

**Holding Institution**

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

**Sponsored by**

Smithsonian

**Copyright & Reuse**

Copyright Status: Public domain. The BHL considers that this work is no longer under copyright protection.

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.