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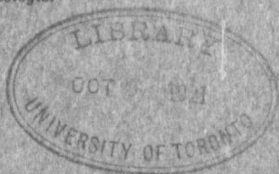
General publication

Bird Conservation
in Labrador

BY

CHARLES WENDELL TOWNSEND, M.D.,

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Reprinted from the Seventh Annual Report of the
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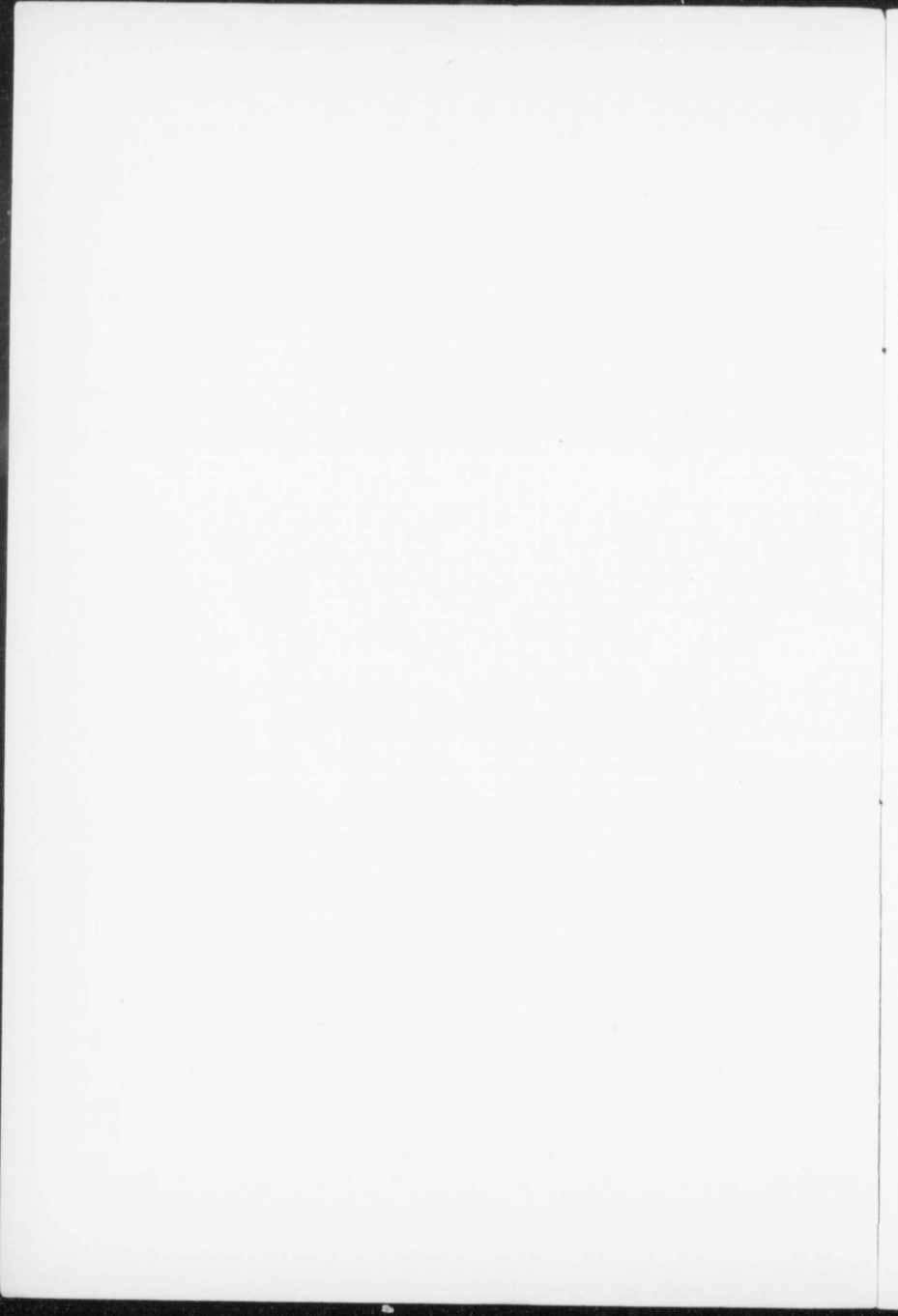
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Bird Conservation in Labrador

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Bird Conservation in Labrador*

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CHARLES WENDELL TOWNSEND, M.D.,

Ornithologist, temporarily on the Staff of the Geological Society.

IN the latter part of the eighteenth century, in the time of Cartwright, water birds swarmed along the coast of the Labrador peninsula. The Eskimos and the Indians, the polar bears and the raptorial birds served but to keep the bird colonies in healthy condition. White man is more systematic in his methods and more thorough, especially when stimulated by the expectation of financial gain, and, if conservation is not practised, he will eventually exterminate the creatures of his quest. This was true in the case of the buffalo and the passenger pigeon and the same fate awaits many other beasts and birds.

In Audubon's day the despoilers of Labrador bird rookeries plied their trade without let or hindrance. Audubon, in his visit to the southern coast in 1833, was filled with horror on observing their cruel methods and their ruthless destruction of his beloved bird life. He writes:

"See yon shallop, shyly sailing along; she sneaks like a thief, wishing, as it were, to shun the light of heaven. Under the lee of every rocky isle some one at the tiller steers her course. * * * There rides the filthy thing! The afternoon is half over. Her crew have thrown their boat overboard, they enter and seat themselves, each with a rusty gun. One of them sculls the skiff towards an island, for a century past the breeding-place of myriads of Guillemots, which are now to be laid under contribution. At the approach of the vile thieves, clouds of birds rise from the rocks and fill the air around, wheeling and screaming over their enemies. Yet thousands remain in an erect posture, each covering its single egg, the hope of both parents. The reports of several muskets loaded with heavy shot are now heard, while several dead and wounded birds fall heavily on the rock, or into the water. Instantly all the sitting birds rise and fly off affrighted to their companions above, and hover in dismay over their assassins, who walk forward exultingly, and with their shouts mingling oaths and execrations. Look at them! See how they crush the chick within its shell, how they trample on every egg in their way with their huge and clumsy boots. Onward they go, and when they leave the isle, not an egg that they can find

*Advance chapter of "In Audubon's Labrador," by Dr. C. W. Townsend. Published by permission of the author.

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is left entire. The dead birds they collect and carry to their boat. * * * The light breeze enables them to reach another harbour a few miles distant, one which, like the last, lies concealed from the ocean by some other rocky isle. Arrived there, they re-act the scene of yesterday, crushing every egg they can find. For a week each night is passed in drunkenness and brawls, until, having reached the last breeding-place on the coast, they return, touch at every isle in succession, shoot as many birds as they need, collect the fresh eggs, and lay in a cargo. At every step each ruffian picks up an egg so beautiful that any man with a feeling heart would pause to consider the motive which could induce him to carry it off. But nothing of this sort occurs to the egger, who gathers and gathers until he has swept the rock bare. The dollars alone chink in his sordid mind, and he assiduously plies the trade which no man would ply who had the talents and industry to procure subsistence by honourable means."

Mr. M. Abbott Fraser*, in 1884, was much impressed with the destruction of bird life by the fishermen. He says: "During the week the men are all busy out in their dories fishing, but their Sundays are their own and are generally spent on the islands gathering eggs and shooting birds, and they stop at nothing, but shoot everything which flies whether eatable or not, and shoot just for the sport they find in destruction; and as they keep it up during the whole season the poor birds have but a slim show." He also saw a few Halifax eggers on the coast.

Mr. D. N. Saint-Cyr visited the Canadian Labrador Coast in 1882 and 1885. He says:† "It is unfortunately too true that certain settlers on the coast, but more especially strangers, from Nova Scotia, from the State of Maine and the island of Newfoundland, pillage the sea-birds' eggs, which they carry off to sell in their own country. These years past as many as thirty schooners have been counted, engaged in obtaining loads of wild birds' eggs in the islands of the Gulf, and, to make matters worse, when these pillagers observe that the eggs are hatching, they break them, in order that the old birds may lay more. Then all these fresh eggs are taken away, and it is thus that thousands upon thousands are destroyed every year."

The visits of the Halifax eggers, for commercial purposes, have long since ceased, but the robbery of eggs and the destruction of nesting birds still continues. The conditions, as I found them in my four trips to the Labrador peninsula, which have included a survey of 1,100 miles of the coast, from the bay of Seven Islands to Nain, are most deplorable, and are rapidly leading to the utter extinction of the water birds. Spring shooting confined to migrating birds, although undesirable, is not so pernicious in its effect as the shooting of birds on their arrival at their breeding grounds. This is practised in the case of all the birds that nest on the coast. At Perroquet island, in Bradore bay, for example, the arrival of the puffins or "perroquets" in the spring is eagerly awaited by the inhabitants,

**Ornithologist and Oologist*, Vol. 12, 1887.

†*Sessional Papers* No. 37, Quebec, 1886.

who make the occasion a great holiday. They encamp for several days on the island and shoot down the poor birds as they fly in a bewildered manner around and around their homes. I was told by one man with great glee that he sometimes shot two hundred birds in a day. He added that the wounded birds were generally lost, as they crawled into their nesting holes. I, myself, in 1909, witnessed, on another island, where puffins bred, this cruel sport. The birds, bewildered and frightened by the shooting, circled about the island and were picked off by the gunner as they flew past. At Perroquet island the boys who have no guns strike down the birds with long poles. The whole village feasts on the puffins and many are wasted or given to the dogs. Throughout the summer the island is visited by fishermen, who not only shoot the birds, but also dig them out of their nesting holes and secure them in nets spread over the holes. In many cases the young are left to perish. The Newfoundland fishermen are undoubtedly the worst offenders in egg and bird destruction, but the people of the coast are not far behind. The former are absolutely ruthless of consequences for the birds, but the people of the coast in some few cases are careful not to disturb the birds after the first eggs have been appropriated. The case of the island near Point au Maurier, where ring-billed gulls breed, is an example. Here for many years the sole family living at this place had been in the habit of looking to the island for a supply of fresh eggs, but they never disturb the birds after they have taken the first set of eggs. The bird colony has in consequence suffered no diminution, and has even increased in numbers.

The shooting of female eider ducks as they leave their nests involves, of course, the loss of the brood. The eggs themselves may be discarded on account of the advanced stage of incubation. The fishermen take the eggs to a pool of water and save only those that sink. The ones that float contain partly or wholly formed young and are thrown away. If the men intend to stay near the breeding place for a few days they destroy all the eggs, so that a fresh lot may be laid for them to appropriate.

Nesting murre are shot or killed with clubs. Most of these birds are eaten, but nesting gulls, terns and cormorants are often shot for the cruel pleasure and practice of the sport, and left where they fall. It is almost inconceivable that men should destroy such exquisite creatures as terns and gulls without even intending to pick them up and look at them, but it is a sad commentary on humanity that such "sport"—God save the mark—is not infrequently indulged in by men of education and supposed refinement. I have known men of this class to hold up their hands in horror at an ornithologist who had shot a small bird for the distinct object of study and of addition to human knowledge. Another cruel sport, that is frequently practised by thoughtless people, is the firing of guns near rookeries for the purpose of seeing the frightened birds jump from their eggs. As a result of these practices the cliffs of cape Whittle are now nearly deserted by birds.

I obtained from reliable sources, often from the offenders themselves, numerous reports of great quantities of murre and eider eggs

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collected for their consumption by the crews of fishing schooners. Many of these vessels are scantily and poorly provisioned and make up for this by inroads on the birds. Up to a few years ago a dozen barrels of murre eggs have been collected by a crew of twenty men from one island. As many of the terrified nesting birds are clubbed and shot as possible. The manner in which bird life is squandered at such times is almost too terrible to be thought of.

Besides the eggs and nesting birds, the young of several species of water birds, particularly of the great black-backed gull, are eagerly sought for the table. Sometimes the young are confined in coops and fattened before killing. The fact that this gull sometimes destroys young eiders and the eggs of nesting birds is often seized upon as an excuse for destroying both old and young of this species, but the majority ask no excuse.

The recent adoption and increasing use of motor boats is putting the finishing touches on the birds. The fishermen are enabled to traverse much greater areas of the coast, to reach distant islands where birds are nesting, and to more readily approach birds on the water. Going to and from the fishing grounds the motor boat enables its owner to take wide detours and gather cargoes of eggs and nesting birds. When sails and oars are used these out-of-the-way spots are fairly safe.

The destruction wrought by the Indians during their summer sojourn on the coast is increasing as other sources of food are diminishing.

If the treatment of the bird population in Canadian Labrador where there are laws and game wardens, is bad, that in Newfoundland Labrador, where there appears to be neither, is still worse. In 1906 I found a bad state of affairs* and a rapidly diminishing water bird population. Mr. A. C. Bent, who visited this coast in the summer of 1912, says:† "I have heard that the sea birds on the Labrador coast were disappearing, but was not prepared to find them so scarce as they proved to be. They seem to have decreased very decidedly during the past few years, and, unless something can be done to protect them, many species will soon have disappeared entirely. Their nests are robbed persistently all during the summer by the resident white people, by the Eskimos, and by the large number of Newfoundland fishermen that visit the coast in the summer. The birds are also shot freely for food at all seasons of the year."

The whole outlook is indeed a gloomy one. It was thoroughly understood by Audubon in 1833. He says: "Nature herself seems perishing. Labrador must slowly be depeopled, not only of aboriginal man, but of all else having life, owing to man's cupidity. When no more fish, no more game, no more birds exist on her hills, along her coasts, and in her rivers, then she will be abandoned and deserted like a worn-out field."

It is an old custom, and the wastefulness and terrible cruelty of it all does not appear to penetrate to these men's consciences. The

*See "Along the Labrador Coast."

†*Bird Lore*, 1913, Vol. XV, p. 11.

people who live along the coast and the fishermen who come from a distance have always been in the habit of taking eggs and killing the birds for food. They regard it as their right, and although some of them will admit that the wasteful methods used are fast destroying the birds, they are not willing to refrain from these methods. They say with reason that if they do not take these eggs or young gulls, or shoot these setting ducks, someone else will. It is each man for himself and the devil take the hindermost. Annihilation is the fate of the birds; the eider and the murre will go the way of the Labrador duck and the great auk. Birds that nest in crevices in the rocks, like black guillemots and razor-billed auks, will last longer, but the end is in sight for all.

It is a truism that laws out of sympathy with the feeling of the people will not be kept. Laws against egging or shooting out of season can not be enforced on the long and intricate coast of Labrador. Wardens who intend to do their duty and arrest and prosecute offenders will be looked upon as enemies to be avoided and cheated, and this by an otherwise law-abiding people.

There is one very simple means which would help in enforcing the present laws in Canadian Labrador. Newfoundland fishermen, who are the most reckless offenders, are obliged to obtain licenses to fish in Canadian waters. The law requires that they not only obey the game laws, but that they also take out at some expense licenses to carry guns and shoot. If the presence of an unlicensed gun on a fishing schooner or the detection in egging be made a sufficient reason for cancelling the fishing license, one of the great sources of bird destruction will be diminished but not by any means stopped. It is easy to conceal guns and elude wardens on this long and intricate coast.

The open season for shooting should be intelligently planned for different parts of the coast, and should be strictly limited to the periods when the birds are migrating. It is of course illogical to have the same open season at Blanc Sablon as at Nain, where the birds nest several weeks later.

These suggestions, if adopted, may be of some value, and may delay for a little the rapid progress towards annihilation of water-bird life in Labrador. That these or any similar measures will prevent this dreaded consummation I do not believe.

What then is to be done? Is there no hope for the birds and for the people to whom the birds are such a valuable asset? I think there is. I believe that the whole problem can be solved most rationally and satisfactorily for all concerned by the immediate establishment of *bird reservations*. These should be islands or groups of islands or suitable portions of the main coast that can be watched by guardians. Here the birds should be undisturbed and allowed to rest, feed and breed in peace. The people should be made to understand that these reservations are not established to cut down their hunting, and thereby invite poaching and violation of the laws, but for the purpose of preserving and increasing the birds so that there shall be better shooting for everybody on the coast.

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A campaign of education is necessary, therefore, and I believe that the bird reservation will do more good in making the people understand, not only the need of bird conservation, but its advantages. The game wardens will be looked upon, not as enemies to be avoided and cheated, but as friends who are working for the people's good. If the matter is well managed, the people will regard their reservation with pride, and public opinion will keep the birds there inviolate. The wasted regions near fishing villages now devoid of all sea-bird life on the one hand and the crowded bird reservations on the other will be powerful object lessons in this process of education. I would suggest the placing of a brief notice on each reservation, printed in English, as well as in French, Montagnais or Eskimo, where these languages are used, worded somewhat as follows:

BIRD RESERVATION

The purpose of this reservation is to preserve the birds from destruction and to increase their numbers, so that there will be better shooting on the coast. The people are asked not to disturb the birds or their eggs on this reservation and to avoid the use of guns in its neighbourhood.

There are a number of places that could be named, some of which have responsible men living near, who could be made guardians. For example, on the Canadian Labrador coast I would suggest a small island at the mouth of the bay of Seven Islands, the Perroquet Islands off Long point, Mingan, where the lighthouse keeper could be put in charge; Sea Cow island and the small islands in its neighbourhood near Eskimo point; an island at Betchewan; one at Piashti bay; one or two at Natashkuan; a strip of the sandy shore near the lighthouse at Natashkuan point; Triple islands, off Romaine; Outer and Gull islands and the cliffs of cape Whittle; Gull island at point au Maurier, where the interesting colony of ring-billed gulls breed; St. Mary's island, with its lighthouse; one of the Harrington group of islands; Treble Hill island and Flat island off Great Mekattina; some of the islands of Kecarpoui, near Shekaticka and Old Fort, and lastly, and very important, the famous Perroquet island, in Bradore bay. On the Newfoundland Labrador similar scattered reservations should be made.

These scattered reservations are, it seems to me, more important and more easily kept sacred than large ones, such as the 64 miles of coast between Cape Whittle and Mekattina, suggested by Col. William Wood in his admirable address in 1911 on "Animal Sanctuaries in Labrador."

Some of these islands are now nearly depopulated of birds, but the birds can be trusted to find out where they are safe. On the coast of the United States, where reservations have been established, sometimes close to great cities, the birds, that are elsewhere very shy and wary, are here tame and confiding. I would also suggest that the guardian of the reservation be instructed in the eider down

industry,* and that a beginning of this industry be made in the reservation, both to eke out the small stipend of the guardian, and as an object lesson to the people.

If the reservation movement is well managed, so that the people are in sympathy with it, it will be a success, and one may look forward to many benefits as a result. First and fundamental, the birds will be saved from extinction. This fact may not appeal to the people, but the improvement in the shooting during the migrations will be welcomed as a great boon. The introduction of the eider-down industry, which, I believe, will follow the reservation movement, should add a large yearly income to the people of the coast. Another desirable result of the reservations will be to make the coast more attractive to tourists in general and to ornithologists in particular, and this class will help the people in several ways. They will necessarily spend money along the coast, will introduce better transportation facilities and new and better ideas of living. To ornithologists everywhere it will be an enormous relief to know that the great destruction of bird life, so vividly portrayed by Audubon, is at last stayed, and the wonderful bird nurseries of the Labrador coast are again assuming their rightful function.

*See paper "A Plea for the Conservation of the Eider," by Dr. C. W. Townsend "The Auk," Vol. XXXI, 1914, pp. 14-21.