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AVES FROM FUNAFUTI.

By A. J. NORTH,

Ornithologist to the Australian Museum.

[III.]

AVES.

BY ALFRED J. NORTH, C.M.Z.S.,

Ornithologist to the Australian Museum.

THE Ornithological Collection made by Mr. Hedley consists of six specimens, referable to four well known Australasian species, and one egg. Mr. Hedley has supplied an interesting note on the "Lakea" (*Micranous leucocapillus*). Although found on most islets near the line, *Totanus incanus* and *Sterna melanauchen* have not, I believe, been previously recorded from the Ellice Islands.

1. TOTANUS INCANUS.

Grey-rumped Sandpiper.

Scolopax incana, Gmel. Syst. Nat., Vol. i. p. 651 (1788).

Totanus incanus, Vieill. Nouv. Diet., tom. vi. p. 400 (1816).

Totanus griseopygius, Gould, Proc. Zool. Soc. 1848, p. 39; *id.*
Bds. Austr. Vol. vi. pl. 38 (1848).

Actitis incana, Finch, Ibis, 1880, pp. 432, 434 (Gilbert Islands).

One adult female in winter plumage. Wing 6.9 in. This specimen was obtained on the margin of a mangrove-lined swamp on Funafuti. *T. incanus* in winter dress is not uncommon on the shores of Botany Bay, New South Wales, during the months of October and November.

2. DEMIEGRETTA SACRA.

Reef Heron.

Ardea sacra, Gmel. Syst. Nat., Vol. ii. p. 640 (1788); Finch,
Ibis, 1880, pp. 432, 433 (Gilbert Islands).

Herodias jugularis, G. R. Gray, List Spec. Bds. Brit. Mus., p. 80
(1844); Gould, Bds. Austr. Vol. vi. pl. 60 (1848).

Herodias greyi, G. R. Gray, List Spec. Bds. Brit. Mus., p. 80
(1844); Gould, Bds. Austr. Vol. vi. pl. 61 (1848).

One adult specimen obtained on the reefs near the village. Throat whitish, remainder of the plumage dark slate-colour. Fairly common on the reefs and beaches, specimens being seen in all stages of plumage, white, dark slate colour, and parti-coloured birds. Dr. Finsch, who met with this species in the Gilberts, writes as follows in his interesting "Letters from the Pacific"*:—

"*Ardea sacra* was more plentiful than in the Marshalls, and on some places not at all shy, coming close to the huts of the natives and perching on the neighbouring trees. That white and slate-coloured specimens belong to one and the same species is a well known fact, which I confirmed formerly by the investigation of full materials received from the Pacific, and which I can now verify from my own experience. In Butari-tari I saw uniformly white birds going always in pairs; I also saw pairs, undoubtedly male and female, of which the one was white the other slate-coloured, or both of the latter colour or mixed with white. There seems to be no regularity of sex or age, for even birds in the dirty pale slate garb, which I always took for the first plumage, proved to be old.

When on Tarowa, 12th December, a gentleman of the vessel went out shooting, and brought home six specimens; there were two males slate-coloured, one female white, spotted with slate, one female uniformly white. All the females, even one which I thought to be a young bird, had very small ovaries, but a large patch destitute of feathers (a so-called breeding patch) covering the whole belly. The gentleman told me that he had met a whole colony of this Heron in some shrubs, and that he felt sure they would have nests there. We intended to visit the spot again, but were disappointed, for the vessel was not going in pursuit of eggs and birds but natives, and to make a harvest the brig had to leave, so we could not remain behind."

This species has been found breeding on the small islets lying off the north-east coast of Australia, also on the islands of Bass Strait. The nests are built of small sticks and are placed in low trees, or are constructed of coarse grasses and hidden under the shelter of an overhanging ledge of rock. The eggs are of a pale greenish-white, and vary in shape from a true ellipse to swollen oval, an average specimen measures 1.95 x 1.4 in. Nests found by Mr. Macgillivray on the islands off the north-east coast of Australia and Torres Strait contained two eggs for a sitting, those found by Mr. J. A. Boyd in Fiji had three eggs, while nests found by Dr. Holden on the islands adjacent to the north-west coast of Tasmania contained from two to four eggs for a sitting. Three, however, is the usual number laid in the latter locality.

* Ibis, 1880, p. 432.

3. STERNA MELANAUCHEN.

Black-naped Tern.

Sterna melanauchen, Temm. Pl. Col., Vol. iv. pl. 427 (1827); Gould, Bds. Austr., Vol. vii. pl. 28 (1848, Torres Strait); Finsch, Ibis, 1880, pp. 431, 433 (Gilbert Islands); North, Nests and Eggs Austr. Bds. p. 356 (1889), egg; Saunders, Cat. Bds. Brit. Mus., Vol. xxv. p. 126 (1896).

“Agiagi,” Natives of Funafuti.

One adult female, shot while feeding on the beach not far from the village. Wing 8·5 in. Not common.

4. MICRANOUS LEUCOCAPILLUS.

White-capped Tern.

Anous leucocapillus, Gould, Proc. Zool. Soc. 1845, p. 103 (Raine Islet, North Australia); *id.* Bds. Austr., Vol. vii. pl. 36 (1848); Sharpe, Proc. Zool. Soc. 1878, p. 273 (Ellice Islands).

Anous melanogenys, Gray, Gen. Bds., Vol. iii. p. 661, pl. 182 (1846); Crowfoot, Ibis, 1885, p. 246 (Norfolk Island, breeding); North, Nests and Eggs Austr. Bds., p. 376, pl. xxi. fig. 5 (1889), Norfolk and Phillip Islands.

Micranous leucocapillus, Saunders, Cat. Bds. Brit. Mus., Vol. xxv. p. 146 (1896).

“Lakea,” Natives of Funafuti.

Two adult males in full breeding plumage, and a nestling. Wings of adult measures 9 inches. One egg of a faint creamy-white ground colour, minutely dotted and blotched with dull purplish-brown particularly on the larger end, some of the markings appearing as if beneath the surface of the shell; length 1·82 x 1·26 in.

Mr. Hedley has contributed the following note relative to this species:—

“The ‘Lakea’ breeds freely on the smaller islets of the atoll, which being destitute of fresh water are not habitable by natives. On the main islet it is too harrassed to nest. In the tall Pouka trees (*Hernandia peltata*, Meissn.) it swarms in such numbers that half-a-dozen birds may be knocked over at a shot. Uttering their hoarse cry the remainder of the flock wheel round and settle in a few moments on the adjacent trees. On June 30th I landed on one of the leewards islets with a native, and found the ‘Lakea’ nesting in great numbers in the branches of the Fala (*Pandanus odoratissimus*); each tree was so crowded with nests that a fork was rarely unoccupied, and where a limb was sufficiently broad and horizontal that too was utilised for a site, one bough might thus carry a dozen nests. Their structure was of the most flimsy description, and defied my efforts to preserve a

whole specimen for the Museum, consisting as they did of scraps of Fala leaves plastered together with excrement, and scantily lined with a few tufts of coarse fibre. I sent the native to procure the eggs, but in most cases the young birds were commencing to fly, and my friend Tanai ascended several trees in vain before he was rewarded with a couple of eggs, one of which proved addled, and the other was safely brought to Sydney. With a few well directed stones Tanai knocked over some fledglings. Plucking but not drawing these, he spitted them on a split cocconut midrib, and toasted them over a wood fire. They were very fat and tender, and on these and the pithy interior of a sprouting cocconut we made an excellent breakfast.

Netting these birds is a sport much enjoyed by the natives. The 'shaou shaou,' made like a butterfly net, has a bag about 3 ft. by 2 ft. of four-inch meshes of fine sinnet twine, spread on a wooden hoop and mounted on a ten foot pole. After dark the party of hunters walk out quietly to the scene of operations. One, divesting himself of his dress for greater freedom of movement, ascends a low tree and gaining a suitable station, imitates by a purring sound of his lips the call of the Lakea. A bird flies up answering the call, and at a sweep the decoyed tern is struggling in the net. The trapper does not kill the bird, but twisting its wings across its back ties the longer quills together or latches one wing into the other, and flings the struggling bird to his mates. If another kind of bird comes in sight the call is changed, and with a whizzing sound it too is deluded to within reach of the fatal net. These calls are very difficult to voice, few even of the natives do it well, and a European can hardly hope to succeed. When the man aloft is tired another of the party relieves him. Perhaps in one night a hundred birds would fall to a net, providing a great feast on returning to the village. Another method requiring less skill is to take the birds by a smaller net set at an angle to the long handle. Creeping quietly up to the tree the fowler, standing on the ground, sweeps or rather 'spoons' the roosting birds off the bough."

The following is a list of the birds obtained in the Ellice Islands by Mr. Fritz Jansen in 1876, and which formed the basis of a short paper by Dr. R. B. Sharpe, to whom they were submitted by the Rev. S. J. Whitmee for determination* :—

1. *Ardea sacra*.
2. *Procelsterna cœrulea*.
3. *Anous stolidus*.
4. *Micranous leucocapillus*.
5. *Sterna ancœsteta*.

* On a Small Collection of Birds from the Ellice Islands. By R. Bowdler Sharpe, F.L.S., F.Z.S., &c. With a note on the other birds found there. By the Rev. S. J. Whitmee.—Proc. Zool. Soc., 1878, p. 271.

In a note contributed by Mr. Whitmee he writes as follows :—

“In addition to the birds included in the foregoing list, he (Mr. Jansen) saw a *Carpophaga* in the Ellice Islands; and the Frigate-bird (*Fregata aquila*) also occurs there. In fact the latter bird is domesticated by the natives; and when I was in those islands in 1870, I saw scores of them about the villages sitting on long perches erected for them near the beach. The natives procure the young birds and tie them by the leg and feed them till they are tame. Afterwards they let them loose, and they go out to sea to get their food, and return to their perches in the villages at intervals. I cannot say to what species the *Carpophaga* is referable, not having seen it myself. Mr. Jansen procured young ones in May and June; but he thinking that they were the same as the Pigeon found in Samoa (*C. pacifica*), did not preserve any specimens. Natives of the Ellice Islands who were in Samoa when I left there told me their Pigeon is like the Samoan species, “except that it is smaller owing to its food being less plentiful.”

Mr. Hedley informs me that he did not see any tame Frigate-birds on Funafuti, but on Nukulailai on August 2nd, 1896, he saw one unattached on a tall perch in front of the teacher's house. There is no doubt, however, that *Fregata aquila* still inhabits Funafuti or some of the neighbouring atolls, for the “titi's” brought back by Mr. Hedley and worn by the natives of both sexes on festive occasions, were ornamented with the feathers of this species.

The use these birds were put to as message carriers between the scattered atolls of the Ellice Group, is thus described by the Rev. Dr. George Turner, of the London Missionary Society* :—

“When I visited the group in 1876, I found that the Samoan native pastors on four of the islands were in the habit of corresponding by means of carrier Frigate-birds. While I was in the pastor's house on Funafuti on a Sunday afternoon, a bird arrived with a note from another pastor on Nukufetau, sixty miles distant. It was a foolscap 8vo leaf dated on the Friday, done up inside a light piece of reed, plugged with a bit of cloth, and attached to the wing of the bird. In former times the natives sent pearl-shell fish-hooks by Frigate-birds from island to island. I observed they had them as pets on perches at a number of islands in this “Ellice Group,” fed them on fish, and when there was a favourable wind the creatures had an instinctive curiosity to go and visit another island, where on looking down they saw a perch, and hence our Samoan pastors, when they were located there, found an ocean postal service all ready to their hand !”

* Turner—Samoa a hundred years ago and long before. 1884, p. 282.

Mr. C. M. Woodford, who visited the Gilbert Group in 1884, records in the "Geographical Journal"* seeing several of these birds captured on one of the islands, and which he was informed were used for similar purposes. He writes as follows:—

"These natives catch and partially tame the Frigate-bird, and employ it to convey messages from island to island. I was informed of this fact by the natives, but was loth to believe it. At Apamama I saw, however, three of the birds kept upon T-shaped wooden perches opposite to the king's house. A long line was tied to their tails. When wild birds were seen, some fish were thrown upon the ground, and the captive birds made to take wing. By this means the strangers were induced to settle, and while engaged in feeding on the fish, a line at the end of a rod about six feet long, having at the end a stone about the size and shape of a fowl's egg, was thrown over them, whereby their wings became entangled and they were caught. I saw the tame birds and the apparatus for catching the wild ones; but although some were seen, they could not be induced to settle, so that I missed seeing the most interesting part of the performance."

In June, 1896, the Hon. C. R. Swayne, late H.B.M.'s Resident at the Gilbert and Ellice Groups writes me as follows:—"I could never find that the Frigate-bird was used to convey messages between islands. The old men always laughed at the idea."

Although the Pigeon inhabiting the Ellice Islands has been often observed, I can find no record of adult specimens having been obtained, but there is little doubt that the birds seen by Mr. Jansen on Funafuti in 1876, and on Niu in 1895, were correctly identified by them as *Globicera pacifica*.

To Dr. Sharpe's and the Rev. S. J. Whitmee's list of the Ellice Island birds may now be added *Urodynamis taitensis*, observed by Mr. Swayne on Niu,† and *Totanus incanus* and *Sterna melanauchen*, collected by Mr. Hedley.

The number of species at present known to frequent the islands of the Ellice Group will be considerably augmented when the collection formed by Mr. Gardiner, one of the members of the same expedition, is worked out.

*The Gilbert Islands—Geogr. Journ. (1895), vi., 4, p. 347.

†Note on a Cuckoo taking possession of a Tern's nest, by A. J. North—Proc. Zool. Soc. (*in lit.*)