

Ornithology of "The Cruise of the Bonton"

By William B. Robertson, Jr.

The Bonton's cruise having been undertaken for the specific purpose of collecting plumes and bird specimens, it is not surprising that observations of birds comprise the most interesting and significant biological data in the narrative. Although the narrator uses some common names that are no longer current, the specific identity of most of the birds he mentions is plain. Only the few referred to by such general terms as "duck", "gull", and "heron" are not identifiable. The narrative's general agreement with ornithological information from other contemporary sources provides ample evidence that Pierce was a keen and accurate observer. It is likely, however, that some of the more detailed comments, such as those concerning the Reddish Egret, draw heavily upon the opinions of Chevelier.

In all, 42 species of birds can be recognized from "The Cruise of the Bonton". The list below pairs the present technical and vernacular names¹ of these species with the names used in the narrative. Records of special interest are briefly annotated. Figures in parenthesis are the total number of each species killed during the trip.

WHITE PELICAN (*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos*)

"white pelican".

The observation—near Pavilion Key, Monroe Co., about 14 June 1885—provides one of the earliest definite records of the summering of this species in southern Florida. As is now well known, small numbers of non-breeding individuals regularly summer along the Gulf Coast.

BROWN PELICAN (*Pelecanus occidentalis*)

"Pelican" (284).

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax auritus*)

"cormorant" (193).

ANHINGA (*Anhinga anhinga*)

"water turkey" (1).

The fact that this species was encountered but once agrees entirely with its present occurrence. Except when forced into such habitat by severe drought, Anhingas are seldom found at the coast or on offshore keys.

MAGNIFICENT FRIGATE-BIRD (*Fregata magnificens*)

“Man-of-war bird” (12).

It must be presumed that the author is mistaken in his belief that a nest of the Frigate-bird was found on a key in northeastern Florida Bay. Although Audubon stated that the species nested on the Florida Keys² and various later writers³ have made similar assertions, no generally satisfactory evidence has been presented. Large summer roosts are still to be found at many of the places where the Bonton party shot Frigate-birds.

GREAT WHITE HERON (*Ardea occidentalis*)

“Great White Heron” (4).

The apparent scarcity of Great White Herons is somewhat surprising, because the Bonton traveled most of the present Florida range and the party collected at a number of keys that today are important nesting sites. Presumably the population had been greatly reduced by hunting prior to 1885.

GREAT BLUE HERON (*Ardea herodias*)

“blue heron” and “great blue heron” (3).

GREEN HERON (*Butorides virescens*)

“green heron” (10).

LITTLE BLUE HERON (*Florida caerulea*)

“little blue heron”, “small blue heron”, and “peckit bird” (the white immatures) (24).

REDDISH EGRET (*Dichromanassa rufescens*)

“Redish egret” (43).

Other writers have reported that this species was formerly much more abundant in Florida, and that the breeding range (now limited to Florida Bay) then extended well northward along the Gulf Coast. These points are fully corroborated by the present account. Whether it was original with Pierce, or (as seems more likely) the opinion of Chevelier, the recognition of the two color phases of the Reddish Egret shows perception beyond that of many ornithologists of the day. At that time, some still held to Audubon's belief that the white individuals were immatures. Others, such as Maynard,⁴ were as firmly convinced that they represented a distinct species, the so-

called "Peale's Egret". The mode of color inheritance in the Reddish Egret remains poorly known. The statement here that the young are invariably of the same color as the parent birds, however, disagrees with Florida observations cited by Scott,⁵ and by Baird, Brewer, and Ridgway.⁶ It is to be regretted that the Bonton narrative includes no record of the number killed of each color phase.

COMMON EGRET (*Casmerodius albus*)

"white heron" (57).

SNOWY EGRET (*Leucophoyx thula*)

"egret" (47).

This and the preceding species were, of course, the plume birds most sought after.

LOUISIANA HERON (*Hydranassa tricolor*)

"Louisiana heron" (96).

YELLOW-CROWNED NIGHT HERON (*Nyctanassa violacea*)

"yellow-crowned night heron" (18).

Judging from the localities visited, it is probable that most the birds referred to merely as "night herons" (60) also were this species. No clear reference to the Black-crowned Night Heron appears.

WOOD IBIS (*Mycteria americana*)

"wood Ibis", "Gannet", and "gannett" (7).

WHITE IBIS (*Eudocimus albus*)

"white curlew", "grey curlew" (the immature birds), and "curlew" (15).

SCARLET IBIS (*Eudocimus ruber*)

"Scarlet Ibis".

This species has only a slender claim to a place in the list of birds that have occurred naturally in Florida. The history of several specimens alleged to have been collected in the state in early years is somewhat obscure.⁷ The present observation is evidence about as substantial as other sightings mentioned by Scott⁸ and Sprunt,⁹ but some reason exists to suspect that these reports may relate to the Glossy Ibis, a species then little known in Florida. The numerous undoubted records of Scarlet Ibis in southern Florida since about 1954 all refer to introduced birds or escaped captives.

ROSEATE SPOONBILL (*Ajaia ajaja*)

"Pink Curlew" (1).

The scarcity of Spoonbills evident from the Bonton narrative agrees with Scott's report¹⁰ that plume hunters virtually extirpated this species on the Florida Gulf Coast soon after 1880.

AMERICAN FLAMINGO (*Phoenicopterus ruber*)

"Flamingo".

This interesting record—Upper Cross Bank, Florida Bay, 3 May 1885—is consistent with other observations summarized by Allen.¹¹ As he points out, until shortly after 1900 Flamingos, probably from nesting colonies in northwestern Andros, Bahamas, performed a regular migration into Florida Bay in summer to molt. The species was often alleged to breed in Florida, but no satisfactory proof of this is known.

MOTTLED DUCK (*Anas fulvigula*)

"Florida mallard" (1).

BALD EAGLE (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

"eagle"

An eyrie active in recent years is located near the point of this observation. It seems remarkable that the Bonton narrative records no other sightings of Bald Eagles and none of Ospreys.

TURKEY (*Meleagris gallopavo*)

"turkey" (3).

CLAPPER RAIL (*Rallus longirostris*)

"Clapper rail" (5).

PURPLE GALLINULE (*Porphyryula martinica*)

"Purple Galunel" (1).

This interesting record—Twin Keys, Florida Bay, about 5 May 1885—doubtless relates to a spring migrant.

AMERICAN COOT (*Fulica americana*)

"coot" (4).

AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER (*Haematopus palliatus*)

"oystercatcher" (1).

COMMON SNIPE (*Capella gallinago*)

"jack snipe" (1).

DOWITCHER (*Limnodromus* species)

"long bill brown snipe" (24).

Probably dowitchers.

LAUGHING GULL (*Larus atricilla*)

"black head gull" (1).

ROSEATE TERN (*Sterna dougallii*)

"Paradise Tern" (1).

Pierce's description leaves little doubt that the bird was this species. It apparently was uncommon along the Gulf Coast then, as now.

LEAST TERN (*Sterna albifrons*)

"Sea Swallow" and "Least Tern" (326).

ROYAL TERN (*Thalasseus maximus*)

"Royal tern" (7).

BLACK TERN (*Chlidonias niger*)

"black sea swallow" (2).

BLACK SKIMMER (*Rynchops nigra*)

"shearwater" (3).

WHITE-CROWNED PIGEON (*Columba leucocephala*)

"Key West Pigeon" (13).

CAROLINA PARAKEET (*Conuropsis carolinensis*)

"Paroquet".

Cypress Creek, Broward (?) County, 31 March 1885. The major decline of this species in southeastern Florida seems to have occurred in the 1890's. This observation agrees with others¹² suggesting that Parakeets were locally common in the 80's, but few acceptable reports are known from this section of the state after 1900.

MANGROVE CUCKOO (*Coccyzus minor*)

"mangrove Cookoo" (3).

PILEATED WOODPECKER (*Dryocopus pileatus*)

"Cock-of-the-woods or pilated woodpecker" (1).

RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER (*Centurus carolinus*)

“red-bellied woodpecker”.

This is an interesting observation, because the species is not now known to nest on the outer keys in Florida Bay.

GRAY KINGBIRD (*Tyrannus dominicensis*)

“great gray flycatcher” (8).

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD (*Agelaius phoeniceus*)

“red wing blackbird” (3).

COMMON GRACKLE (*Quiscalus quiscula*)

“purple grackel” and “white eyed blackbird” (7).

In addition to the above, the party also shot 103 “herons” (or “birds”, with heron being clear from the context), 3 “gulls”, and 1 “duck”, the total recorded kill for the cruise, plus the two side trips made by Pierce and the Bradleys beforehand, amounting to at least 1397 individuals of at least 36 bird species.

DISCUSSION

The published results of the work of C. J. Maynard, W. E. D. Scott, and J. W. Atkins have provided a relatively complete record of the bird life of the Florida Keys and Gulf Coast in the 1870's and 80's. The Bonton narrative, limited as it is to the larger and more conspicuous birds, adds little to the overall ornithological record. In some cases, however, the additional data are welcome corroborative evidence. They also allow inferences concerning the status particularly of wading bird populations at many localities not specifically mentioned in previous literature.

Similarly, although the Bonton narrative is valuable historically as one of the few first-hand accounts of plume-hunting, it adds only minor detail to the picture presented in Scott's classic paper, “The Present Condition of Some of the Bird Rookeries of the Gulf Coast of Florida.”¹³

Rather unexpectedly, the chief ornithological value of the narrative is found in what it reveals of the expedition's leader, Mr. Chevelier. The Bonton account prompted me to search out other scattered data which in sum suggest that Chevelier was a scientific collector of considerable importance.

Heretofore, he has been known to south Florida history at large as an eccentric naturalist, often referred to merely as "the old Frenchman", who lived during the late 80's and 90's at Possum Key in the mangrove wilderness southeast of Chokoloskee. He is believed to have died there about 1895. Chevelier Bay at the head of Chatham River takes its name from him. To latter-day Florida ornithology, Chevelier has been unknown. The most detailed account of the development of the science in Florida¹⁴ does not mention him. His name appears in Howell's definitive *Florida Bird Life* but once (p. 319, as "A Lechevallier"), as the collector of a specimen listed.

The present narrative is somewhat ambiguous regarding Chevelier as a scientific collector. Pierce states that he was a collector as well as a plume hunter, but the Bonton party's concentration upon the birds of greatest demand in the feather trade makes it clear that plume hunting was the major activity of this trip. Pierce remarks that some birds, White Ibis and "long bill brown snipe", were of no value to them except as food. By way of seemingly contrary evidence, Chevelier's more careful method of preparing skins suggests that the birds collected may have been usable as scientific specimens. In addition, it's difficult to believe that such species as the Common Grackle and Clapper Rail can have had much value for their feathers. Neither of these points, however, is conclusive. Scott¹⁵ described a "flat skin" preparation technique of plume hunters similar to that used by Chevelier. The Bonton narrative is silent on a critical point, whether the head and feet were left attached to the skins. The great variety of birds taken apparently was typical of some segments of the feather trade as is mentioned in material cited by Covington.¹⁶ A description of the plume-hunting operations of J. H. Batty as Scott observed them at Big Gasparilla Pass in May, 1886, is particularly revealing on this point.

In the morning I went on the beach with Mr. Batty, and we shot Knots, Black-bellied Sandpipers, Sanderlings, and Turnstones over decoys, all these species being used by Mr. Batty in his feather business. At the same time two of Mr. Batty's men were killing Wilson's Plovers, Least Terns, Boat-tailed Blackbirds, Gray Kingbirds, and any other small species that came in their way. The Least Terns are particularly in demand in the hat business, and Mr. Batty paid for such small birds as I have enumerated ten or fifteen cents each in the flesh. All Owls, and particularly the Barred Owl, are desirable. The feathers of these, as well as of Hawks, are bleached by

processes that Mr. Batty described to me, and used for hats and other decoration. One of Mr. Batty's employees told me that they had left a party at the pass below, where they were killing the same kind of birds, and that Mr. Batty was constantly purchasing and trading with native and other gunners for plumes and round and flat skins of all the desirable birds of the region. Not less than sixty men were working on the Gulf Coast for Mr. Batty in this way.¹⁷

From the Bonton account alone it could not be concluded with any certainty that Chevelier was a scientific collector. Pierce's narrative did suggest this possibility strongly enough to spur a re-examination of what was known of the man from other sources.

Several residents of Everglades and Chokoloskee to whom Dr. Tebeau talked in connection with his study of the history of the southwest coast had been acquainted with Chevelier. Although plume-hunting still flourished in the region at that time, they remembered him only as a naturalist and collector. One, who as a boy had lived for some time at Possum Key, recalled that Chevelier kept three guns for shooting birds of different sizes, and that he had a field camp on Gopher Key where he did much of his collecting. It seems certain, as well, that Chevelier was "the Frenchman" for whom Bill House worked as a guide and assistant collecting eggs of Swallow-tailed Kites.¹⁸

A check of the contemporary ornithological literature soon revealed that Chevelier had been known on the Gulf Coast as both plume hunter and collector, and that he had a longer history in southern Florida than had been suspected. The following from Scott is the earliest definite reference to him so far found.

When I previously visited this point* A. Lechevallier had located on the mainland about three-quarters of a mile away; here he had built a house and was killing birds on the island for the feather market. He or his assistants had been there a little over a year, and I am told by persons living near, whom I have every reason to believe, that it took these men *five* breeding seasons to break up, by killing and frightening the birds away, this once incomparable

* Maximo Rookery, located on an island off Pinellas Point in the south end of Boca Ciega Bay. Scott's previous visit occurred in the late winter or early spring of 1880.¹⁹

breeding resort. Of course there were other plume hunters who aided in the slaughter, but the old Frenchman and his assistants are mainly responsible for the wanton destruction. He regarded this as his particular preserve, and went so far as to order outsiders, who came to kill Herons and other birds, off the ground. The rookery being destroyed, he had now given up his residence here.²⁰

This passage identifies Chevelier as perhaps the first large-scale plume hunter to operate on the Gulf Coast. If Scott's information was correct, Chevelier must have left the Tampa Bay area only a few months before the Bonton account places him in Miami. Besides other references to Chevelier at Maximo, Scott's 1887 paper also mentions hearsay accounts of a plume-hunting expedition led by Chevelier to Estero Bay and Charlotte Harbor in 1885 that can only have been the cruise of the Bonton.

Scott's references to Chevelier in the 1887 paper suggest that the two were not personally acquainted. Scott evidently did not know then that the blackest figure in his gallery of plume-hunting rogues was also an ornithological collector. Contact with this side of Chevelier's activities seems to date from Scott's acquaintance with J. W. Atkins, whom he met for the first time at Punta Rassa on May 19, 1886.²¹

Atkins was a telegrapher by profession and a self-taught ornithologist. He came to Punta Rassa probably in 1883²² and was stationed at Key West for many years after 1887.²³ Before he met Scott, Atkins had made a small collection of local birds at Punta Rassa. Apparently as a result of their meeting, he became a much more active collector, particularly during his early years at Key West. Atkins published little, but Scott, in a series of papers published in *The Auk* in the years 1887-1890, refers continually to specimens and notes sent to him by Atkins. Taken together these data represent a major contribution to knowledge of southern Florida birds. Of particular importance is the fact that Atkins was a *resident* ornithologist. Scott, as so many of the writers on Florida natural history before and since, was a winter visitor from the North.

In the publications mentioned above, Scott specifically refers to seven bird skins as having been collected by "A. Lechevallier." Scott's notes make it plain that information about all of these came to him through Atkins. The seven specimens are listed below in order of published mention. Locality and date of collection are included where known.

Short-tailed Hawk, near Cape Romano, 15 December 1886.²⁴

” , Chatham Bay, 12 November 1888.²⁵

” , Miami, 11 October 1883.²⁵

” , Chatham Bay, 2 February 1889.²⁵

Swallow-tailed Kite, near Miami, (no date).²⁶

White-tailed Kite, below Cape Romano, (no date).²⁷

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Miami, (no date).²⁸

The second, third, fourth, and sixth specimens above are stated to be in Scott's collection bearing his catalog numbers 3216, 3215, 3225, and 3218. The close spacing of the catalog numbers suggests that all were included in the lot of bird skins that Atkins "kindly secured for me from A. Lechevallier".²⁹ The first specimen above is noted as having been sent for identification by Atkins to Scott and by Scott to J. A. Allen.²⁴ Presumably it was part of Atkins' collection, as was the above Swallow-tailed Kite. Of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Scott notes²⁸ "Mr. Atkins writes me that he has examined a single bird of this kind, taken at Miami by A. Lechevallier." It appears that this specimen may have remained in Chevelier's possession.

The birds known to have been collected by Chevelier all are records of considerable interest. The Short-tailed Hawks were among the earliest Florida specimens to come to scientific attention, and were of critical importance to Scott in his study of the color phases of that species. Scott's later references to Chevelier are noticeably more restrained than those to "the old Frenchman" who destroyed Maximo Rookery.

Nothing is known of Atkins' association with Chevelier beyond what may be gleaned from Scott's comments on the specimens. The acquaintance, however, apparently persisted for at least several years. It seems probable that they would have met during the Bonton's visits to Punta Rassa, if not acquainted before that time.

Several things combine to suggest that Chevelier was a much more active ornithological collector than is evident from the scanty published record. The box of birds received by Scott through Atkins²⁹ apparently included specimens other than those cited. It is likely that additional specimens collected by Chevelier will be found in the museums that acquired the collections

of Scott and Atkins. Chevelier may also have been in contact with other collectors. Perhaps the most likely possibility is J. H. Batty, another who combined plume hunting and scientific collecting on the Florida Gulf Coast in the 1880's³⁰. Specimens mentioned at various places in the ornithological literature of Florida couple locality names such as Chatham Bay, Chatham Bend, Chatham River, Turner's River, Maximo Point, Marco Island, Cape Romano, and Ten Thousand Islands with dates from 1880 to 1895. From what is known of the itineraries of other collectors of the day, it is probable that a number of these specimens trace back to Chevelier.

Any other of his specimens that are accompanied by collection data will add to historical knowledge of Chevelier's career in southern Florida. Such specimens, if in U. S. museums, are less likely to be of ornithological interest. One tends to presume, at least, that Howell or other compilers found and examined them, and that the data they bear have entered the published record of south Florida birds.

Ornithological curiosity is more attracted by specimens that Chevelier may have shipped to Europe. He is known to have collected birds in southern Florida over a span of nearly 12 years. Even if most of the presently doubtful specimens known to the literature of Florida birds prove actually to be Chevelier's, their number is still too few to indicate more than casual attention to scientific collecting. Bird skins in the collections of two U.S. museums, however, prove that Chevelier did indeed send scientific specimens to Europe.

While checking Florida birds at the American Museum of Natural History in 1958 and at the United States National Museum in 1961, I found the following:

— (AMNH No. 501469) Common Crow—"Chatham Bay, Florida, 12 February 1888. Collected by A. Lechevallier."

— (USNM Nos. 146854 and 146855) Swallow-tailed Kite—Both "Florida", no date. Collector's name given on the tags as "Chevalier" and "Le Chevalier."

I am indebted to Wesley A. Lanyon and John W. Aldrich for information about the acquisition of these specimens.

The crow was from the collection assembled by Lord Rothschild at Tring, England, and purchased by the American Museum in 1931³¹. The two kites were among specimens donated to the U. S. National Museum by

M. Adolphe Boucard³². Both Dr. Lanyon and Dr. Aldrich stated that the acquisitions in question may well include other birds collected by Chevelier.

A thorough check of the above collections should give an idea of the number of bird specimens from Florida that Chevelier sent to Europe. It seems probable that the material was distributed among the more active European collections of the time. It may since have become still more widely dispersed, as is suggested by the following from a notice of the death of Boucard:

“To the Museum d’Histoire Naturelle at Paris he is stated to have given the greater part of his large series of books and birds, while he distributed the duplicates to the U. S. National Museum and the Royal Museums of Madrid and Lisbon.”³³

From present information it appears possible that the “The Cruise of the Bonton” may lead by devious channels to knowledge of an important and previously overlooked early collection of birds from southern Florida.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 American Ornithologists’ Union, *Check-list of North American Birds*, Fifth Edition. 1957.
- 2 J. J. Audubon, *Ornithological Biography*, Vol. 3, p. 496. 1835.
- 3 E.g., C. J. Maynard, *Birds of Eastern North America*, p. 472. 1881; H. H. Bailey, *The Birds of Florida*, p. 19. 1925.
- 4 Maynard, *op. cit.*, p. 410.
- 5 W. E. D. Scott, “Supplementary Notes from the Gulf Coast of Florida, etc.,” *The Auk*, Vol. 5 (April, 1888), p. 184.
- 6 S. F. Baird, T. M. Brewer, and R. Ridgway, *The Water Birds of North America*, Vol. 1, p. 37. 1884.
- 7 A. H. Howell, *Florida Bird Life*, p. 119. 1932.
- 8 W. E. D. Scott, “A Summary of Observations on the Birds of the Gulf Coast of Florida,” *The Auk*, Vol. 6 (January, 1889), p. 15.
- 9 A. Sprunt, Jr., *Florida Bird Life*, p. 47. 1954.
- 10 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1889), p. 14.
- 11 R. P. Allen, *The Flamingos: Their Life History and Survival*, Research Report No. 5, National Audubon Society, pp. 39-45. 1956.
- 12 Summarized by Howell, *op. cit.*, p. 284. 1932.
- 13 W. E. D. Scott, *The Auk*, Vol. 4 (April, July, and October, 1887), pp. 135-144, 213-222, 273-284.

- 14 "History of Florida Ornithology," pp. 6-37, in Howell, *op. cit.* 1932.
- 15 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.*, (1887), p. 141.
- 16 J. W. Covington, *The Story of Southwestern Florida*, Vol. 1, p. 179. 1957.
- 17 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1887), pp. 276-277.
- 18 Ivan D. Sutton, "Nesting of the Swallow-tailed Kite", *Everglades Natural History*, Vol. 3 (June, 1955), p. 74.
- 19 W. E. D. Scott, "On Birds Observed in Sumpter, Levy, and Hillsboro Counties, Florida," *Bull. Nuttall Ornithological Club*, Vol. 6 (January, 1881), pp. 14-21.
- 20 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1887), p. 282.
- 21 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1887), p. 221.
- 22 See, "Notes and News," *The Auk*, Vol. 5 (January, 1888), p. 128. The letter in question is not signed, but internal evidence suggests that it was written by Atkins.
- 23 The date of Atkins' move to Key West is somewhat uncertain. The latest date on which he is known to have been in Punta Rassa is 1 September 1887. For a brief biography of Atkins see, T. S. Palmer, "John Wyley Atkins," *The Auk*, Vol. 50 (January, 1933), p. 153-154.
- 24 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1888), p. 185.
- 25 W. E. D. Scott, "On the Specific Identity of *Buteo brachyurus* and *Buteo fuliginosus*, with Additional Records of Their Occurrence in Florida," *The Auk*, Vol. 6 (July, 1889A), p. 244.
- 26 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1889), p. 246.
- 27 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1889), p. 247.
- 28 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1889), p. 318.
- 29 W. E. D. Scott, *op. cit.* (1889A), p. 243.
- 30 For a brief biography of Batty, see J. A. Allen, "Mr. J. H. Batty," *The Auk*, Vol. 23 (July, 1906), pp. 356-357.
- 31 W. E. Lanyon, *in litt.*, 26 October 1962.
- 32 J. W. Aldrich, *in litt.*, 2 November 1962. Because nothing is known of Chevelier before about 1879, it is of interest to note Dr. Aldrich's mention that the donor's file of the U. S. National Museum includes note of four bird specimens (from Labrador!) donated by a "Lechevallier" in 1869.
- 33 *The Ibis*, Vol. 5 (8th Series, 1906), p. 300.