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THE BIRDS OF ISLA COIBA,
PANAMÁ

(WITH FOUR PLATES)

By
ALEXANDER WETMORE
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(PUBLICATION 4295)

CITY OF WASHINGTON
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INTRODUCTION

Isla Coiba, largest island on the Pacific coast of Central America, lies well at sea to the west of the lower end of the Azuero Peninsula, at lat. $7^{\circ}20'$ to $7^{\circ}40'$ N. and long. $81^{\circ}36'$ to $81^{\circ}54'$ W. The island trends northwestward and southeastward, with a length of $21\frac{1}{2}$ miles and a greatest width of 13 miles. It is well watered, with numerous small streams running down from the rough, broken interior, where two separated high points near the center rise to about 1,400 feet above the sea. A lower hill, about 1,150 feet high, stands in the center of the northern end, while the southern end is mainly lower ground. The island bulges to the westward, while on the eastern side there is the large indentation of Bahía Damas, and the smaller one of Ensenada Arenosa. A broad valley, now mainly cleared to form cultivated fields and pastures, lies back of the large bay mentioned. It is drained by the parallel streams of the Río San Juan and Río Catival, which are actually a single river system, separated in their lower ends only by swampy land.

The entire island is covered with heavy virgin forest, except along the lower courses of the larger streams where there are swampy woodlands, succeeded to seaward by stands of mangroves. In the San Juan area these are of considerable extent. Rocky headlands project along the coast, with sand beaches, some of considerable extent, between them, broken by mangroves at the river mouths. The land rises back of the shore rather steeply to elevations of 80 to 250 feet, and then slopes back to the interior ridges, which in many places are steep-sided and much broken.

Near the projecting point on the western side of Boca Grande, at the extreme southern end of Bahía Damas I noted many fragments of coarse-grained sandstone, wave-worn into flattened, lenticular form, piled up on the beach. Elsewhere the numerous exposures along the eastern shore of Coiba and on Isla Ranchería are an altered

igneous rock, in places associated with beds of white chert. These three types of rock presumably belong to the pre-Tertiary basement complex of Panamá. At Punta Damas small, roughly circular, iron manganese concretions (perdigones) are extraordinarily abundant on partly eroded surfaces, particularly over the small landing field for airplanes, where, at a casual glance, the appearance of the ground in places was that of a goat corral. There is a small thermal spring, with water the temperature of a very hot bath, at the base of the hill above the swampy woodland on the southern side of the Río San Juan.

Isla Coiba, because of its size and location, was well known in the early days of the Spanish settlement in Panamá. The first white man to visit it was Bartolomé Hurtado, a lieutenant of Gaspar de Espinosa, who came to the island in 1516 during an exploration of the coast to the west of the Azuero Peninsula. Hurtado, and those who followed, found on Coiba Indian inhabitants of powerful physique, speaking a Guaymí dialect. They were armed with heavy spears, set at the tip with shark's teeth, and wore corselets made of cotton thick enough to turn a bullet, but of no avail against Hurtado's cannon. Some gold was obtained from them, which probably aided in their undoing. They were exterminated early, the final remnant being taken as laborers to Darién, probably about 1550. In historic accounts the name of the island is called variously Cabo, Cobaya, Quibo, and Coiba, apparently all variations of the name of the Indian chief in control at the time of the Spanish discovery.

Spanish settlement in Panamá during the latter part of the sixteenth century spread to the west beyond Natá, through the great Province of Veragua, which in that day extended to what is now Costa Rica. The Carmelite friar Vásquez de Espinosa, writing of the Pacific side of Veraguas, apparently from information gathered between 1612 and 1620, speaks of sawmills and shipyards employing 4,000 workmen. He mentions Remedios with about 80 houses, Montijo, and Chiriquí which had 80 Spanish residents. Since transport of products from these western outposts would have been by boat, Coiba must have been seen and visited regularly, but I have found no record of early settlement there. The operations of buccaneers along these coasts in early years may have been a deterrent to permanent residence on islands so remote.

Capt. William Dampier in his travels writes that he came to Coiba on June 15, 1685. He refers to it as the "isle of Quibo or Cobaya" and remarks on the forests, the deer, the monkeys, the iguanas, and the snakes. Among details concerned with fresh-water supply, naviga-

tion, and dangers, of interest to mariners, he mentions that the "isle of Quicarra is pretty large" which is an early reference to Isla Jicarón. He makes no reference to human habitation on Coiba, but this must have come soon after, if not already in existence, through the pearl fishery which later was pursued through the annual period of good weather. From June to November, the season of the "vendevales," strong winds blowing from unfavorable quarters were too frequent to make pearl diving profitable or safe.

Capt. George Shelvocke of the British Navy, in his account of his voyage around the world, came to Coiba on January 13, 1720, anchored off the northeast point, and found two or three deserted huts that he supposed were used by pearl fishermen, as there were heaps of pearl shell around them. During his stay two large piraguas landed on adjacent Isla Ranchería (which he calls Quivetta), and he learned from prisoners that he took of another Spanish ship laden with provisions that had passed during the night. Shelvocke came again to Coiba about the first of May 1721, and then gives a considerable description of it, in which he mentions "the great variety of birds, which the woods would not permit us to follow," and the abundance of black monkeys and iguanas.

George Anson, on another British expedition around the World, stopped at Coiba on December 3, 1741. As the expedition included several vessels, and was therefore in strong position, they anchored in Bahía Damas, off the present location of the Colonia Penal, as indicated on the map that Anson made of the eastern side of the island. Anson mentions parrots and parakeets, and especially great flights of macaws. Like his predecessors, he writes of monkeys and deer, which, however, could not be hunted because of dense forest. He discredited reports from prisoners he had taken of "tigres," since he saw no tracks or other sign of them. These same prisoners described in detail a highly dangerous poisonous snake of which they were much in fear. Pearl oysters were reported in greater abundance here than anywhere else in Panamá. Anson was impressed by the great number of turtles, and includes an account of the pearl fishery, and of the divers who obtain the shells. Only a few unoccupied huts were found.

Coconut plantations were established in due time, but there seems never to have been any extensive settlement on Coiba. At the opening of the present century, the pearl fishery was in operation, with a store, cantina, and other buildings located, in part at least, near Punta Observatorio in the southern section of the bay, the site of the present convict camp at María. Other fishing went on also, but all this

activity lessened with the depletion of the shell beds. Private holdings finally were acquired by the Government of Panamá, and the island was set aside as the penal colony of the country. A plaque on the main guardhouse and cellblock at the headquarters records that this was done by President Porras in November 1919. The location of the headquarters, known as the Central, is below the base of Punta Damas in the northern rim of Bahía Damas. The seven outlying work camps are spread along the eastern side of the island from Aguja at the north end, opposite Isla Ranchería, to Playa Blanca at the southern end, a short distance west of Boca Grande. Only two, Catival and San Juan, located on the rivers of the same name, are inland. Extensive clearings for pasture and the planting of food crops have been made adjacent to these camps, the largest of these, embracing many hundred acres, extending from Punta Damas south to the Río San Juan, and inland over the broad valley of that section. The cleared areas in general rise from the beaches back to the crest of the slopes of low hills, so that most of their area is visible from the sea, except for the interior of the San Juan Valley. Behind these there has been some logging for timber, but the great interior forests have not been touched.

Trails, mainly near the shore, for travel on foot or by horse, connect the outlying camps with the Central, and pass back through the broad San Juan Valley. There is also one across to the opposite side of the island from María and Playa Blanca, traversing the lower elevation at the southern end of the island. During World War II radar detectors were installed on a 1,400-foot hill back of the San Juan Valley, with a camp located near Playa Hermosa. The tower was still visible at the time of my visit but the camp had been long abandoned.

The impressive vegetative cover of Coiba is not appreciated until it is penetrated. I found an extensive stand of red mangroves at the mouths of the Catival and San Juan Rivers, and lesser tracts elsewhere. Behind these, at the rivers mentioned, there was swampy woodland, one of the common interesting trees being the alcornoque (*Dimorphandra megistosperma*) whose huge flattened, beanlike seeds measure up to 180 mm. in length. Near Playa Blanca I noted considerable numbers of manchineel growing in low, open groves along the beach. Plantings of coconut palms are extensive.

Inland from the clearings the forest is unbroken, the great trees rising to such heights that loads for my shotgun, suitable for the largest birds, failed to reach hawks and pigeons in the higher branches. Only on the upper Río Jaque in eastern Darién have I seen

similar stands of trees. Below the high crown were the tops of lower trees, a stratum of branches and then undergrowth, usually fairly open and easy of penetration. Through this there are scattered thickets of bamboo that are too dense for passage except by cutting trail with a machete.

On days of sunshine the masses of leaves and vines stood out clearly in silhouette in the high summits of the trees, with small birds moving actively through them. Below, the forest floor was dark and shadowed, so dimly lighted in many places that clear vision was difficult. On occasional cloudy days many areas in the heavy forest were too obscure for successful hunting.

Isla Ranchería, distant 2 miles from the northern end of Coiba, about $1\frac{3}{4}$ miles long by a mile wide, of irregular shape, rises to an elevation of nearly 500 feet. I visited this on one occasion, landing on a sandy beach midway of the southern side. A wooded swamp lay behind, and above this were fairly steep, well-forested slopes, but with trees of lesser height than those on Coiba. Many seemed stunted by the thin soil overlying the mass of altered igneous rock that is the core of the island. Ranchería long has been private property, and at one time considerable activity is reported in pearl and other fisheries. Of the store, the houses, and the clearings in which they stood there is now no evident trace, except for coconut palms and a lemon tree back of the beach, and a scattered growth of succulent bryophyllum, grown commonly as a decorative plant in gardens.

This island is known universally in Panamá as Isla Coibita, a name that is applied on current charts and maps to an outlier in the groups of islets known as the Aaron Rocks, a mile to the northwest of the western point of Ranchería. Shelvocke, in 1720, called the island Quivetta, and Anson, in 1741, varied this to Quiveta, both these names being diminutives of Quibo, the name these travelers applied to the large island. Dampier, in 1685, used the name Ranchería, which is the one cited for records in the following report since the island is so called on current charts and maps.