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NOTES ON AUTUMN BIRD MIGRANTS IN PANAMA

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ABSTRACT

Observations on 57 species of North American migratory birds in Panama during autumn of 1961 and 1962 are presented. Emphasized are records of shorebirds and an account of Turkey Vulture and hawk migratory flights. Includes author's records of results of a large scale mistnetting program (up to 50 nets worked continuously) at Almirante, near the Costa Rican border, operated by the Gorgas Memorial Laboratory.

For many seasons in northwest Florida I have seen autumn migratory birds arrive on the Gulf coast, build up in numbers, then disappear. Assiduous studies of arrival and departure dates along the northern coast of the Gulf of Mexico have told us a vast amount about these migrants as they leave the country. But relatively little is known about migratory pathways, dates, and behavior once these birds have departed. It is true that various papers on birds of tropical American countries mention these birds where they occur and add importantly to our knowledge of them. But we are very far from understanding migration through these tropical areas as we understand it in the continental United States: we lack the accumulation of continuous series of observations such as we have grown used to in the States. We need, in other words, much more work of the kind McCandless (1961) has started in Puerto Rico. This paper is intended as a step in that direction for Panama.

It was my good fortune to spend autumn of 1961 and 1962 in Panama, at which time I made the following observations on North American migrants. (For purposes of this paper, "autumn" comprises the period from about 1 August to 30 November, the period when migratory activity is most obvious). During the first season, other duties kept me from making more than casual observations, and my notes are thus quite limited. But in the fall of 1962 I began a program of shorebird trapping and observation, which took me rather regularly to the Pacific coast; my notes began to grow. The hawk and vulture migrations also claimed my attention to a greater extent that second season. Finally, the Gorgas Memorial Laboratory began a program, under Dr. Pedro Galindo, of mistnetting for certain migrants at Almirante, Bocas del Toro Province. As many

as 50 nets were worked on a dawn to dusk basis. I spent two weekends in Almirante, through the courtesy of the Gorgas Laboratory and the Chiriqui Land Company (United Fruit Company), at which time I banded a number of North American migrants taken in the nets. My observations at Almirante form a large part of these records.

Generally, the place names used without further identification refer to localities in the Canal Zone or Panama City. Other localities are identified by mention of the province in which they occur. Occasionally, as with vulture migrations seen over the entire Panama City-Balboa-Curundu-Fort Clayton area, I simply refer to this entire region as the "Pacific terminus".

FIELD NOTES

ANATIDAE

Anas discors (Blue-winged Teal). Seen on mud flats near Panama Vieja 23 September and 13 October 1962. They were seen fairly commonly in suitable habitats in the Canal Zone-Panama City area after this date. A banded specimen was taken by a native hunter near El Rincon, Herrera, Province, in mid-October 1962; the band, No. 595-10053, was given to Mr. Marvin Keenan, who in turn gave it to me. Data on this band has not yet been received.

CATHARTIDAE

Cathartes aura (Turkey Vulture). I witnessed striking migratory flights of this species in October and November of both 1961 and 1962. I first noted them as rather scattered individuals in a large flight of hawks passing over the Fort Clayton-Curundu area in early October 1961. Thereafter that year until 25 October, I saw them infrequently and usually with hawks. No more obvious migrants were

seen until 17 November, when a veritable "river" of Turkey Vultures appeared over the Pacific terminus. Thousands upon thousands of these birds moved rapidly west to east, following the lay of the land toward Colombia, along what seemed pathways through the sky. Two large streams emerged from the far western horizon; these merged in the vicinity of Ancon Hill, where the birds swirled in dense flocks, riding thermal currents upward. As new birds entered these swirls from below, others left from higher up to stream out in a line toward the east. The flight lasted something over an hour. I can only estimate the number of vultures seen as many, many thousands. No more obviously migrating vultures were seen after this date in 1961.

During autumn of 1962 I saw migrating flocks much more frequently, but these were usually of smaller numbers and never so vast as the flight of 17 November 1961. The first flight was noticed on October, a few birds among a flock of migrating hawks over Curundu; a few more with hawks were noted the following day. I saw no more migrants until 20 October, when I observed a very large flight at midday over Almirante, Bocas del Toro Province, near the Costa Rican border.

On 25 October, I noted "hundreds" of vultures with a few hawks over Ancon Hill. On 30 October, there were thousands passing in a steady stream over Fort Clayton at midday. Other small flights were seen on 2, 3, 7, and 9 November, over the Pacific terminus. On the morning of 12 November, returning from Almirante, I observed many low-flying flocks of Turkey Vultures scattered over the area as my plane came into Tocumen Airport. From the plane window I could see many birds on the ground in fields. Rain was imminent as I left the airport, with dark clouds over the mountains toward which migratory birds would have to fly. Small flocks were milling everywhere over the sky from the airport to Panama City and the Zone. Many trees along the road were filled with perching vultures. The following morning at about 8 o'clock, I observed vultures rising from the jungles about Fort Clayton, swirling in thermals, then moving out in small groups.

A few more small, scattered flocks were noted on 14 and 17 November, but thereafter no more obviously migrating birds were seen.

ACCIPITRIDAE

Buteo swainsoni (Swainson's Hawk). I

observed migratory hawk flights several times in autumn 1961-62. In most cases, I was unable to make positive identifications, beyond the fact that they were buteos. The ones I did see clearly were all Broad-winged Hawks. However, Dr. Nathan Gale captured an exhausted Swainson's Hawk near Curundu in early October 1961, during the period of maximum hawk migration here. Mr. Eugene Eisenmann and I saw two near Chepo, Panama Province, on 23 November 1962.

Buteo platypterus (Broad-winged Hawk). As explained above, I was rarely able to make identifications of the hawks seen in migration. However, those seen closely were all of this species, and I feel confident that the majority of buteos I saw were Broad-winged Hawks.

I saw my first hawk flight in early October, 1961. Thousands of hawks, accompanied by a few Turkey Vultures, were streaming west to east (toward Colombia) over Albrook Field. These birds were moving rapidly, though they rarely flapped their wings. As with the vultures, they seemed to be following some narrow pathway in the sky. This flight lasted perhaps an hour. Subsequent smaller flights were noted from time to time until about 25 October 1961.

In 1962, the first flight I saw was of three separate flocks of Broad-winged Hawks on 30 September, about 50 in each group, some 5 miles up the Changuinola River from Empalme, Bocas del Toro Province. On 8 October, I spotted a large flight of hawks over Curundu, though not so numerous as in the largest flocks of 1961; the following day I saw perhaps 50 birds circling in a thermal over Panama City in the company of a few vultures. Then on 19 October at Almirante, Bocas del Toro Province, I saw hawks by the thousands passing overhead at mid-afternoon. None were seen the following day, though there was a large vulture flight. On 21 October, another small flock passed over Almirante. I saw no more obviously migrating flocks, though from time to time in October and early November there were a few hawks circling with vultures over the Pacific terminus.

Circus cyaneus (Marsh Hawk). Seen on 20 October 1961 near Penome, Cocle Province, and on 21 October 1961 5 miles south of Divisa, Herrera Province. Others were observed in this general area later that fall and winter, but I do not have the dates.

PANDIONIDAE

Pandion haliaetus (Osprey). I have never observed migratory flocks of ospreys in Panama. My earliest "autumn" record is 8 August 1962, a single bird over the waterfront at Panama City. However, ospreys frequently pass the summer in Panama. I have noted ospreys on the Panama City waterfront, Gatun Lake, the Colon region, and Almirante region after this date and into the winter months, but never more than one or two at the time and then infrequently.

CHARADRIIDAE

Squatarola squatarola (Black-bellied Plover.) One individual in basic (prenuptial) plumage seen on the Amador Causeway on 14 August 1962. Other plovers of about this size were noted at later dates at Panama Vieja, but their identity was not established. Black-bellied Plovers were numerous there on 23 November 1962.

Pluvialis dominica (Golden Plover). Ten of these birds were counted among a large number of shorebirds at Panama Vieja on 12 August 1962. They were considerably more numerous there 19 August. A few were present on 26 August; they were "numerous" on 23 September and "some present" there on 13 October and 23 November.

Charadrius wilsonia (Wilson's Plover.) These birds were quite common in the large shorebird flocks of 12 August at Panama Vieja. I counted 20 in the immediate area where my mist nets were set up. However, I did not see them after this date.

SCOLOPACIDAE

Numenius phaeopus (Whimbrel) This is an abundant shorebird near Panama City and Balboa through much of autumn. They were especially plentiful on the grassy field at Albrook Air Force Base and the playing field near the Balboa train station in September 1961. The first whimbrel I noted in 1962 was on this field near the railroad station on 8 August. Thereafter, with a few exception, they were generally seen in numbers at Panama Vieja and occasionally on the Amador Causeway through November.

Totanus flavipes (Lesser Yellowlegs). One was mist-netted and another seen in a ditch running into the Panama Canal behind Corozal on 24 November.

Totanus melanoleucus (Greater Yellowlegs) I saw 2 individuals on the beach near Panama Vieja on 23 September 1962, and

another there on 23 November 1962. One was mist-netted in a ditch behind Corozal on 24 November 1962.

Tringa solitaria (Solitary Sandpiper). Mr. George Hunt reported seeing one bird near the Tropical Survival School, Albrook Field, 29 August 1962. I observed a single bird in a mud puddle within the town of Rio Hato, Coclé Province, 16 September 1962, and captured one in a mist net in a ditch behind Corozal, 24 November 1962.

Actitis macularia (Spotted Sandpiper). This was the earliest autumn migrant that I noted, though it is possible that a few may summer in Panama. The first were seen, two individuals, on the Amador Causeway on 1 August 1962. Another was present on Barro Colorado on 7 August, and another on the Amador Causeway on 8 August. My next record, 14 August, was for 6 on the Amador Causeway, but from this time on, the Spotted Sandpiper was present in almost all appropriate localities. There seems to be at least one of these birds on every creek and stretch of shoreline in Panama throughout the winter months.

Arenaria interpres (Ruddy Turnstone). One individual was noted near Panama Vieja on 26 August 1962. They were "fairly numerous" there on 23 September. I saw 2 birds on Ustupo, one of the San Blas islands, on 7 October, and 2 at Panama Vieja on 13 October.

Limnodromus griseus (Short-billed Dowitcher). First seen on 12 August 1962, about 30 individuals near Panama Vieja. Some 25 of these were in basic (prenuptial) plumage. Others noted there on 26 August, 23 September, and 13 October.

Capella gallinago (Common Snipe). Two were taken in mist nets at a fresh water pond near Almirante, Bocas del Toro Province, 10-11 November 1962.

Crocethia alba (Sanderling). I did not see this bird until 23 November 1962, when Mr. Eugene Eisenmann and I noted several near Panama Vieja.

Ereunetes pusillus (Semipalmated Sandpiper). This and the Western Sandpiper are the two most abundant shorebirds seen in the Panama City area in autumn — at least until mid-October. This species was quite numerous on every field trip to Panama Vieja beach from 12 August through 13 October 1962. During this time I captured and banded 43 specimens. However, Mr. Eugene Eisenmann and I did not identify any of this species there on 23 November, though Westerns were still numerous. One banded at Panama Vieja on 12

August was recaptured there 23 September.

Eurenetes mauri (Western Sandpiper). As mentioned above, this bird was present in good numbers near Panama Vieja on every trip from 12 August to 23 November. I captured and banded 35 individuals.

Erolia minutilla (Least Sandpiper). A few were noted near Panama Vieja on every trip from 12 August through 23 November 1962.

Erolia fuscicollis (White-rumped Sandpiper). One bird was seen near Panama Vieja on 23 September 1962 and 2 others on 13 October 1962.

Erolia melanotos (Pectoral Sandpiper). Two were seen on the grassy lawn of Gatun Dam 18 October 1962. One day during the last week in October, a flock of 50 or more were present for several hours near the Balboa Railroad Station where they were feeding on the grassy lawn. They were not present the following day.

LARIDAE

Larus atricilla (Laughing Gull). Though I recorded few actual dates for this species in autumn, I observed this bird in small numbers on nearly every trip to the Pacific shore. During the latter part of November 1961, I noted large flocks of unidentified gulls looking like this species near Miraflores Lake on several occasions; often these would be seen flying from there toward the coast. About this time, hundreds of gulls could be seen sitting on a field near Albrook Air Force Base. The largest flocks were noted on 28 November 1961. I positively identified many of these birds on Albrook Field as Laughing Gulls; what proportion, if any, may have been Franklin's Gull (*Larus pipixcan*) I cannot say. These large flocks had disappeared by mid-December. Such flocks were not seen in 1962.

Chlidonias niger (Black Tern). I have no dates recorded for this species; however, I observed it near Miraflores Lake in early autumn of both 1961 and 1962.

CUCULIDAE

Coccyzus americanus (Yellow-billed Cuckoo). Mr. Eugene Eisenmann and I saw one individual near Chepo, Panama Province, on 23 November 1962. Dr. Nathan Gale captured one of these birds near Corozal the following day.

CAPRIMUIGIDAE

Chordeiles minor (Common Nighthawk).

Though I have no recorded dates, I have seen this bird in mid-autumn over Fort Clayton and at Penonome, Cocle Province.

Caprimulgis carolinensis (Chuck-will's Widow). One individual found dead on the railroad track near Almirante, Bocas del Toro Province, 20 October 1962.

ALCEDINIDAE

Ceryle alcyon (Belted Kingfisher). Though I have no recorded data, this bird was seen through autumn of both 1961 and 1962 in the Canal Zone and variously on the Pacific slope of western Panama.

TYRANNIDAE

Tyrannus tyrannus (Eastern Kingbird). A large flock seen near the Palo Seco Leprosarium on 2 October 1962. On 23 October 1962, I saw a small flock, perhaps 15 birds, on shrubs and sitting on the lawn at Fort Clayton in the company of Social Flycatchers (*Myzetetes similis*). This or a similar small group was noted in the same area, and usually with local flycatchers and *on the ground*, for a period of about two weeks thereafter. At other times toward the last of October I saw a few scattered birds along the wire fence around Albrook Field.

Tyrannus dominicensis (Gray Kingbird). There is a saying among bird watchers to the effect that once you see a species, you seem thereafter to see it everywhere. Though I am very familiar with this summer resident of Florida, I had not "seen" a Gray Kingbird in Panama until, on 23 November 1962, Mr. Eugene Eisenmann pointed out several to me on the road to Chepo. The following day, I made a trip to the Azuero Peninsula: the Gray Kingbird was one of the commonest telephone-wire sitters from about Penonome to Chitre. Though I have travelled this road many times, I had never observed this abundant species there before a phenomenon of the bird watcher, not the bird.

Myiodynastes luteiventris (Sulphur-bellied Flycatcher). I captured a single individual in a mist net in a jungly area behind Albrook Field on 9 September 1962.

MIMIDAE

Dumetella carolinensis (Common Catbird). This was one of the most abundant migrants noted at Almirante, Bocas del Toro Province in autumn, 1962. On 20-21 October, I banded 15 birds from some 30 mist nets operated there by the Gorgas Memorial Laboratory; on 10-11 November, I banded 12 birds from 50 nets. A

few individuals were noted near Churundu and Corozal in late October and November.

TURDIDAE

Hylocichla mustelina (Wood Thrush). One specimen was banded at Almirante, Bocas del Toro Province, on 21 October 1962; and 3 were banded on 11 November.

Hylocichla ustulata (Swainson's Thrush). There is a tremendous migratory flight of these thrushes in the Almirante region through autumn. Dr. Pedro Galindo of the Gorgas Memorial Laboratory had noted this in the past, and so in autumn 1962 began an intensive effort to study these birds at Almirante, especially using banding techniques. I visited his operations there on 19-21 October and 10-11 November 1962. His crew, using about 30 nets, were capturing about 150 Swainson's thrushes a day on my first trip there. On the November dates, catches were down to some 10 birds daily in 50 nets. However, Mr. Eustorgio Mendez of the Gorgas Laboratory told me that they took as many as 250 birds a day in 50 nets during the last week or 10 days of October. After that time, their numbers dropped rapidly.

Hylocichla minima (Gray-cheeked Thrush). I banded 65 of these birds from the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 19-21 October. Only 2 were caught and banded on 10-11 November 1962. A few individuals were noted near Corozal and Curundu by Dr. Nathan Gale and myself in November; these were probably winter residents.

Hylocichla fuscescens (Veery). Four were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory mist nets at Almirante on 20-21 October 1962.

VIREONIDAE

Vireo flavifrons (Yellow-throated Vireo). One individual was taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 10 November 1962.

Vireo olivaceus and/or *Vireo flavoviridis* (Red-eyed Vireo and/or Yellow-green Vireo). Unfortunately, I was unable to distinguish clearly between these two birds, both of which occur in autumn in Panama. I believe I had examples of both in hand, but due to my difficulty in separating them I felt it wiser at the time to list them jointly. Eight birds were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20 October 1962; one was taken there on 11 November 1962.

PARULIDAE

Mniotilta varia (Black-and-White War-

bler). Mr. George Hunt observed this bird in the woods behind Albrook Field on 29 August 1962. I netted one in this same vicinity on 18 October. Another was taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 10 November 1962.

Protonotaria citrea (Prothonotary Warbler). My earliest record for this species is 7 October 1962, when 2 were seen far up the Rio Puprugandi, opposite the island of Ustupo on the San Blas coast. Mr. Edwin Tyson and I observed an individual of this bird at both Puerto Nuevo, Veraguas Province, and near Remedios, Chiriqui Province, on 11 November 1961. Two specimens were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 10-11 November 1962.

Vermivora peregrina (Tennessee Warbler). Six individuals were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 10-11 November 1962.

Dendroica aestiva (Yellow Warbler). I netted 2 of these birds on 22 September 1962 in mangroves near Panama Vieja. The Yellow Warbler could be seen rather commonly from about this time on in such areas near the beaches and among the shrubbery of houses of the Pacific terminus. They were abundant in a citrus grove near Changuinola, Bocas del Toro Province, on 30 September. Six were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20-21 October and 2 were taken there 10-11 November 1962.

Dendroica magnolia (Magnolia Warbler). Two were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 21 October 1962.

Dendroica pensylvania (Chestnut-sided Warbler). Five were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20-21 October 1962.

Seiurus aurocapillus (Ovenbird). Eleven birds were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20-21 October 1962; two were taken there on 11 November 1962.

Seiurus noveboracensis (Northern Water Thrush). These birds were rather common in a citrus grove near Changuinola, Bocas del Toro Province, on 30 September 1962. Seven were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20-21 October 1962; and one on 10 November 1962.

Oporonis formosus (Kentucky Warbler). Five were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20-21 October 1962; one was taken there on 10 November 1962.

Geothlypis trichas (Common Yellowthroat). Eleven were taken in the Gorgas

Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20-21 October 1962.

Icteria virens (Yellow-breasted Chat). One was taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20 October 1962.

Wilsonia canadensis (Canada Warbler). Three were taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20-21 October 1962. Dr. Nathan Gale netted one of these birds earlier that week near Corozal.

Setophaga ruticilla (American Redstart). Mr. George Hunt observed a single bird in woods behind Albrook Field on 29 August 1962.

ICTERIDAE

Icterus spurius (Orchard Oriole). Mr. George Hunt observed one of these birds in woods behind Albrook Field on 29 August 1962. Dr. Nathan Gale and I netted an individual near Corozal, Canal Zone on 22 November. I saw several through autumn around Curundu-Corozal, but made no record of them.

THRAUPIDAE

Piranga rubra (Summer Tanager). Though I made no notes concerning this bird in the Canal Zone area, it is one of

the commonest autumn migrants and winter residents to be seen. One was taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 21 October 1962; and 6 on 10 November 1962.

FRINGILLIDAE

Pheucticus ludovicianus (Rose-breasted Grosbeak). Five were banded from about twice that number taken in the Gorgas Laboratory nets at Almirante on 20-21 October 1962; 4 birds were taken there on 10 November 1962.

Spiza americana (Dickcissel). Numerous birds in flocks were seen over rice fields near Chepo, Panama Province, in late September 1961. I did not see them there on a few subsequent trips that autumn, nor were they present in late November 1962. However, even larger flocks were seen there in spring of 1962. The natives know this bird well, calling it *arroccero* ("ricebird").

REFERENCES

- MCCANDLESS, J. B., 1961, Bird life in southwestern Puerto Rico. I. Fall migration: Carib. J. Sci. 1: 3-12.

Corrigenda to

"Notes on Autumn Bird Migrants in Panama"
(Carib. J. Sci., 1963, 3:63-68)

The author did not see proofs of this paper before it was published, and a number of unfortunate typographical errors occur in it, some of which are quite important. Therefore this page of corrigenda is offered.

- p. 63, under Anas discors, 8th line: delete comma after "ra".
- p. 64, 1st column, 3rd paragraph, line 6: change "seem" to "seen".
- p. 64, under Circus cyaneus, 2nd line: change "Penome" to "Penonome".
- p. 65, under Pluvialis dominica: delete the words "Pluvialis dominica (Golden Plover)" and replace with "Charadrius semipalmatus (Semipalmated Plover)". Now, between the section on Squatarola squatarola and Charadrius semipalmatus, insert the following statement:

Pluvialis dominica (Golden Plover). Two Golden Plover were seen at Panama Vieja on 12 August 1962. Another in alternate (nuptial) plumage was seen there on 23 September 1962. As noted above, plovers of this size were seen there on other occasions but could not be identified. Both the Black-bellied and Golden Plovers remain far from the beach, sitting on emergent rocks or at the low-tide waterline--quite a distance away with the 16-foot Pacific tides.

- p. 66, under Tyrannus dominicensis, next to last line: insert a dash between "before" and "a".
- p.67, 1st column, line 2: change "Churundu" to "Curundu".
- p.68, under Wilsonia canadensis, lines 4 and 5: change "these birds" to "this species".