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George Archibald McCall

BY WITMER STONE

AN army career in the first half of the nineteenth century offered the best, indeed often the only, opportunity of visiting the western and southern wilds of North America, then mainly populated by Indians more or less hostile to the whites.

Consequently it is not surprising that many an army officer has contributed materially to our knowledge of the natural history of the country: some having an inherent interest in nature, exploration or hunting, others doubtless influenced by the novelties which they found about them.

Prominent among these army naturalists was George A. McCall, whose name is perpetuated in our American Ornithology by the Texas Screech Owl, *Otus asio mcalli*, which was named in his honor by John Cassin, and described in the well-known "Birds of California and Texas" "as a slight memento of long-continued and unbroken friendship, and in testimony of our high appreciation of him as a naturalist who has contributed much of interest and importance, especially to the ornithology of Western America."

George Archibald McCall was born March 16, 1802, at Philadelphia, son of Archibald McCall and Elizabeth Cadwalader. He was educated at West Point Military Academy where he graduated in 1822, and was commissioned lieutenant in the Fourth Infantry stationed at Pensacola, Florida. The territory of Florida had just been acquired by the United States, the purchase having been ratified in March, 1822. From there Lt. McCall went with his regiment to Hillsborough [Tampa] Bay, where the Seminole Agency's headquarters were located, and where he remained until sent north on recruiting service in July, 1830.

In an autobiographical volume which he prepared during the last years of his life,¹ we find many allusions to hunting and occasionally an ornithological note of interest, although it is evident that much material of this kind was eliminated from the journals and letters upon which the volume is based, as being of little general interest. Fortunately, however, many ornithological notes from the journal had been furnished to Cassin and published in his "Birds of California and Texas," to which reference has already been made.

From a letter dated Hillsborough Bay, December 1, 1827, and published in his "Letters from the Frontier," he describes the shooting of a Flamingo on Anclote Key, thirty miles above the entrance to Hillsborough Bay, where later he got three others. Two were adult males and two young of the year "in pale, grayish, rose-color" plumage. He says: "As I debouched from the thicket my eye caught sight of the grotesque figure but splendid plumage of a Flamingo on the beach not over fifty yards from where I stood. It was the first bird of the species I had ever seen in the flesh, although I had from childhood been familiar with the stuffed specimens of the museums. As the bird had not yet perceived me, I stood for several minutes to observe his manners. He was standing in the water knee-deep and was with his great clumsy beak cleansing and arranging the pen feathers on the side of his body, just

¹ Letters from the Frontier, written during a period of Thirty Years' Service in the Army of the United States. By Major General Geo. A. McCall, late Commander of the Pennsylvania Reserve Corps, Philadelphia, 1868.

under his wing. The latter was extended and partially revealed to me the deep scarlet of the wing coverts and the glossy black of the quill feathers." Having read in Horace of the famous Roman delicacy, a dish of Flamingo tongues, Lt. McCall had the tongues of his specimens cooked, but while they had a delicate flavor they proved so exceedingly oily that only a small portion could be eaten.

In another letter he describes Millet Key, a small island absolutely covered with eggs while clouds of terns, gulls and skimmers flew screaming overhead. The eggs were so thickly spread upon the sand that without great care one could not walk over the ground without breaking them. "Next morning," he adds, "we gathered four or five bushels of eggs from the ground we had cleared the day before, and I candidly confess, I should not have credited the thing had I not been present."

Lt. McCall seems to have been the first to notice the difference in the Florida Quail, as he says "the Partridges appeared to me smaller than our northern bird and somewhat differently marked." These observations are among the first made on the birds of Florida by an American naturalist.

In 1831 Lt. McCall was appointed Aide-de-Camp to Gen. E. P. Gaines, and reported at Jefferson Barracks, Mo. From that time until 1836 he was stationed at Memphis and Nashville, Tenn., Courtland, Ala., and Little Rock and White River, Ark. At the last place he made the acquaintance of the Prairie Chicken, which abounded on the Big Prairie all about Mrs. Black's Halfway House where travelers stopped.

The year 1836 found him back in Florida under Gen. Worth, subduing the Seminole uprising, in which campaign he gained distinction and became a captain on Sept. 21.

The next ten years were spent mainly on the western frontier, in Missouri and Indian Territory, although he was in Tennessee in 1838 and Florida in 1841. At Fort Scott, Indian Territory, he described the hunting of turkeys and grouse and the abundance of Sandhill Cranes.

In 1846, after the declaration of war with Mexico, Capt. McCall was ordered to join General Taylor and served throughout

the war, gaining distinction in the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, and was commissioned Major of the Third Infantry, December 26, 1847.

In November, 1849, after a year's leave of absence on account of ill health, he was ordered to Santa Fé, New Mexico. He reached San Antonio, January, 1850, and traveled over the route to El Paso, crossing the Pecos February 19, and reaching his destination March 12, where he remained until August 31. In the meantime, he had on June 10 been appointed Inspector-General of the Army, and he now spent several months inspecting other posts in the department of New Mexico.

Inspired no doubt by the novelty of the fauna, General McCall seems to have paid much more serious attention to ornithology during his sojourn in New Mexico than ever before, and encouraged by Cassin he published, on his return east, his paper on the birds of this region.¹ This was a notable contribution to ornithology, treating of a country practically unknown. Gambel, who crossed from the Ratone Mts. and Santa Fé to California in 1841, being apparently the only ornithologist who had previously entered it. In this paper Gen. McCall describes as new a Jay, *Cyanocorax cassinii*, which proved later to be *Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*, named by Wied in 1841, now known as the Pinon Jay. Also a Purple Finch, *Carpodacus obscurus*, not different from *C. mexicanus frontalis*, and a Lark, *Otocoris occidentalis*, which still stands in our Check List.

In 1852 General McCall was engaged in an inspection of the military posts of California and Oregon. Just what his route was upon this tour I have been unable to ascertain, but from the notes contributed to Cassin he evidently paid close attention to the birds which he encountered. On April 22, 1853, finding his impaired health unequal to the duties of his position, he resigned and retired to his home "Belair" near West Chester, Pa., where he remained until the breaking-out of the Civil War. He then offered his services to the State and was

¹ Some Remarks on the Habits, etc., of Birds met with in Western Texas, between San Antonio and the Rio Grande, and in New Mexico; with descriptions of several species believed to have been hitherto undescribed. *Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci., Phila.*, V, pp. 213-224, 1851.

made commander of the Pennsylvania Reserves. He rendered valuable service during 1861 and 1862, especially in the peninsular campaign, and was finally captured at Frazier's Farm, June 30, 1862, in the seven days' battle before Richmond. He was confined in Libby prison until his exchange in August, but his health was so affected that he was unable to return to the war, and resigned March 31, 1863. He died February 15, 1868.

General McCall was married August 30, 1851, to Miss Elizabeth McMurtrie, by whom he had five children.

He is described by his brother, in a manuscript history of the family, as a man of extraordinary determination and force of character, and who possessed much scientific ability. He describes himself as "one for whom nature in her mildest hour of infancy has always possessed unrivalled charms." He became a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, June 29, 1847, and, besides the paper on the Birds of Texas and New Mexico already referred to, published in the Proceedings of the Academy, the following:

"Description of a supposed new species of *Columba* inhabiting Mexico, with some account of the habits of the *Geococcyx viaticus* Wagler." Vol. III, pp. 233-5, 1847. The new species *Columba solitaria* proved to be *C. flavirostris* described by Wagler from Mexico in 1831.

"Notes on some Mexican Birds heretofore not fully described." Vol. IV, pp. 63, 64, 1848. *Orpheus curvirostris* and *Columba leucoptera*.

"Note on *Carpodacus frontalis* (Say), with description of a new species of the same genus from Santa Fé, New Mexico." Vol. VI, p. 61, 1852. This was *C. familiaris* based on exceptionally red specimens of *C. frontalis*.

In addition to these papers there are the numerous contributions to Cassin's "Birds of California and Texas." Indeed to judge from some statements in Cassin's letters to Baird, Gen. McCall seems to have had no little part in starting this publication. Under date of June 7, 1851, he writes: "Col. McCall is here, constantly engaged in ornithology at the Academy. He is a devout ornithologist and possesses great knowledge about western specimens"; and again, February 9, 1852, he says:

“McCall is quite excited about my new book; he has been urging me to it for the last six months and is getting notes ready.”

It will thus be seen that General McCall played no small part in building up our knowledge of the North American Avifauna, although like many other field naturalists he had no selfish desire to gain notoriety by publishing all his notes over his own name, but gave the results of his experience cheerfully to others, who could use them in the advancement of his favorite science.

He gave many valuable specimens to the Philadelphia Academy, not only birds but mammals and reptiles as well, and among the latter his name is perpetuated in that of the curious Horned Lizard of New Mexico, *Anota mcallii*, named by Mr. Hallowell from a specimen collected by Gen. McCall.

The published observations by Gen. McCall constitute apparently but a small portion of the natural history lore with which his mind was stocked, but we have enough to show that he should occupy a high place in that wonderful group of early naturalists whose activities centered about the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, and whose explorations carried them far beyond the then frontier boundaries of our country.