RECENT RECORDS OF WATER BIRDS IN THE DESERT

Richard C. Banks[1]
San Diego Natural History Museum
San Diego, California

In the early part of 1966, several reports of the occurrence of strictly aquatic birds in the desert of San Diego and Imperial counties, California, were brought to my attention. While each record is of interest individually, the number of independent reports and the number of birds involved suggest that more than a casual straying from a normal flight path or migratory pattern is involved. I want to thank Maurice Getty, Naturalist at Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, for donating specimens found in Borrego Valley and for forwarding reports from park rangers. R. Guy McCaskie helped in drawing other records together and made valuable suggestions. I also wish to thank those mentioned below for permission to report their observations. Unless otherwise noted, localities are in San Diego County, California, and dates are in 1966.

Gavia immer, Common Loon.

Robert R. Prather found a loon in the town of Ocotillo, Imperial County, on April 20, following a severe windstorm. He picked it up and released it the next day at the Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge, of which he was at that time Manager. Prather reported (*in litt.*) that the bird was apparently in good health, and was gone from the release area the following day.

This species of loon is not common on the Salton Sea, the only large body of water in interior southern California (McCaskie, *pers. comm.*). There are few records in the Gulf of California (Friedmann, Griscom, and Moore, 1950). Phillips, Marshall, and Monson (1964), however, noted that it is "sometimes common in April" on the Colorado River. In all probability, the bird found at Ocotillo had been blown off its course and grounded by the strong winds.

Branta canadensis, Canada Goose.

Mr. Carruthers, of La Jolla, California, reported in considerable detail the occurrence of one of these birds in sparsely vegetated badland country near Arroyo Seco del Diablo in Anza-Borrego Desert

[1]Present address: Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife; U.S. National Museum, Washington. D. C.

State Park. On the afternoon of January 14, he saw the bird standing in the desert, far from any water. There were some green plants emerging from the ground, but the bird was not observed feeding. Mr. Carruthers approached to within 150 to 100 yards of the bird, which then flew about 50 yards. This was repeated. On Mr. Carruthers' third approach the bird flew farther and over a ridge. The bird did not appear to be injured in any way.

Banta nigricans, Black Brant.

On April 1, a flock of 12 to 15 brant were seen on a stream in Coyote Canyon, north of Borrego Valley, by a park ranger. Getty found a dead brant in Borrego Valley on April 2. On April 3, Jay Shepard found two brant on San Felipe Creek at Scissors Crossing; these birds were captured and were banded and released in Mission Bay, San Diego.

There have been several recent records of brant wintering in the northern Gulf of California and appearing as spring migrants at the Salton Sea (Nowak and Monson, 1965; Reynolds, 1966). To my knowledge the present records offer the first information concerning the route taken from the normal range on the Pacific coast to the newly exploited inland habitats. It is possible that a new migratory pattern is being established by brant that enter the Gulf of California from the south, find themselves trapped at the northern end, and are forced to fly overland to the Pacific or to northern breeding grounds.

Anas platyrhynchos, Mallard.

A dead mallard in Borrego Valley was reported to Getty by a park visitor on April 2, but the report could not be verified.

Aythya affinis, Lesser Scaup.

Getty reported that a ranger found a dead scaup near Vallecito in early April. On April 3, a scaup was captured at Angelina Spring in Grapevine Canyon. The bird was unable to fly more than a few feet at a time, and died shortly after capture.

Melanitta perspicillata, Surf Scoter.

Getty found one of these birds in Borrego Valley on April 2, and reported that a ranger had found one near Vallecito about the same time. Shepard found one near Scissors Crossing on April 3. There are three other records of this species from interior San Diego County: Julian, La Puerta (=Mason) Valley (Grinnell and Miller, 1944:90),

and Jacumba (Sams and Stott, 1959:10). Grinnell and Miller (1944) interpreted inland occurrences of this species as suggesting an overland route of migration from wintering grounds in the Gulf of California to the Pacific coast.

Discussion

The records of the common loon and the Canada goose stand apart from the others reported here in time, and at least the former can be explained by circumstances (a windstorm) immediately preceding the occurrence. It is interesting that the brant, mallard, scaup, and scoter all were found within a short period in early April, and that most of them were found dead or dying. Although the time of the occurrences is within the normal migratory period for these waterfowl, there is no ready explanation for their appearance on the desert floor.

Robert R. Prather reported (*in litt.*) that fowl cholera was rather widespread in California in early April, and that the disease affected some waterfowl in the Imperial Valley. The brant found in Borrego Valley was submitted to Dr. H. C. Johnstone, Veterinary Pathologist, Office of the County Veterinarian, San Diego County, who examined it for cholera. Dr. Johnstone reported (*in litt.*): "There was no evidence of fowl cholera in this specimen, and bacteriological cultures were negative for this organism. On autopsy, the bird showed extensive visceral gout (retention of urates)." The bird had been frozen for some 10 weeks prior to examination, however, and Dr. D. J. Thackrey, of the same office, noted that failure of the causative organism of fowl cholera to culture was not necessarily significant.

Dr. Thackrey also indicated that gout could have been responsible for the bird's death. This condition is a result of a deficiency in protein metabolism, and may be caused by an excess of protein in the diet or by a poor quality protein. In this respect, it is interesting that the normal food of brant along the coast is sea lettuce, *Ulva*, but brant on the Salton Sea have been reported feeding on bulrush, *Scirpus tuberosus* or *robustus* (Nowak and Monson, 1965; Reynolds, 1966). A comparison of the nutrient qualities of *Ulva* and *Scirpus* might prove to be enlightening.

Literature Cited

FRIEDMANN, H., L. GRISCOM, and R. T. MOORE
1950. Distributional check-list of the birds of Mexico. Part 1. *Pac. Coast Avifauna* no. 29, 202 p.

GRINNELL, J., and A. H. MILLER
1944. The distribution of the birds of California. *Pac. Coast Avifauna* no. 27, 608 p.

NOWAK, J. H., and G. MONSON
1965. Black brant summering at Salton Sea. *Condor*, 67(4):357.

PHILLIPS, A., J. MARSHALL, and G. MONSON
1964. *The birds of Arizona.* Tucson: Univ. Ariz. Press, 212 p.

REYNOLDS, F. L.
1966. Recent sightings of black brant (*Branta nigricans*) in the Salton Sea area of southern California. *Calif. Fish and Game*, 52(2):118.

SAMS, J. R., and K. STOTT, JR.
1959. Birds of San Diego County, California: An annotated check-list. *Occ. Pap. San Diego Soc. Nat. Hist.* no. 10, 49 p.