

NOTES

AN OLD REPORT OF ESKIMO CURLEW ON LONG ISLAND — Like wisps of fog on a misty sea come tales out of the past, some first hand, others repeated, many exaggerated, but occasionally one authentic enough for the record. This narrative is relative to the Eskimo Curlew and seems well founded.

The remarks came from the veteran feather-hunter and well-known guide, the late Nelson Verity, life-long resident of Seaford, Long Island. Mr. Verity died in an accident at his home about five years ago at the age of 92. On many occasions he related to me incidents happening in the latter half of the 19th century both on the Long Island uplands and on the bay. There were no regulated hunting laws during those years and he was busily engaged in feather hunting for the adornment of women's hats. (See Elliott, 1945, *Audubon Magazine* 47(1):30-34.) He was well-known to sportsmen as a guide and acted in this capacity to William Dutcher, famous Long Island ornithologist of three-quarters of a century ago. (See Elon H. Eaton, 1910, *Birds of New York* 1, 355.)

Nelson's comments spared no one, not even himself, in relation to the relentless attitude of the market and feather hunters of old. In those days any bird that walked, stalked or flew received little mercy from the ever-present shotgun, whose muzzles on busy days were dipped into the bay to cool after excessive shooting. (Despite this the old veteran baymen seemed to hold themselves guiltless and considered it their inalienable right to gun to the limit. I could never convince one that the demand could exhaust the supply. They always retorted with a comment like: "Why there ain't half as many birds on the bay today with all your protection like there were years ago.")

Verity was well acquainted with many shore birds, including the very rare Long-billed Curlew which, however, was reportedly more common years ago in the east. Like other baymen he called the common Hudsonian Curlew "Jack" or "Jack Curlew" and the formerly abundant, but now possibly extinct, Eskimo Curlew "dough-bird" — this name was given it by gunners because of its accumulated fat in autumn.

I talked with Nelson Verity one Sunday afternoon as I sat in his kitchen. Reminiscent thoughts came to him as silence prevailed; then he remarked: "You know the dough-bird, Eskimo Curlew they call it — haven't seen it in many years — gone I guess. They say it's extinct." Upon my concurring on this point, Nelson continued: "I remember the last fair-sized flock I ever saw. It was on a stormy September day. For a couple of days a northeaster had flooded the bay; the meadows (bay islands) were flooded. I was gunning south of here not far from shore and a good-sized floating island of thick, dead thatch was stirring around ahead of me. All of a sudden a close flock of about 40 Eskimo Curlews came by and alighted on the floating thatch island. I shot and got quite a few, bunched as they were. Then instead of flying off they returned and I got some more. They were easy to shoot, always coming back, and do you know: I got every bird of that flock down to the last one." Verity's best recollection of the date was some time in the 1870s.

Much agreement with this comes from Eaton (1, 341) as he fittingly remarks: Many . . . believe that this species is now practically extinct. If so it seems that this unfortunate fate has overtaken it because of its habit of bunching so closely during migrations, that gunners, as well as unfavorable weather conditions, had exceptional opportunities to affect its destruction." He states that it was abundant in Labrador in fall, fattened on crowberry, took the long flight over the ocean to South America and like the Golden Plover was often driven landward by autumn gales. Forbush tells how they were mercilessly shot for food on the Massachusetts coast and also on their spring trip up the Mississippi Valley. Their flesh was described as excellent.

On the other hand the Hudsonian Curlew or "Jack Curlew" avoids hunters, is shy and difficult to stalk, and so perpetuates its race. Only occasionally it, like the Long-billed Curlew, exhibits sympathy for wounded companions, according to Eaton. Furthermore he describes its flesh as quite unpalatable, except when feeding in the fall for some time on berries and grasshoppers.

Strange as it may seem, in Giraud's time, some 115 years ago, the Long-billed Curlew was reportedly more common on Long Island than the Hudsonian. Many of the Long-billed Curlew's nesting grounds have been destroyed by settlement of the west and northwest causing some reduction in numbers. Past records indicate a darkening of the skies by thousands of Eskimo Curlews over Eastern Canada before their flight southward about the time that mass flights of Passenger Pigeons shut out the sun. Both were analogous in close flocking, susceptibility to disregard danger or failure to recognize it and dependence on flock rather than individual security. Each species huddled together, apparently trusting in a close knit mass unit, and because man could readily profit by these conditions, he betrayed their trust. — John J. Elliott, 3994 Park Ave., Seaford, Long Island.