

BIRDS AS BRIGANDS

BY AUSTIN L. RAND
CURATOR OF BIRDS

A BRIGAND, according to my desk dictionary, is one who takes by force what is not his. Brigandage is a term for human behavior, of course, but it finds its parallel in the bird world.

The bald eagle meets the definition most aptly. The eagle is fond of fish and, although it is capable of capturing one itself upon occasion, it is a common practice for the eagle to take a fish from the osprey—a fish



Cartoon by Peggy Collings Brown

that the osprey has just caught from the water. The osprey, with a fresh-caught fish, flies heavily. The watching eagle quickly overtakes the smaller heavily laden bird and forces him to drop his prey. Then the eagle swoops down and usually catches the fish before it can strike the land or water. Rarely does the osprey escape with its food under such an attack. It is recorded that an eagle made several dives at one fish-laden osprey and, when it wasn't successful in making the osprey loose its hold on the fish, the eagle dived under the smaller bird, turned over on its back with talons outstretched, snatched the fish from the grasp of the osprey, and flew away with it, as successful a pirate as ever sailed the seas.

NEMESIS OF VULTURES

Besides taking fresh-caught food from the osprey, the bald eagle has been seen pursuing vultures and making them disgorge their meal of carrion. The eagle, if unsuccessful in catching the disgorged food in the air, may land on the ground and eat the food there. We know, also, that the aerial flights that the eagle uses to frighten the vulture into relinquishing its food are not idle threats, for an eagle has been seen striking and killing a bird that refused to disgorge.

Not only does our American eagle carry out such practices, but related species in other parts of the world behave in similar ways. The New Guinea sea eagle harries the osprey in the area it inhabits, and on the west coast of Africa a sea eagle robs pelicans and cormorants of their prey.

Certain long-winged birds of the tropical seas, such as *Fregata magnificens*, are known popularly as man-o'-war birds or frigate birds, reflecting their well-known character as pirates and tyrannical free booters. The "man-o'-war birds glean a portion of their livelihood from the host of creatures which live at the surface of the ocean," but they also get much of their food by forcing terns, cormorants, boobies, and pelicans to deliver up their catch.

In a tropical bay a school of small fish comes to the surface, perhaps driven by large fish below. From far and near terns gather, darting down to seize the fish that jump into the air. Above them circle the frigate birds ready to dive down and chase and harry a successful tern until it drops its fish and leaves its prey to the freebooter.

BOOBIES ARE VICTIMS

Frigate birds also may sail about where a colony of nesting brown boobies is located, waiting for the birds laden with food to return home. When such a food-laden booby returns, the frigate bird then dashes down at it, buffets it with its wings, and snaps at it with its long hooked bill until the booby finally drops its fish for the man-o'-war bird to enjoy.

The skua, a big dark relative of the gull, is also known as a pirate. Its chief food is fish but it also eats many other foods from the sea. It rarely takes the trouble to fish for itself but watches until some other bird, perhaps a gull or a tern, has been successful in its hunting. Then it gives chase, forcing the unfortunate hunter to relinquish its food. Several of the skua's smaller relatives, the jaegers, have similar unpleasant habits. It is written of the Pomerine jaegar off our New England coast: "They are the notorious pirates and freebooters among sea birds, the highwaymen that persecute their neighbors on the fishing grounds and make them stand and deliver." The jaegar gives chase to the lucky tern that "has caught a fish, following every twist and turn in its hurrying flight as it tries to dodge or escape, close at its heels as if attached by some invisible string. At last in desperation the harassed tern drops its fish and the relentless pursuer seizes it before it can strike the water."

STAFF NOTES

Dr. Sharat K. Roy, Chief Curator of Geology, spent several days in Washington, D.C., and New York, negotiating exchanges of meteorites and studying certain falls of meteorites in connection with publications in preparation. . . . Mr. Bryan Patterson, Curator of Fossil Mammals, and Dr. Rainer Zangerl, Curator of Fossil Reptiles, attended the 1948 field conference of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology held in northeastern Wyoming in August.

COLA NUTS

BY LLEWELYN WILLIAMS
ASSOCIATE IN FOREST PRODUCTS

Recently the Department of Botany received from Mr. Stewart J. Walpole, of Park Ridge, Illinois, several cola nuts. They are of singular interest because of the importance this forest product has long had as an article of trade in tropical Africa and, lately, its increasing use in the United States in the preparation of refreshing summer beverages.

The tree producing this nut, also known as Kola, Gurú-kurú, Nangué, etc., belongs to the genus *Cola*, of the Cacao family (Sterculiaceae). There are about 40 species throughout tropical Africa, but the one considered superior to all others is *Cola acuminata* Schott & Endl., a medium-sized tree with a dense crown, its branches, reaching almost to the ground, covered with dark green leaves and yellowish-white flowers. It is native in the deciduous forest of the coastal zone between Sierra Leone and the Congo or Lower Guinea, at altitudes below 1,000 feet, and flourishes in low, humid areas. From its native habitat it is reported to have been introduced by slave ships in the early 18th century to the American continent and is now well established and naturalized in several of the islands in the Antilles, as well as in parts of the mainland of tropical America. It has also become acclimated in some of the islands in the Indian Ocean.

Harvesting.—The tree begins to bear fruit after four or five years, although it does not attain full development until it is ten years old. The mature fruit is a yellowish-brown, warty pod, somewhat egg-shaped and two to four inches long, and is harvested twice a year, in May through June and again in October through November. A few hours after falling from the tree the fruit splits open, exposing the seeds, the so-called cola nuts of commerce. The number of seeds in each pod varies from one to five, but usually is three. These seeds are irregular in size and shape, as well as in the manner in which they are tightly wedged one against the other within the shell. They are surrounded by a cream-colored pulp, of a sweet, agreeable taste. When fresh they vary from white, most highly valued by the natives and known as "King cola," to a pale pink with brown wavy lines. When stored for a long period and allowed to dry, they turn dark brown.

After removing the pulp, the seeds are placed in baskets and covered over with leaves, which are sprinkled frequently with water to keep them moist. After about 30 days they are washed in fresh water, repacked, re-covered with moistened leaves, and are ready to be sent to the market. Upon reaching the market, they are dried further by exposure to the sun and are retailed either whole or ground into powder. The consumption within the country is



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