THE CAROLINA PARROT.

+CENTURUS CAROLINENSIS, *Linn.*

PLATE CCLXXVIII.—MALE, FEMALE, AND YOUNG.

Doubtless, kind reader, you will say, while looking at the figures of Parakeets represented in the plate, that I spared not my labour. I never do, so anxious am I to promote your pleasure.

These birds are represented feeding on the plant commonly called the *Cockle-bur*. It is found much too plentifully in every State west of the Alleghanies, and in still greater profusion as you advance towards the Southern Districts. It grows in every field where the soil is good. The low alluvial lands along the Ohio and Mississippi are all supplied with it. Its growth is so measured that it ripens after the crops of grain are usually secured, and in some rich old fields it grows so exceedingly close, that to make one's way through the patches of it, at this late period, is no pleasant task. The burs stick so thickly to the clothes, as to prevent a person from walking with any kind of ease. The wool of sheep is also much injured by them; the tails and manes of horses are converted into such tangled masses, that the hair has to be cut close off, by which the natural beauty of these valuable animals is impaired. To this day, no useful property has been discovered in the cockle-bur, although in time it may prove as valuable either in medicine or chemistry as many other plants that had long been considered of no importance.

Well, reader, you have before you one of these plants, on the seeds of which the Parrot feeds. It alights upon it, plucks the bur from the stem with its bill, takes it from the latter with one foot, in which it turns it over until the joint is properly placed to meet the attacks of the bill, when it bursts it open, takes out the fruit, and allows the shell to drop. In this manner, a flock of these birds, having discovered a field ever so well filled with these plants, will eat or pluck off all their seeds, returning to the place day after day until hardly any are left. The plant might thus be extirpated, but it so happens that it is reproduced from the ground, being perennial, and our farmers have too much to do in securing their crops, to attend to the pulling up the cockle-burs by the roots, the only effectual way of getting rid of them.

The Parrot does not satisfy himself with cockle-burs, but eats or destroys

Carolina Parrot or Parakeet

1. 2. Males. 3. Female. 4. Young.

Cocklebur

almost every kind of fruit indiscriminately, and on this account is always an unwelcome visiter to the planter, the farmer, or the gardener. The stacks of grain put up in the field are resorted to by flocks of these birds, which frequently cover them so entirely, that they present to the eye the same effect as if a brilliantly coloured carpet had been thrown over them. They cling around the whole stack, pull out the straws, and destroy twice as much of the grain as would suffice to satisfy their hunger. They assail the pear and apple-trees, when the fruit is yet very small and far from being ripe, and this merely for the sake of the seeds. As on the stalks of corn, they alight on the apple-trees of our orchards, or the pear-trees in the gardens, in great numbers; and, as if through mere mischief, pluck off the fruits, open them up to the core, and, disappointed at the sight of the seeds, which are yet soft and of a milky consistence, drop the apple or pear, and pluck another, passing from branch to branch, until the trees which were before so promising, are left completely stripped, like the ship water-logged and abandoned by its crew, floating on the yet agitated waves, after the tempest has ceased. They visit the mulberries, pecan-nuts, grapes, and even the seeds of the dog-wood, before they are ripe, and on all commit similar depredations. The maize alone never attracts their notice.

Do not imagine, reader, that all these outrages are borne without severe retaliation on the part of the planters. So far from this, the Parakeets are destroyed in great numbers, for whilst busily engaged in plucking off the fruits or tearing the grain from the stacks, the husbandman approaches them with perfect ease, and commits great slaughter among them. All the survivors rise, shriek, fly round about for a few minutes, and again alight on the very place of most imminent danger. The gun is kept at work; eight or ten, or even twenty, are killed at every discharge. The living birds, as if conscious of the death of their companions, sweep over their bodies, screaming as loud as ever, but still return to the stack to be shot at, until so few remain alive, that the farmer does not consider it worth his while to spend more of his ammunition. I have seen several hundreds destroyed in this manner in the course of a few hours, and have procured a basketful of these birds at a few shots, in order to make choice of good specimens for drawing the figures by which this species is represented in the plate now under your consideration.

The flight of the Parakeet is rapid, straight, and continued through the forests, or over fields and rivers, and is accompanied by inclinations of the body which enable the observer to see alternately their upper and under parts. They deviate from a direct course only when impediments occur, such as the trunks of trees or houses, in which case they glance aside in a very graceful manner, merely as much as may be necessary. A general cry

is kept up by the party, and it is seldom that one of these birds is on wing for ever so short a space without uttering its cry. On reaching a spot which affords a supply of food, instead of alighting at once, as many other birds do, the Parakeets take a good survey of the neighbourhood, passing over it in circles of great extent, first above the trees, and then gradually lowering until they almost touch the ground, when suddenly re-ascending they all settle on the tree that bears the fruit of which they are in quest, or on one close to the field in which they expect to regale themselves.

They are quite at ease on trees or any kind of plant, moving sidewise, climbing or hanging in every imaginable posture, assisting themselves very dexterously in all their motions with their bills. They usually alight extremely close together. I have seen branches of trees as completely covered by them as they could possibly be. If approached before they begin their plundering, they appear shy and distrustful, and often at a single cry from one of them, the whole take wing, and probably may not return to the same place that day. Should a person shoot at them, as they go, and wound an individual, its cries are sufficient to bring back the whole flock, when the sportsman may kill as many as he pleases. If the bird falls dead, they make a short round, and then fly off.

On the ground these birds walk slowly and awkwardly, as if their tail incommoded them. They do not even attempt to run off when approached by the sportsman, should he come upon them unawares; but when he is seen at a distance, they lose no time in trying to hide, or in scrambling up the trunk of the nearest tree, in doing which they are greatly aided by their bill.

Their roosting-place is in hollow trees, and the holes excavated by the larger species of Woodpeckers, as far as these can be filled by them. At dusk, a flock of Parakeets may be seen alighting against the trunk of a large sycamore or any other tree, when a considerable excavation exists within it. Immediately below the entrance the birds all cling to the bark, and crawl into the hole to pass the night. When such a hole does not prove sufficient to hold the whole flock, those around the entrance hook themselves on by their claws, and the tip of the upper mandible, and look as if hanging by the bill. I have frequently seen them in such positions by means of a glass, and am satisfied that the bill is not the only support used in such cases.

When wounded and laid hold of, the Parakeet opens its bill, turns its head to seize and bite, and, if it succeed, is capable of inflicting a severe wound. It is easily tamed by being frequently immersed in water, and eats as soon as it is placed in confinement. Nature seems to have implanted in these birds a propensity to destroy, in consequence of which they cut to atoms pieces of wood, books, and, in short, every thing that comes in their

way. They are incapable of articulating words, however much care and attention may be bestowed upon their education; and their screams are so disagreeable as to render them at best very indifferent companions. The woods are the habitation best fitted for them, and there the richness of their plumage, their beautiful mode of flight, and even their screams, afford welcome intimation that our darkest forests and most sequestered swamps are not destitute of charms.

They are fond of sand in a surprising degree, and on that account are frequently seen to alight in flocks along the gravelly banks about the creeks and rivers, or in the ravines of old fields in the plantations, when they scratch with bill and claws, flutter and roll themselves in the sand, and pick up and swallow a certain quantity of it. For the same purpose, they also enter the holes dug by our Kingfisher. They are fond of saline earth, for which they visit the different *licks* interspersed in our woods.

Our Parakeets are very rapidly diminishing in number; and in some districts, where twenty-five years ago they were plentiful, scarcely any are now to be seen. At that period, they could be procured as far up the tributary waters of the Ohio as the Great Kenhawa, the Scioto, the heads of Miami, the mouth of the Manimee at its junction with Lake Erie, on the Illinois river, and sometimes as far north-east as Lake Ontario, and along the eastern districts as far as the boundary line between Virginia and Maryland. At the present day, very few are to be found higher than Cincinnati, nor is it until you reach the mouth of the Ohio that Parakeets are met with in considerable numbers. I should think that along the Mississippi there is not now half the number that existed fifteen years ago.

Their flesh is tolerable food, when they are young, on which account many of them are shot. The skin of their body is usually much covered with the mealy substances detached from the roots of the feathers. The head especially is infested by numerous minute insects, all of which shift from the skin to the surface of the plumage, immediately after the bird's death. Their nest, or the place in which they deposit their eggs, is simply the bottom of such cavities in trees as those to which they usually retire at night. Many females deposit their eggs together. I am of opinion that the number of eggs which each individual lays is two, although I have not been able absolutely to assure myself of this. They are nearly round, and of a light greenish-white. The young are at first covered with soft down, such as is seen on young Owls. During the first season, the whole plumage is green; but towards autumn a frontlet of carmine appears. Two years, however, are passed before the male or female are in full plumage. The only material differences which the sexes present externally are, that the male is rather larger, with more brilliant plumage.

PSITTACUS CAROLINENSIS, Linn. Syst. Nat., vol. i. p. 141.

CAROLINA PARROT, *Psittacus carolinensis*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. iii. p. 89.

PSITTACUS CAROLINENSIS, Bonap. Syn., p. 41.

CAROLINA PARROT, *Psittacus carolinensis*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 545.

CAROLINA PARROT, *Psittacus carolinensis*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. i. p. 135.

Male, 14, 22.

South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, and up the Mississippi to Kentucky. Abundant. Resident.

Adult Male.

Bill short, bulging, very strong and hard, deeper than broad, convex above and below, with a cere at the base; upper mandible curved from the base, convex on the sides, the margin overlapping, with an angular process, the tip trigonal, acute, declinate, much exceeding the under mandible, which is very short, broadly convex on the back, truncate at the extremity. Nostrils basal, round, open, placed in the cere. Head very large. Neck robust. Body rather elongated. Feet short and robust; tarsus scaly all round; toes scutellate above, flat beneath, two behind and two before, the latter united at the base; claws curved, acute.

Plumage compact and imbricated on the back, blended on the head, neck, and under parts. Orbital space bare. Wings long, second and third quills longest. Tail long, wedge-shaped, of twelve, narrow, tapering feathers.

Bill white. Iris hazel. Bare orbital space whitish. Feet pale flesh-colour, claws dusky. Fore part of the head and the cheeks bright scarlet, that colour extending over and behind the eye, the rest of the head and the neck pure bright yellow; the edge of the wing bright yellow, spotted with orange. The general colour of the other parts is emerald-green, with light blue reflections, lighter beneath. Primary coverts deep bluish-green; secondary coverts greenish-yellow. Quills bluish-green on the outer web, brownish-red on the inner, the primaries bright yellow at the base of the outer web. Two middle tail-feathers deep green, the rest of the same colour externally, their inner webs brownish-red. Tibial feathers yellow, the lowest deep orange.

Length 14 inches, extent of wings 22; bill along the ridge $1\frac{1}{2}$, gap, measured from the tip of the lower mandible, $\frac{1}{2}$; tarsus $\frac{5}{6}$, middle toe $1\frac{1}{4}$.

Adult Female.

The female is similar to the male in colour. The upper figure represents a kind of occasional variety, with fourteen tail-feathers. The specimen from which the drawing was taken was shot at Bayou Sara, in Louisiana.

Young Bird.

The young bird is known by the comparative shortness of the tail, and the uniform green colour of the head.

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1. 2. Males. 3. Female. 4. Young.

Cocklebur

Audubon, John James. 1842. "The Carolina Parrot, *Centurus carolinensis*, Linn. [Pl. 278]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 4, 306–310. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319393>.

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