

# OLOMEGA IN EL SALVADOR IS A MECCA FOR WATER BIRDS

By AUSTIN L. RAND  
CURATOR OF BIRDS

WE'D LOOKED forward to this trip to Olomega, noted for its water birds. We'd delayed the trip because of the distance from San Salvador, some 164 kilometers along the paved road, and this in our jeep is four and a half hours. We passed the area of the earthquake of the week before, that had destroyed four villages, no more than seeing the ruins through our binoculars, the cracked walls being all the damage the houses along the road had suffered. Flame trees (*palo de fuego*) had recently come into bloom, and the almost incredible orange red of their blooms massed in the tree tops was startling in its brightness.

The lake lies only some eight kilometers off the highway, and the road is safe, though slow. A village, called Olomega, lies at the southeast corner of the lake and here we had our first view of the water. It's a fishing village, dirty and odorous, on a flat sloping shore. Here we hired a canoe and guide and put out.

Before I mention the birds that swarmed I should briefly mention the lake. It is some four or five miles across with a shallow sloping north and west shore, with the Volcano of San Miguel looming up beyond, and the steep, rugged Colinas de Jucuaran rising to south and east, rugged, wooded, uninhabited, shutting the lake off from the sea.

## EVEN CANOE GOES AGROUND

It's a shallow lake—ibis and herons were wading several hundred yards out in the water, and to travel about by canoe we had to skirt the shore far out. Once, 200 yards from shore we ran aground in the few inches of water the dugout drew.

As we walked down to the lake, the first bird that caught our eye was a red-winged blackbird flying along the lake shore with its red epaulets gleaming against the black of its plumage in the tropical sunlight. There were grackles, too, but they're everywhere in El Salvador so we paid them little heed and hastened on to the water's edge. Here two birds vied for our interest: the jacanas and the stilts. Each is adapted for marsh life, but in a different way. The jacanas are rail-like marsh birds with short legs but very long toes and toenails. Obviously their feet are adapted for their habit of running about over the floating marsh vegetation, and thanks to the size of their feet, it takes less dense marsh vegetation to hold them up than it would most birds. Side by side with the jacanas or lily trotters were black-necked stilts. But their modification is in the direction of long legs (as one might guess from their name); they wade in the water while the jacana walks on the rafts of vegetation.

The jacanas are blackish and rufous birds, but their most striking marking is

shown only when they fly, or when they stand with outspread, fluttering wings. Then one sees only the yellow wings.

The stilts, black above and white below, are soberly but elegantly attired. They are still more striking for the grace of their great elongated bills and necks matching long legs, and when they fly you see that their long narrow wings are adequately proportioned.

But we took to our canoe and quickly pushed out. Beyond, it was difficult to

As a member of the Museum's Salvadorean Project, Dr. Austin L. Rand, Curator of Birds, has been engaged in a comprehensive ornithological study of the Central American country, with the co-operation of the Instituto Tropical de Investigaciones Cientificas of El Salvador. Dr. Rand returned to Chicago last month. Herewith is his account of some of the more interesting of the Salvadorean water birds.

estimate how far the lake stretched, for big white birds seemed to be standing everywhere. The first we found to be big white egrets, standing belly deep in the water, perhaps 300 yards from the shore. They were actively fishing, snatching tiny fish from the surface of the water as they walked slowly along. I had noted at Los Blancos on the coast near San Salvador that these birds often, when watching, kept their necks stretched up and out, in a rather strained and stiff looking attitude. But here their necks were all curved in a more graceful manner, and there was material all about me for scores of Japanese screens.

Soon we came to wood ibis feeding along with the herons. They are white with black-tipped wings, but a rather dingy white—not the lovely pure white of the egrets. The great, bulky, downward pointing bills of the wood ibis were being used in the same way as the slender, spear-like bills of the egrets—to pick fish from the surface, or near it. Both birds were very tame, and we could put the canoe to within twenty yards of them, and then they flew but a short distance. There were no small egrets out here—the water was too deep for them, but there were a few snowy egrets, little blue herons and one Louisiana heron in close to shore. The little blues, and there must have been several dozen, were almost all in a ragged, mottled plumage, partly the white of the immature plumage, when it looks very similar to the snowy egret except for the dull feet and toes (instead of black with yellow toes) and partly in the

adult, slaty plumage, giving them a strange mottled appearance. Both the little blue, and the big egrets were feeding occasionally in a manner rather unusual, but not unknown, for herons. Flying over the water, they swooped down and picked something, presumably fish, from the surface. It was far from a neat performance, with broad flapping wings and trailing legs, but it was apparently effective.

## MONARCH OF AIR

Ahead we saw a line of ducks—and then beyond a line of pink that could only be spoonbills. But first a frigate bird, perhaps the most magnificent bird awing, came drifting in over the coastal range to cruise over the lake before disappearing seaward again. It was a young bird, as indicated by its white head and breast, but already its mastery of the air was great. We never saw a wing stroke, nor an opening and closing of the long scissor tail during the time we watched it.

The spoonbills, that showed as a line of pink in the distance, were a disappointment. A few days earlier I had watched a few solitary birds on the mudflats of the coast. They walked about and when they came to ponds, or bits of soft mud, they swung their strange, spoon-shaped bills back and forth through it. This does not seem to be using the spatulate tip of the bill to advantage, for it seems very similar to the manner in which avocets, with slender bills, feed at times. But these spoonbills now were resting quietly along the water's edge in company with some wood ibis that completely dwarfed them. Only once were they as spectacular as I had expected—when we drifted by more than 100 yards off shore and the flock rose with the ibis and settled again, the pink of the spoonbills contrasting with the black and white of the ibis.

Here and there stumps, or stubs, projected from the water, and on them were cormorants. But what interested me about them was their swimming about amid a herd of cattle that were standing in the water. These wild fish-eaters were consorting with cattle, swimming about their legs, just as if they were domestic ducks. This was near a fence that ran out into the lake, and perhaps 100 cormorants were perched on the fence. These birds, with all four toes webbed, were perching not only on the fenceposts, but also on the barbed wire. Sometimes it took a bit of teetering back and forth, but their dexterity was surprising. And when they took off some jumped off backwards, and turned around as they flew away. When flushing from low perches, they pattered off over the surface of the water for a bit before they were air-borne. As they went across the bow of the dugout I was surprised to see they were not running as a duck would, but were making hops,

striking the water with both feet together. Pig ducks I've heard these birds called somewhere, but had never appreciated the name before. Now I did as I heard the grunting noises they made.

#### ALL ARE 'DUCKS,' EXCEPT DUCKS

Several little grebes (*Colymbus*) were swimming about, but they were inconspicuous. The dark throat and the yellow iris were diagnostic. The boatman pointed them out as ducks, that I should shoot. But here, everything that swims is a duck: the coots, of which a dozen or so were swimming along the shore were "patos"; the cormorants were "patos." Anhingas, that are known to occur but were not seen, are "patos." But when we came to what I call ducks—the whistling tree duck—these the natives called "Pishishi." These are magnificent birds. First a flock came by whistling hoarsely—then I saw them on the water. The sun shines on their golden buff plumage until their brilliance rivals that of the spoonbills.

There were other things conspicuous, too: turkey vultures and caracaras feeding on the water's edge, presumably on fish, washed ashore; on a little grassy island were a dozen or more green herons that flushed one by one as we approached; a pair of bluewinged teal flushed, circled and alighted; a flock of about 20 Franklin's gulls bunched close together on the water; there were shore birds, too, in the marshy shore vegetation. We would have liked to have left the open shore and investigated some of the bays where reedy vegetation grew thick and tall; and the far shore where the forest rose at the water's edge. We knew that boat-billed herons should be here somewhere, as well as tiger bitterns, and that the hills above were the home headquarters of the king vulture populations of El Salvador.

As we put back for the landing and watched the curling crests of the waves whipped up by the freshening wind, marveling at the opaqueness of the green, algae-filled water, we thought that here, if our station was close enough, was material for a couple of months' work all by itself.

#### STAFF NOTES

Dr. Alexander Spoehr, Curator of Oceanic Ethnology, recently returned from Yale University and other eastern institutions where he has been studying documentary material related to his researches on Micronesia.... Dr. Theodor Just, Chief Curator of Botany, has returned from a field trip in Texas and Iowa. He also presented a paper on "The Classification of the Cycadeoidales" before the sixth annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Evolution held in Berkeley, California.... Dr. Julian A. Steyermark, Curator of

the Herbarium, recently conducted a series of botanical field trips in Missouri. In addition to his Museum explorations, he led a four-day field trip of the Central States Section of the Botanical Society of America into the Ozarks.

### BOTANICAL FIELD TRIP COMPLETES WORK

The Museum's 1951 Southwest Botanical Field Trip has returned from five weeks of study and collecting in the vicinity of archaeological sites in New Mexico excavated by the Museum's Southwest Archaeological Expeditions of the past few years. Most of the time was spent near Tularosa Cave, scene of the 1950 operations. The wealth of wild and cultivated plant material unearthed by excavations there made it essential to study the vegetation now growing about the cave. The remains from Tularosa Cave cover a period of about 3,000 years or more and include several roots that could not be identified from herbarium specimens and descriptions of the plants of the region. Dr. Hugh C. Cutler, Curator of Economic Botany, and Jack Reeves, volunteer assistant, collected all the plants now growing in the region of the cave.

### CURATOR TO COLLECT FOSSIL FISHES

Robert H. Denison, Curator of Fossil Fishes, will spend August on a collecting trip in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York. One of the purposes of the trip is to obtain specimens of the armored, fish-like vertebrates called ostracoderms, that have been found in certain Silurian rocks in these states. They are of particular interest because they are among the oldest known vertebrates, and their structure and occurrence may help to throw light on the early history of this important group. Some time will be spent also in investigating the Late Devonian rocks in western New York state. A great thickness of shales was deposited in this region more than 300 million years ago as muds in the bottom of a sea. These shales have yielded a few well-preserved fishes mostly related to sharks and to a group of heavily armored fishes known as placoderms.

### SUMMER LECTURE TOURS GIVEN TWICE A DAY

During July and August, conducted tours of the exhibits, under the guidance of staff lecturers, will be given on a special schedule:

**Mondays:** 11 A.M.—The World of Animals (general survey of the animal exhibits); 2 P.M.—General Tour

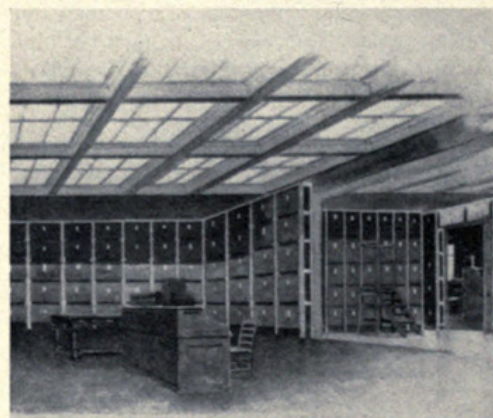
**Tuesdays:** 11 A.M.—Places and People (general survey of the anthropology ex-

## FIFTY YEARS AGO AT THE MUSEUM

Compiled by MARGARET J. BAUER

From the *Annual Report of the Director* for the year 1901:

"It would seem from the permanent improvements recorded each year that the building is gradually being reconstructed. This, as a matter of fact, is true as concerns the offices, laboratories, etc., but the growing needs of the Museum and the expanding processes necessary to meet the demand of



#### OLD-TIME SCIENTIST'S QUARTERS

Office and laboratory of the Curator of the Department of Zoology when the Museum, located in its former building in Jackson Park, was known as the Field Columbian Museum.

the departments are but an index of the development of the entire institution. More and more each year the Museum finds itself equipped to perform all the necessary labor; not only the technical and scientific labor, but the ordinary mechanical work as well, and the circumstances are unusual when outside agencies are employed."

"The Memberships.—There still has to be recorded a decrease in the annual memberships, due, as has been previously reported, to the fact that no effort is made to increase the list." (In 1951, as for years past, the membership trend is upward and the total today is close to 5,000. Constant efforts toward further increase are now made.)

hibits); 2 P.M.—General Tour

**Wednesdays:** 11 A.M.—Green Magic (general survey of the plant exhibits); 2 P.M.—General Tour

**Thursdays:** 11 A.M. and 2 P.M.—General Tours

**Fridays:** 11 A.M.—Secrets in Stones (general survey of the geology exhibits); 2 P.M.—General Tour

There are no tours on Saturdays and Sundays.



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