

# Overlooked Bird Reports from South Carolina in the 16th Century

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Heretofore, the earliest recognized bird report from South Carolina has been the account of William Hilton's exploration in 1663 (Wayne 1910; Sprunt and Chamberlain 1949). Along the coast from Port Royal to the Edisto River, Hilton wrote: "The Country abounds with Grapes, large Figs, and Peaches; the Woods with Deer, Conies, Turkeys, Quails, Curlues, Plovers, Teile, Herons; and as the Indians say, in Winter, with Swans, Geese, Cranes, Duck and Mallard, and innumerable of other water-Fowls, whose names we know not, which lie in the Rivers, Marshes, and on the Sands...." (Hilton 1664:8). In the same account he reported "...Deer and Turkies every where; we never going on shoar, but saw of each also Partridges great store, Cranes abundance.... Also in the River we saw great store of Ducks, Teile, VVidgeon, and in the woods great flocks of Parrakeeto's...." (Hilton 1664:10). Also "...we kill'd of wild-fowl, four Swans, ten Geese, twenty nine Cranes, ten Turkies, forty Duck and Mallard, three dozen Parrakeeto's, and six or seven dozen of other small Fowls, as Curlues and Plovers, &c." (Hilton 1664:15).

Although Hilton's bird names are mostly too general for precise identification, the Turkies must have been *Meleagris gallopavo*, the Quails and Partridges, Northern Bobwhites (*Colinus virginianus*), the Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*, and the Parrakeeto's, the Carolina Parakeet (*Conuropsis carolinensis*). The reported abundance of birds, especially the waterfowl in winter and shorebirds, in South Carolina in the 17th century is similar to reports from Virginia at the same time (David W. Johnston, unpubl. data).

A century before Hilton's journey, a French expedition led by Captain Jean Ribaut (also known as Ribault or Ribauld) landed in May 1562 at the River of May (St. John's River) in northeastern Florida (Ribauld 1563). From there he made an excursion northward along the coast to present-day South Carolina arriving at Portus Regalis (Port Royal) on 17 May 1562 (Connor 1927). At least two versions of the excursion are known. Thomas Hacket (in Connor 1927) translated the original French version into English, which translation included observations from the Port Royal area: "Also an innumerable sorte of wyld foule of all sorts, & in litle Islandes at the entry of this hauen on the East Northest syde, there is so great number of Egreps that the bushes be all whyte & couered with them, so that one may take of the yonge ones with his hand as many as he wyll carye away. There be also a number of other foules, as Hernes, Bitters, Curlues, And to be short, there is so many small byrdes that it is a straunge thyng to be sene." A similar but slightly different version has been found in the British Museum, wherein Ribaut wrote about

"...guinea foule and innumerable wildfoule of all sortes, and in a lyttell ilande at the entrye of this haven, on the est northerest side, there is so great nombre of egretes that the bushes be all white and covered with them, so that one may take of the yong ones with his hande as many as he will carry away. There be also a nombre of other foule, as herons, bytters, curleux, and to be shorte, so many smale birdes that yt is a straung thing to be sene" (Connor 1927:92). The addition of "guinea fowle" must have referred to the Wild Turkey.

René Laudonnière paraphrased Ribaut's account of this venture to Port Royal in 1562 by adding: "Advancing through these woods, we saw turkeys flying everywhere and grey and red partridges [probably the Northern Bobwhite], differing from ours mainly in size. We also heard deer and saw bears, lynxes, leopards..." (Lawson 1992:23).

As with bird reports of other early North American explorers, most of the names are too general for specific identification. "Bytters" might have referred to the American Bittern (*Botaurus lentiginosus*), "egretes" might have been any of several species, and "curleux" are unidentifiable. Even so, Ribaut's description of the bird life, as well as that of animals and plants, provides an early picture of natural history in coastal South Carolina.

After constructing Charlesfort at Port Royal, Ribaut left men to guard it, then departed for France on 11 June. Ultimately Charlesfort was destroyed by the Spanish.

A second French expedition to "New France" (*i.e.*, northeast Florida) took place in 1564, this one under the leadership of René Laudonnière. Accompanying him was Jacques Le Moyne De Morgues (1530?-1588), a special painter and mathematician. His duties were "to make an accurate description and map of the country and drawings of all curious objects." He accompanied Laudonnière on his exploring trips up the St. John's River from Fort Caroline at the river's mouth, thereby giving him impressions of Indian life styles and wildlife. One of the French commanders, Le Vasseur, sailed northward to the Port Royal region, and Le Moyne reportedly accompanied him. Soon thereafter the Spanish attacked the French at Fort Caroline and killed most of its inhabitants, including Jean Ribaut, who had returned to Florida in 1565. Le Moyne and Laudonnière managed to escape and sailed to England in 1565.

Exactly where and when Le Moyne completed 42 paintings of the Florida and South Carolina travels is unclear. Theodore de Bry purchased Le Moyne's drawings in London and published them in 1591 (Bry 1591). These drawings have been reproduced several times (Lorant 1946; Allen 1951; Hulton 1977b), most of them dealing with scenes of Indian life, Fort Caroline, and travels along the St. John's River. Only one of the originals has survived: "Life at Fort Caroline." Among the 42 illustrations published by de Bry is one entitled, "The French Reach Port Royal," and in it three French vessels are depicted entering the islands of Port Royal Sound (Fig. 1). The caption in Hulton (1977a:140) contains the statement: "On penetrating these [islands and forests] they could see turkeys or peacocks flying past and deer ranging through the forest." Four

Wild Turkeys, one obviously a gobbler, are shown on one of the islands in that illustration of Port Royal. This is the first known illustration of any North American bird.

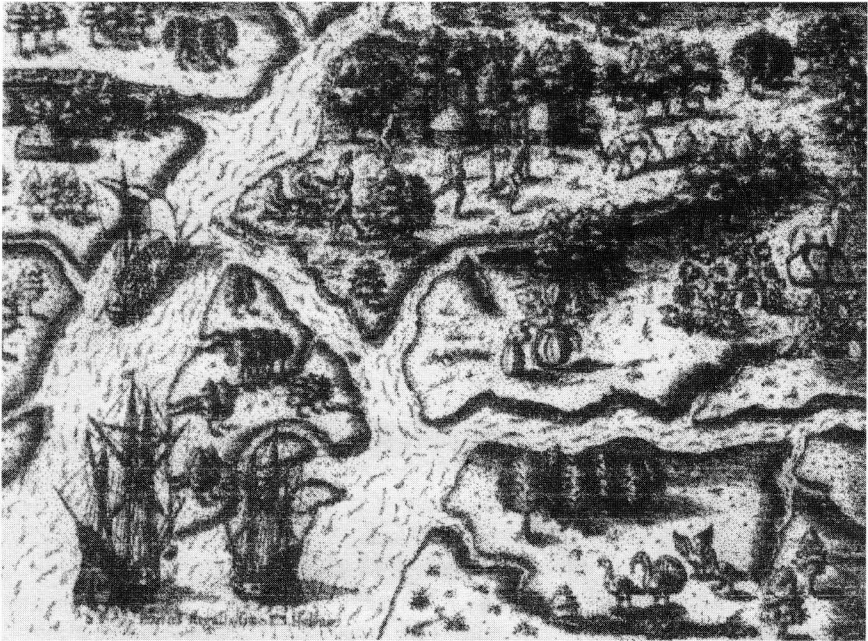


Fig. 1. Le Moyne's illustration of the French arriving at Port Royal (now South Carolina). Note the four Wild Turkeys in the lower right island. After Lorant 1946.

It is interesting to note that Le Moyne published a book in 1586 which included his illustrations of many English plants and common birds of the countryside (Le Moyne 1586). This suggests that Le Moyne had an interest in birds, but if he painted any of them from the New World, certainly they have not been found thus far.

In 1951 E.G. Allen wrote a paper describing the history of American ornithology before Audubon's time. Her account of the French in Florida and South Carolina contains several noteworthy errors. She attributed Ribault's report of "...the faire meadows...full of Hernes, Curlues, Bitters, Mallards, Egrepths, etc." to the Port Royal area (Allen 1951:440), when in fact Ribault was describing the environs of Fort Caroline, Florida (Connor 1927). This geographical mistake is repeated in Sanders and Anderson (1999:5). There is no evidence to support Allen's claim that Le Moyne "lived for nearly a year in

the wilderness of South Carolina....” (Allen 1951:440); the description of the Le Vasseur/Le Moyne trip to Port Royal in Lawson (1993:92) strongly suggests only a brief visit of a few days. And on page 441 Allen unfortunately labelled Le Moyne’s drawing of “The French Reach Port Royal” as “Life at Fort Caroline.”

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