

NOTES & QUERIES

QUAIL POISONING AND *AMBELABOULIA*

from William Woys Weaver

Questions raised in *PPC* 71 by Andrew Dalby regarding Anthony Dixon's comments in *PPC* 70 on 'murderous herbs' deserves further discourse. The issue might be easily resolved by looking at the seeds upon which the animals feed. I mention this specifically with reference to other migratory birds that have caused serious illness, but where the culprit plant has been identified.

In my work on the foods of medieval Cyprus, I have found a large body of material dealing with *ambelaboulia* ('vineyard birds') that have been a fall delicacy on that island for at least 2,000 years: there are several Roman mosaics in Paphos depicting them. Until the middle of the 1600s, these birds were pickled and exported to Europe, even to England. The specific bird in question is the song thrush (*Turdus philomelos*), but several other migratory birds of similar size were also caught. Englishman John Locke (not the philosopher) visited the island in 1553 and commented on the birds extensively, as did many other visitors. Tomasco Poracchi, who visited Cyprus right before the Turkish invasion of 1570, noted that the thrushes fed primarily on grape seeds and lentisk berries. The latter imparts a flavour akin to mixing a few juniper berries with crushed pistachio nuts. I have eaten song thrushes that have fed on these berries, so I can speak from first-hand knowledge. This delightful taste, however, can also mask the taste of toxins in the stomach and flesh of the birds.

It was Pietro della Valle, a Roman patrician visiting the island in September of 1625, who obtained the specific

name of the plant that was the culprit for the poisonings. He reported staying at Ayia Napa in the half-ruined summer palace that is still extant today. At that time of the year, the locals were engaged in catching *ambelaboulia*. The whole affair was akin to a community-wide festival with dancing, singing, and of course, a massive feast on birds. Della Valle noted that some of the birds were dangerous to eat because they had consumed the seeds of scammony (*Convolvulus scammonia*). Since this plant did not grow at Ayia Napa, he speculated that the birds had probably eaten it somewhere else during their migratory flight. This would mean that in the case of the song thrush found in Cyprus, the feeding on deadly seeds took place in Bulgaria or Anatolia or on one of the Greek islands, which would disperse their toxins fairly well over their bodies by the time they reached Cyprus. Their next stop would be Egypt, since they winter in East Africa. Thus the toxic birds can be spread far and wide.

The resin extracted from the rhizome of scammony had medical applications as a drastic cathartic. The active ingredient being scammonin, in overdoses it is a violent gastrointestinal irritant. I could not find data on the chemical make-up of the seeds, but if they are like other seeds of this genus, then they also contain the potent hallucinogenic substances from which LSD is made. I suppose that and the cathartic action would make an especially deadly combination, and rather strange that it does not seem to affect the birds themselves.

I have been told by Cypriot hunters that non-migratory birds, such as chukars, francolins and quails have all caused illness from eating these seeds. This might be the result of the birds living in areas where there are high concentrations of waste sites where this plant seems to thrive. I have never

visited Lesbos, but I wonder whether a large number of abandoned fields, or a proliferation of waste areas around housing developments might not contribute to the upsurge in this weed and hence its appearance in the diets of birds in the area. The fact that the affected birds come from the south part of the island, might also suggest that this is the resting area for migratory birds (just as the SE tip of Cyprus is the resting area for the song thrush). It would be useful to find out whether this is the culprit plant on Lesbos and other places where poisoning has occurred.

For the full text of the passage dealing with Pietro della Valle, I would refer readers to Claude Cobham's *Excerpta Cypria: Materials for a History of Cyprus* (Cambridge, 1908), page 213. E-mail: W3Food@aol.com

THE PINEAPPLE

from Jeri Quinzio

A propos Sandra Sherman's article in *PPC* 81, M. Emy had a recipe for a pineapple ice in his wonderful book, *L'art de bien faire les glaces d'office*, published in Paris in 1768. Emy called the pineapple the king of fruit, for its unsurpassed taste as well as its crown of leaves. He said the taste had hints of strawberry, raspberry, apricot, peach, and muscat but was uniquely its own. His recipe called for nothing but sugar, pineapple, and lemon, and he said those three ingredients made a perfect ice. In winter, he made his pineapple ice with good marmalade. E-mail: jeriq@rcn.com

JAMBALAYA

from Jan Longone

I thought your readers might be interested in an update to the information found in footnote 12 of the article 'Who Saved Jambalaya?' by Bethany Ewald Bultman in *PPC* 80. In my article 'Early Black-authored American Cookbooks' in