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FURTHER ADVENTURES IN THE JAPANESE ALPS - SUMMER 1949

By Chester Fennell

PART III

The cold gray light of morning eventually worked its way in between the cracks of the walls and we set about preparing our breakfast though there was no sign of the storm letting up. Through the roar of the wind and the rattle of the sleet and rain on the sheet iron roof, occasionally, broke another peculiar sound from the direction of the Oku-Hotaka summit. At last my guide heard it, too, and said the single magic word "Raicho!" (ptarmigan). Fortunately, I had learned the name many months ago and had been on the qui vive for signs of this bird throughout the previous day's climb. Now the work broke on my ears with all the excitement and breathlessness fitting to the introduction of such a rare and fascinating species. And to first hear the bird itself under such exciting circumstances, as though it were part and parcel of the mountain top and the storm, seemed even more fitting. With mouths agape and ears strained to the breaking point we sat and waited to catch once more and yet once again the voice of the storm-lashed peaks. We arose and went to the single window facing in that direction with the hope of catching a glimpse of it, but in vain we sought to penetrate the heavy banks of wind-driven cloud and fog that whirled around the hut and the summit crest.

As the storm continued on with no abatement in its fury we resigned ourselves to a day of confinement and after breakfast climbed back into our sleeping bags to keep warm. Fitfully, I slept, pored over the one map of the Alps that Paul had given to me in Matsumoto, planned our next excursion, memorized elevations of the peaks, scribbled incoherent notes and from time to time attempted scraps of Japanese conversation with my guide who spoke or understood not a single word of English. And so passed the day, slowly and rather monotonously to be sure, but not unpleasantly. At quarter after seven that evening, as we sat in the fast-fading bit of western light finishing our last cup of hot tea a promise of dry land and hope came to us in feathered form much in the same manner as it appeared to Noah in the Ark. Only in our case it was a North China accenter and not a white dove. It alighted on the ground just outside our window and busily picked up a few grains of boiled rice which we had thrown out while cleaning up our few pots and pans earlier in the day. It tarried for only a few minutes then hurled itself into the wind and was blown around the corner of the hut into the fog and dusk. It was the same species which I had observed on the granite summit of Pukhansan, north of Seoul, Korea on the 19th of October, 1947, and this was the first time I had seen it since that date. My guide referred to it as "iwa-hibari," which means "rock skylark," a most appropriate name to be sure. It was surely our bird of good omen and promise, for shortly afterwards the rain ceased and gradually during the night the wind lost its vehemence and died down to less gale-like proportions.

We arose bright and early the next morning and though heavy fog still shrouded the peaks in its gray mantel we started up the almost vertical summit pinnacle. Hand over hand we slowly and carefully inched our way upwards when suddenly within fifteen feet of us on a rocky ledge crouched the raicho we had heard calling again that morning. With difficulty I tried to overcome my excitement in order to cling to my precarious position. However, it was a most obliging bird and only slowly worked its way along the narrow ledge away from us, stopping every few moments to give forth its lonely call. My guide claimed that it was a male bird as indicated by the bright red skin patch above its eye. It was a mottled mixture of gray, brown and black in color, with patches of white on the back, lower breast and wings - a perfect camouflage pattern for the rocky, snowy terrain of its habitat.

A half hour after leaving the hut we stood upon the summit of Oku-Hotaka and in vain tried to peer through the thick, swirling clouds but nary another bit of landscape or neighboring peak were we able to descry. A cold, wet wind chilled us through and through so that we hesitated but only a short time before proceeding on down the other side of the summit. Some 800 feet below the top we caught a momentary glimpse of the Mae-Hotaka summit and mistaking my gesture for one of ambitious desire my guide immediately turned to lead me to the summit of that peak also. I lacked the heart to correct his interpretation and meekly followed his handholds on up a loose, treacherous slide of granite scree to finally stand, also, on the top of Mae-Hotaka, the third highest peak in the Japanese Alps.

From the summit of Mae-Hotaka we descended rapidly and precipitously down one of the most breath-taking trails I have yet followed, directly into the valley at Kamikochi. Some idea of the sheerness of the descent may be gathered when I say that we came down in four hours flat what had taken us approximately ten hours to attain. The route led down through steep gorges and chimneys choked with snow and freshly loosened granite debris, occasionally leading out to the very tip of some narrow spur and then suddenly dipping over the side overlooking a sheer drop of a thousand feet or so. The heavy rains of the day and night before had done nothing to help the firmness and security of the terrain and wherever soil covered the rock foundation, the trail became exceedingly slippery and dangerous.

We arrived at the Shiradabase just at noon and I spent the remainder of the day lounging around in perfect ease and comfort nursing a few blisters on my feet and pampering a pair of lightly complaining legs.

Desirous of obtaining some color slides and movies of the ptarmigan, the following morning I set out, upon the recommendation of the innkeeper, for the summit of Nishi-Hotaka, a lesser and more easily accessible peak of the Hotaka massif. It was a sparkling, fresh morning after the storm and one that added an extra spring and lilt to the stride. All the luxuriant vegetation of the valley floor dripped with the moisture of a heavy dew and the bush warblers were beside themselves in oft-repeated song. Both species of cuckoos were again calling from along the gravelly banks. Yake-dake mirrored its smoking cone in the quiet back-water pools and lemon lilies nodded their golden trumpets in the light morning breeze. Along the upper reaches of the trail a single nutcracker voiced his displeasure and annoyance upon my intrusion of his realm and I heard no less than five robins pouring forth their bubbling matins. Noble, rugged stands of birches overhung a few soiled, lingering banks of snow and outlined their full-budded brittle branches in lovely patterns against the clear, blue dome of the sky above. Peace seemed to have laid her hushing hands o'er all the mountains, and I slowly and

leisurely climbed the heavily-forested slope often stopping to rest, to take pictures or just to listen and breathe in, in huge quenching draughts, the glory and wonder of it all.

I arrived at the Nishi-Hotaka Hutte around noontime and stopped for a cup of tea and a few wafers offered me by the kind keeper of the hut and his wife. The view of the deeply snow-mantled Karasawa ridge from this hut was most gratifying, and I sat in silent admiration for several moments sipping my tea and munching my wafers. Two hours later I was eating my frugal lunch on the summit of Nishi-Hotaka and enjoying the view of the valley from which I had just emerged spread out at full length at my feet. Large masses of clouds had moved in from the southwest only a few minutes before my arrival on the summit and now completely concealed the loftier summits of the Hotaka range which I had been particularly eager to see from this angle. Hearing the fall of a loosened rock I turned to suddenly see appear on the ridge just to the north of Nishi-Hotaka a lone Japanese hiker who within a few minutes scrambled up beside me. He had preceeded me up the trail from Kamokochi and had gone on a bit beyond the summit to explore the adjoining ridge. I offered him a portion of my lunch and water from my canteen after which he bade me "Sayonara" and disappeared over the summit on the return route. Five minutes later he suddenly reappeared in haste to tell me of a raicho which he had found. I hurriedly gulped down one last mouthful of food, gathered together my equipment and followed post haste. Sure enough only a couple of hundred feet below the summit on a granite outjutting of rock boldly stood a single male ptarmigan. He, too, like the individual on Oku-Hotaka, was most obliging and permitted me to approach within approximately ten feet. In spite of the heavily overcast sky I took several still color shots and then as he edged along the narrow, rocky point, I ground out several feet of movie film. He at last reached the tip of the rocky outjutting and was forced to fly down into the slope below, which was densely matted with creeping pine. Only then, as I turned to retrace my path did I fully realize the hazardous position into which I had worked myself. Directly below was a drop of more than a hundred feet and underfoot and on all sides only loose, crumbling rock and dirt. Not a secure handhold was within reach and I could only draw in my breath and spread my body out over as large an area as possible to create as much friction hold as was available. Inch by inch, I slowly and painfully drew myself back onto more "firma terra," where, once again on secure ground I was forced to sit down for several minutes before I dared trust my shaking pins. I could only stare below after that ptarmigan and think how closely I had come to following him in a most ungraceful, uncomfortable manner.

Promptly at eight o'clock on the morning of the 9th July my guide and I were again on the trail, silently and easily striding along the thickly carpeted banks of the Azusa-gawa. Our goal - Mts. Otaki, Cho-ga-take, Jonen, Daitenjo, Tsubakuro, Nakabusa hot springs and so out of the Alps via Azumi-Oiwake and Matsumoto. It was another gorgeous morning, fair and radiant and the summit of Mae-Hotaka, haloed with gauzy streamers of cirrus clouds, shone forth like some mighty, silvered rampart. The bush warblers were in high spirits and the valley actually seemed to be percolating with their ecstatic performances. Patches of deep blue forget-me-nots and yellow violets bordered the trail and the air hung heavy with sweetness of full summer and the pungency of the resinous firs.

At nine-fifteen we had again reached the Tokusawa Hutte, where, this time, instead of turning to the left and crossing the stream towards the Hotaka group, we chose the right fork of the path and worked our way up along the right side of another small, turbulent stream coming in from the northeast.

Two hours later we reached a cool, shaded spot where yet another small tributary tumbled in from the east and here we stopped to rest and eat lunch. It was a perfectly ideal place for the Pallas dipper, with two small waterfalls close at hand and clouds of fine mist and spray continuously wetting the surrounding rocks and foliage. As we ate, we kept a weather-eye on the rocks in midstream and were soon rewarded by the appearance of two of these interesting birds. Instead of the dark gray mantle of the dipper of the western United States this species wears a very dark brown, almost black-appearing cloak and appears slightly larger. This pair bobbed along on the rocks directly below us for several moments then took flight and disappeared around a turn downstream.

Approximately an hour after we had continued our rocky, slippery way upstream, I reached for my Kodak to catch an especially choice shot of the brook tumbling out into an open, well-lighted pool and much to my chagrin and aggravation discovered that I had absent-mindedly left it at the spot where we had stopped to lunch. At once, I proceeded to remove my knapsack and other accouterment in preparation of returning to retrieve it, but before I had had time to slip off a single arm strap my guide had dropped his cumbersome pack and with the agility of a deer was off down the trail ahead of me. While awaiting his return I carefully reconnoitered the nearby rock ledges along the stream in hopes of finding a nest of the dipper. Though unsuccessful in my original intent, I did discover the beautifully woven moss nest of the Japanese wren fastened to the underside of a rock shelf some five feet above the level of the streambed. It was approximately $6\frac{1}{2}$ " wide by $5\frac{1}{2}$ " high, globular shaped and constructed of dry fern leaves, green moss and fine, dry fir branchlets. The interior was neatly and softly lined with fresh green moss. Apparently, it had been but freshly made, since it showed no signs of use. Surely, it was one of the most intricately woven and beautifully constructed nests I have ever seen. As soon as my guide returned with the camera, I lost no time in trying an exposure of it, which, in spite of unfavorable light conditions, turned out exceptionally well.

We arrived at the hut on the summit of Otaki in the middle of the afternoon and were at once provided with a little room on the upper floor. It was barren except for some straw mats on the floor but quite welcome as a shelter and a place to sleep. The keeper of the hut had come up only a few days before and was busily making summer repairs to the structure. Wild flowers of innumerable color and description surrounded the hut on all sides and brightly decked the grassy slopes. Files of old, veteran birches, wind-blown and gnarled raised their silvered arms towards the blue arch of the heavens above, and old, rotten drifts of snow still filled the hollows of the open meadows. An occasional nutcracker "churr-r-ed" his opinion of human obstruders and here, too, the uguisu echoed their ventriloquistic effects. The Hotaka-Yari crest, the main backbone of the Japanese Alps, reared its magnificent knife-edge in sharp, imposing silhouette some eight miles to the west as the sinking sun slowly settled and immersed the entire landscape in its golden-crimson glow. Huge puffs of cumuli hung low overhead and reflected the molten rays till the flaming ball had wholly disappeared below the horizon and permitted the shades of night to take over the stage. Then, as I turned and looked in the opposite direction, a full, yellow moon rose up out of the deep, purple plain below and rode higher and higher into the alpine sky. But its glory was short-lived, for up out of the Matsumoto plain, also, rose legions of cloud and mist which soon completely obliterated its beaming countenance and once again clothed all in darkness.

To be concluded.

LETTERS AND NOTES

Oahu, T. H.: Concerning the frigate birds Mr. Paul Porter writes about in the last Elepaio /March 1950/ I would like to say this:

For several weeks before Christmas I noticed them sailing overhead every evening at just about sundown, always from the western side of Koko Head as if they were coming in over Maunalua Bay. They would come cruising in low and lazily in groups of anywhere from 5 to 20 with stragglers coming in afterwards at a little faster clip. Up from the bay they would come, directly over our lot, drifting and balancing in the wind, then rise up and circle over the ridge back of the rifle range just as Mr. Porter says they did the night he saw them. I have counted from 30 to more than 50 in the air at one time. They seemed to meet and circle, then rise to about the top of the crater and head off out of sight around the mountain. I judged that they roosted either on the eastern slopes of Koko crater or else went on toward the islands offshore.

I have not seen them at all for a long time now. Frigate birds are a fairly common sight out this way, usually flying singly, sometimes as low as what seems like only a couple of hundred feet above ground, but I have seen none at all in the past several weeks. I'm sorry I can't give the exact date of the period over which they used Koko crater as a rendezvous.

We drive to Waimanalo in the late afternoon fairly frequently, and the last two times we have been there, specifically the 25th of Feb., and the 4th of March, we saw something that might be of interest. At a point just on the makapuu side of where the strip of beach houses ends, the cliffs come down fairly close to the road, and there is a large cave or eroded spot low on the cliff. On the two dates mentioned, just before dark, we have noticed a group of white birds roosting in this cave. As we passed there, there were already a dozen or more resting and others came in along the dark face of the cliff and alighted there. We also saw a few others come in and settle down in smaller caves closer to Makapuu. The distance is too great to see them clearly without glasses, but they appear to be about the size of pigeons, not as big as the white sea birds which I believe are called booby birds.

I have seen what I took to be booby birds flying over the water on the Blow Hole side several times recently. There have also been whales out there. We have seen whales three times in the past month, once off Diamond Head and twice off the Blow Hole. Each time we saw them spouting, and twice they were so close in we could see their black backs and tails come out of the water. There seemed to be at least five or six of them, and there were always the white birds flying low over the water where they were, so now, each time I see the birds, I suspect there are whales present. -- Edith Kemble.

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Washington, D. C., to Mr. Richard A. Brasier: "... In regard to your letter of March 6th, 1950, asking for identification of an unusual bird observed on the Island of Oahu, I have consulted with Mr. Herbert G. Deignan, Associate Curator of Birds, who has given me the following information: In Caum's "Exotic birds of Hawaii" (Occasional Papers of the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Volume 10, Number 9, 1933) is listed an unidentified species of laughing-thrush introduced into Oahu in 1928. The bird was not subsequently observed, and its identity has been consequently in doubt. The bird described by you seems to be a member of the laughing-thrush group, and might be the same as the species referred to by Caum.

Your description agrees very well with certain races of Garrulax (Dryonastes) caerulatus, a species widely distributed, in a number of very distinct forms, from Formosa to the Himalayas. Although you did not mention seeing it, I might say that all of them have a small patch of naked blue skin behind the eye, which agrees with Caum's remarks. The species has grayish-white downy feathers along the lower flanks, which often are visible at the sides of the rump. Although the notes of its song have not been recorded in the books, they have been described as exceedingly similar to a melodious human whistle.

It would be of some interest, if you were able to collect one specimen from the flock for exact identification by some competent ornithologist, inasmuch as the species seem to be unrecorded for the Hawaiian avifauna. Signed ... Waldo L. Schmitt, Head Curator, Dept. of Zoology, Smithsonian Institution.

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Kawailoa, Oahu, T.H., Feb. 26th Bird Walk: How elusive the bush warbler can be! All of us who have been hoping for years to see one are quite aware of this, but how maddening it is to have them all about you and yet be unable to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of one darting through the foliage of some nearby tree. And that is exactly what happened to us all along the Kawailoa trail on February 26th. The forest was full of them and seldom was it that one or two could not be heard calling from somewhere in the distance. Frequently one, bolder than the others, would have himself some fun playing hide and seek with us for awhile, and then, tiring of his little game, fly off into the forest to join his shy mates.

Not only were the bush warblers shy, but so were all the other birds. One Apapane, two Amakihi, and two Japanese Hill robins were seen, although many could be heard along the trail. White eye were also frequently heard, and two or three Elepaio and possibly a Chinese thrush were also reported heard but not seen. --
Blanche A. Podloy.

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Kauai, T. H.: We were really tourists on Kauai, not bird watchers, but we had our binoculars and kept one ear and eye alert to any birds that might cross our path. This was February 3rd. Driving up the Wailua River road past Opaikaa Falls, we were rewarded by the best view of the Hawaiian owl to date. He was a fine specimen who hovered over the grassy field, obviously hunting, lit and then flew about awhile and again lit on a nearby bush, staring at us some time before disappearing over the bluff. Looking at the pueo face to face the lighter feathers around the eyes have the appearance of fluting around the cap of a Sister of the Sacred Heart order.

Wherever we went plover flew up off the roads and fields and **five** or six which fed on the lawn of the hotel came close to the lanai, refusing to be disturbed by hotel guests for more than a minute or two. Mynahs, of course, and doves were everywhere, and rice birds and mejiro, and we saw one tern by the Spouting Horn.

Our second day took us toward the Napali Cliffs. We saw two more owls, one near the Haena Caves and one by the road near Kilauea Light. To us mere humans, the slow, meandering Hanalei River looked like good bird water, but we discovered

only one lonely coot. Just before dropping down to the Hanalei Valley we drove through pasture land and feel sure the two birds we heard were meadow lark, but through we stopped driving and waited, watching, some time, we saw nothing more identifiable than the cows themselves. Since we were not properly shod to travel far from the car, we had no chance to observe forest birds and did not even reach Kokee because of torrential rains on our third day. We were particularly tantalized by a beautiful bird song at sunset, repeated many times from the trees bordering the hotel grounds; the song was quite new to us. Perhaps we can visit Kauai again and learn more about the bird life there. -- M.C. Porter.

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Attention of the local membership is called to the Western Division Audubon Camp, to be held this year in the California High Sierras on Donner Pass, 26 miles from Lake Tahoe. "Audubon Camps are outdoor schools for adults. Campers explore fields, woods, ponds, marshes and shores - and learn about rocks, soil, water, weather, plants, animals and stars. Emphasis is on inter-relationships between soil, water, plants and wildlife and on practices for conservation of these natural resources." For further information write to the National Audubon Society, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York 28, N.Y.

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MAY ACTIVITIES:

FIELD TRIP: May 14th, to Pa Lehua at the Ewa end of the Waianae range. Meet at the Library of Hawaii at 8:00 A.M., bringing lunch (and car if possible). This may be the best trail on which to observe the Bush Warbler.

MEETING: May 17th, Staff Work Room of the Library of Hawaii (first floor on the left corridor) at 7:30 P.M. This will be the first meeting at which members will report on their personal observations concerning identifying features and special habits of particular birds chosen at the April meeting. Bird topography will also be discussed.

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