

# T H E   E L E P A I O

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## FURTHER ADVENTURES IN THE JAPANESE ALPS - SUMMER 1949

By Chester Fennell

### PART IV

Early the next morning, a sunrise, equally as brilliant but even more full of promise than the sunset of the evening before, roused us from our warm, cozy sleeping bags and drew us forth into the open. There, some 100 miles to the southeast, for only a few moments, Fuji-san raised its symmetrical, majestic cone in striking silhouette above the mists that so often shroud its base. Even as we gazed in open-mouthed, silent worship the wraiths of fog slowly, mysteriously moved across and erased it from view. The spell was broken and we hastened back to the hut to tend to more mundane affairs such as the filling of our gullets and making ready for the day's trek.

As we descended the opposite, barren, rocky slope of Chōga-take, we observed another iwa-hibari (N. China accentor) fearlessly perched on a large rock, head thrown far back and pouring out his morning melody in the finest of style. True, the refrain was rather weak and none too musical but what it lacked in power and quality was certainly compensated for by the enthusiasm and spirit of delivery. A little farther on my guide, who generally preceded me by some thirty or forty paces, urgently motioned me to hurry. As I breathlessly caught up with him he pointed out another ptarmigan calmly standing on a rock surrounded by a clump of creeping pine, eyeing us inquisitively and waiting for our next move. I at once went into action and with both cameras held in readiness began to work my way cautiously towards it. This one, too, permitted a fairly close approach and for the next 20 minutes I busied myself grinding out film from every conceivable angle and trying to get as close as possible. It refused to fly and kept at a respectable distance by just walking along the rocks and creeping in and out among the dense mats of pine. It, also, was a male. Obviously the hens were busy in seclusion with urgent family cares.

Swinhoe's willow warblers were common in the alders and pines all along the trail between Ōtaki and Jōnen but extremely difficult to catch sight of. Only by their numerous calls was their presence known at all. It was a species wholly new to me and only after quite some time was I convinced of their identity. Kobayashi Keisuke had forewarned me of their presence in this area so that I was fully prepared to find them here, but he had not informed me of their relative shyness and timidity. Not once, during the whole trip, did I actually obtain a good view of one.

Just at the bottom of the heavily wooded saddle between Chōga-take and Jōnen we came across a group of four nutcrackers all flying back and forth from the top of one fir spire to another and loudly "churr-ing." They appeared to be all of a single family, possibly two adults and two nearly full grown young. Strangely enough, in spite of the fact that this species is fairly common throughout the Japanese Alps,



its nest has not yet been located. Dr. Oliver L. Austin, Jr., who is in charge of the Wildlife Division of the Natural Resources Section, GHQ, Tokyo, attributes this lack of record to the possibility of their nesting very early in the spring of the year when there is still too much snow for the average observer to overcome in order to get into the nesting area. If two of the above four individuals which I observed were nearly full grown immature birds, as I believe they were, the observation would certainly tend to confirm Dr. Austin's supposition. An added difficulty in locating a nest is the thickly matted condition of the foliage and branches of the fir trees at this elevation. In most cases, from a position on the ground, it would be impossible to make out the form of a nest through the tangle of boughs above.

Jōnen-dake (10,500 feet in elevation and the fourth highest peak in Japan) proved to be a much more strenuous climb than it appeared from a distance and it was two o'clock that afternoon before we reached the summit. The large white-rumped swifts flew swift, dizzying circles around us as we ascended the long, sharp southern ridge and even here on the summit continued to swish closely past our heads. Yari-ga-take, 11,600 feet, the Matterhorn of the Japanese Alps and the second highest peak in Japan (next to Fuji-san), proudly lifted its steeple-like tower into the lightly overcast sky far to the west and beckoned us to come try its lofty slopes. But we had been foretold of the great amount of snow still surrounding its summit crest and unequipped with ice axe and crampons (I had returned those loaned to me on Oku-Hotaka) as I was, it would have been folly to have made the attempt. I now consoled myself with the thought that it was nice to leave at least one peak, even though it were the highest, unvanquished this year so that I would have something to look forward to upon my return the following summer.

As drifting banks of gray fog rolled in from the southeast we turned and slowly began the descent of the northern slope down to the saddle on which rested the Jōnen Hütte and shelter for the night. The keeper of this hut and his family gladly welcomed us and soon had us comfortably put up in a small but cozy room directly off the main living quarters. We had just nicely settled down around the open fire for a few cups of hot tea and our cigarettes when down off the northern ridge the storm broke about our heads. A human storm this time in the form of 150 Japanese school boys ranging from ten to fourteen years of age. They had hiked in from the Tsubakuro Hütte that morning and were to remain here for the night, returning to Nakabusa Spa on the following morning. What a bedlam they did create! All the worse for a cold rain and wind which had blown up shortly after their arrival and confined them to the already crowded interior of the hut. Rain or no rain, as soon as my guide and I had had a bite to eat, I sought the peace and quiet of the outdoors and wandered alone far out along an old abandoned trail through a dense forest of gnarled firs to crouch in their protection till long after dark. Now I knew why this end of the Alps was often referred to as the "Ginza Route." (The Ginza is the most popular, most heavily crowded street in Tokyo, just in case you haven't already heard of it.)

My guide and I arose shortly after daybreak the following morning in order to hit the trail well ahead of the maddening mob. By the time we had attained the summit of Daitenjō another soupy mist had swept in and along with a strong, cold wind and a light sleet made the going far from pleasant. Just in the most open, cold, wind-swept area we had yet crossed, we found a hen raicho hovering over two approximately day-old chicks. They were huddled up in the meager shelter of a clump of creeping pine and quite naturally seemed very reluctant to be disturbed. We tarried to watch them but for a short time and continued on into the teeth of the gale, wondering at the extreme hardihood of this species.



Shortly before reaching the Tsubakuro Hütte, my guide pointed to some fresh, cloven tracks in a bank of yellowish decomposed granite and muttered "Kamoshika!" It was our only contact with this species during the trip but even for that I was happy, for it proved that an occasional individual actually did exist even in the areas most often frequented by humans.

While eating lunch at the Tsubakuro Hütte, the keeper of the hut came in from a visit to his snare line carrying a fine, large specimen of the Japanese hare. We had seen many signs of this animal on the summit of Otaki and in places along the more grassy sections of the trail, but this was my first opportunity to examine it in the hand. It was almost as large as the jack rabbit of the western states, but had much shorter ears and lacked the white patch under the tail. Otherwise, the color was nearly the same as the familiar cottontail of the states - perhaps a bit darker, in general.

During our rapid descent from Tsubakuro to Nakabusa Spa we again met troops of school children, this time all little girls in charge of a teacher who stopped from time to time to explain certain flowers and trees to them as they wound their way up the steep path. A further sign that we were drawing close to civilization and that my Alpine outing was almost over for another year.

We spent that night in a luxurious hotel at the hot springs taking innumerable hot baths, eating deliciously prepared Japanese food, washing it down with good cold beer and saki and lounging around in our warm kimonos. We felt that we had definitely earned this pleasure and made the most of it. Fifteen more miles separated us from Azumi-Oiwake and the train to Matsumoto. Half-way along that route the following day, a splendid specimen of the "kuma-taka" (Bear hawk), actually known as the Japanese hawk-eagle, left his perch on a dead pine branch far up on the south canyon wall and soared out high over our heads in one last farewell gesture. A grander, more appropriate symbol of the power and majesty of the Alps is impossible to conceive, and we turned away strengthened and spiritually refreshed full of the joy of just being alive.

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#### IN MEMORIAM

Our good friend, Mark Kerr, died suddenly on Saturday, April 29th, as he was preparing for a trip to his beloved out-of-doors. This was fitting, for few know and love the natural world as he did. He had covered most of Oahu on foot, delighting in its beauty, studying the plants and birds, seeking out the rare native flora, and the unusual, then sharing his pleasure most generously with the rest of us. We shall miss him sorely, and shall remember him as we knew him best: on a mountain trail, always cheerful, always ready to help in his unassuming way - to carry a burden, to lend a hand over a rough spot, to fall back with the weary novice, or to hurry ahead if that seemed best. It grieves us to think that he will no longer be with us, but his gentle, kindly spirit will remain in our hearts and memories.

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Lanikai, Oahu: (The following is a portion of a letter written to the G. C. Munro's by a Lanikai observer who prefers to remain anonymous.) ... If only you could have stood with me a little before sunset last night (March 8, 1950), on the edge of the golf fairway! The green has reached perfection; the day was lambent with the approach of night; the low hills with their barenesses, the nearby trees with their touch of spring; enticing small sounds all around, made this a time apart from the business and the mechanics of living... I started out just to try to glimpse that elusive bird with the finch-like song (much like the lazuli bunting) that I occasionally hear. I could not reach it but soon did reach the road that takes one to the golf course. First I passed the pool or pond from which I had been hearing the tattlers until 7 or 8 weeks ago. It is now thick with water plants and there were no tattlers to be seen. Next, I stopped by a less secluded pond which must have been sprayed in the mosquito campaign. It was scummed badly, but two tattlers rose silently from the far edge.

I kept on up the road, through the woodsy section. I passed a large pond without seeing any birds, but as soon as I had gone beyond the branch road that leads to the farm, I was startled by a large bird flying noisily up, and crossing the road at a height of about 10 feet. When I saw "noisily" I mean making a noise with the wings and in the brush, as well as the call. This call was similar in quality to the plover's but deeper, richer, more protracted--but just one continuous call. This was almost an exact repetition of what happened at the same spot when I was walking down the road about 7 or 8 weeks ago. At that time I noticed the buff coloration on the underside, and that its size was considerably larger than the plover's. It gave the same sort of call I heard yesterday, and I thought that it might be a curlew.

When I sat on a log that day weeks ago in order to watch the birds in the wide piece of shallow water, I saw three kinds of birds: the plover, which soon flew off; the large group of smaller birds, and two larger birds. On these larger birds I made out a light tan streak on the heads as they stooped to feed. I considered those larger birds might be curlew. I could not make out the shape of the bills as the birds as they fed kept the beaks in close to the head. This time I thought I saw that the beak was curved.

This road that I was on is little used and reaches the edge of the course almost a quarter of a mile from another road to the north which is nearer the river. This second road comes back towards the first at an angle and almost joins it. At the spot from which the curlew (?) rose, I imagine the two roads may be about 100 yards apart. Both roads are elevated above the adjacent ground, which is covered with algaroba, pluchea, and small undergrowth. I was surprised to discover quite a stretch of standing water on the lower ground almost concealed by the thick growth. I have wondered why a curlew, or any shore bird, should be in that thicket (which was one reason to doubt it was a curlew), but the standing water, which looks wide and of at least a foot deep, seems to show it as a possible fine sequestered feeding place.

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Honolulu, T.H.: The first recorded observation of the bunting, Passerina leclancheri, was made in April by an Audubon member, Miss Charlotta Hoskins, who saw a group of about twelve of these birds in a Hau tree on Huelani Street, Manoa-uka. This bird belongs to the Fringillidae, or family grouping of finches, grosbeaks, and sparrows, and to the subfamily of Cyznoispiza (painted finches), and is a native of southwestern Mexico. Passerina leclancheri has been imported and released on Oahu by the Hui Manu on three different occasions--in the late summer of 1941, early in



1947 and again in 1949-1950.

In 1941, twenty pairs were released at the HSPA experiment station in Manoa Valley. In 1947 twenty-four pairs were released on the Wm. L. Mitchell estate at Kaneohe; twelve pairs at the Dr. James R. Judd home, and the remaining pairs turned loose on Makiki Round Top and on Ferdinand Street. Twelve pairs were brought into Hawaii in 1949 and released in February 1950 on Maunalani Heights after having been caged at the Kapiolani Zoo for a short period of time.

The following description is quoted from Robert Ridgeway's Birds of North America (Bulletin No. 50, Pt. I, (1901) US National Museum, p. 589):

Adult male: Pileum bright yellowish green (apple green), rest of upper parts, including auricular region and sides of neck, bright cerulean or deep turquoise blue; the back usually more or less tinged with green; lores, orbital ring and under parts yellow (lemon or canary) deepening into Cadmium yellow or orange on chest.

Adult female: Above grayish green becoming bluish on upper tailcoverts and tail; remiges edged with greenish blue or bluish green; lore and orbital ring, and under-parts yellow (dull gamboge to Naples red) shaded with grayish or olive across chest and along sides.

There is little difference in size between the sexes--the adult male measures 5 inches, the adult female, 4.7 inches.

Locally these birds have been called by the common names of Mexican bunting, Butterfly bunting of Mexico, and Mexican rainbow bunting. However, the only common name I have been able to find listed for Passerina leclancheri in any authoritative ornithological record is Leclancher's Non-pariel. -- Priscilla G. Harpham.

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Bird walk - Poamoho Trail: On March 12th, the Hawaii Audubon Society made its monthly field trip to Poamoho Trail. The ohia lehua was not as much in bloom as we had hoped, but the birds were out in good number. Seen by various members of the party were elepaio, amakihi, apapane, iiwi, white eyes and the Japanese Hill robin. No attempt is made to give the numbers of individuals seen, but the apapane were most in evidence, one group within the party reporting 37 seen. Hill robins were next in number, and many more were heard. The mystery bird was not seen, but was heard by one member of the party, Miss Reba Robinson, who was on her first trip with us. It is believed that the lehua will be much more favorable for seeing birds at the time of the April bird walk, when we hope to return to Poamoho, weather permitting. -- H. Paul Porter.

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Bird walk - Poamoho Trail: Days of intermittent rains preceded the 16th of April, leaving the scheduled trip somewhat in doubt, but a partial clearing on Saturday, with clear skies on Sunday brought out 15 members and guests, all willing to chance Poamoho's rains and mud.

Our first stop was at Wheeler Field, where three skylarks were seen and heard. Apparently the larks are returning to that area, a favorite spot before the wartime activity drove them away. Here also two plover were seen, beautifully garbed in breeding plumage.



It seemed inadvisable to attempt to drive over Poamoho's jeep road so the cars were parked at the entrance, and the road covered on foot. The lush vegetation, rain-clean and fresh, seemed more beautiful than ever. Yellow lehua was noted in abundance. Apapane, amakihi and elepaio were observed in scattered numbers along the way. When we reached one gulch rich in lehua, upon which the apapane were feeding, much time was spent watching them flit from one tree to another, but no accurate count was possible, because of the numbers and the amount of activity. Hill robins swelled the chorus of song from behind every clump of trees, but remained out of sight.

The stop for lunch was made about a quarter of a mile from the entrance of the trail proper. For five or ten minutes we watched a little grey-green bird in a koa tree fairly close at hand, trying to decide whether it was a female amakihi, a young amakihi, or a creeper. Its habits were amakihi-like, for it searched the leaves and twigs almost wholly, with only an occasional foray upon the limbs. Despite this, the final decision was that the beak was straight, and that faint wing bars could be seen - so, a creeper! No note was heard, to make the identification certain, to the mind of this car-birder.

A heavy downpour drove the lunchers under an overhanging ledge, which sufficed as shelter for a time, but black skies and occasional thunderclaps turned us toward the cars. It had been a good day, lack of sunshine, and of thrushes, notwithstanding. -- Grenville Hatch.

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#### JUNE ACTIVITIES:

FIELD TRIP: June 11th, to Kipapa in the Koolau Range this side of Wahiawa. Meet at the Library of Hawaii at 8:00 A.M., bringing lunch (and car if possible). We have not journeyed to Kipapa lately, and it will be interesting to compare the bird life seen here with that on Poamoho.

MEETING: June 19th, Staff Work Room of the Library of Hawaii (first floor on the left corridor) at 7:30 P.M. The study group will continue with further reports on individual studies of bird identification and a review of bird topography.

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