

THE ELEPAIO

Journal of the
Hawaii Audubon Society



For the Better Protection
of Wildlife in Hawaii

Volume 16, Number 6

December 1955

HAWAII'S BIRDS IN THEIR HOMES: HOW TO SAVE THEM EXTINCTION
By George C. Munro

Published in the Honolulu Star-Bulletin, July 28 - August 25, 1945

VII. Beautiful Bird Sightings on Outlying Islands

Having previously mentioned some beautiful bird sightings which will be available on outlying islands, let me try to describe some of them in greater detail.

The little white tern, love bird or fairy tern of universal appeal, has the warmest place in my affections of any bird. The last two names fit it perfectly, but as both have been preempted by other birds in the Pacific, I prefer to call it white tern. Its plumage is almost pure white, only the midrib of its wing feathers is light brown; it has large black eyes with a thin black ring around them; bill blue and black; legs and toes light blue, webs white, claws black. All its colors are dainty; in fact, everything about the bird is dainty, even to the fish it carries crosswise in its bill to feed its young. It can pack nine or ten little fish across its bill from the tip to base.

Unlike most other terns it does not go in flocks but is scattered over the island. I have seen this lovely bird on many Pacific islands. I once walked about half a mile with twelve of them circling around my head, a friendly escort. But on no island have I seen it in such numbers as on Sand island of Midway islands. A recent estimate of the number there is 20,000. I was on Sand island 54 years ago and I saw only one of these birds there - a solitary little chick. It thrives in human environment and loves trees. Sand island has been settled since 1707. Trees have been planted, birds encouraged and protected from predaceous animals. Men in large numbers have inhabited the island for six years. During all this time white terns have increased prodigiously.

To see this dainty bird flying around among the trees and shrubbery is an inspiring sight. Its flight is somewhat like that of our white tame pigeons, but infinitely more graceful; in repose and on its egg it is the picture of innocence. It makes no nest, but lays its egg almost anywhere. Its eggs are often found in crotches of tree branches, knotholes or any place offering a secure base. One I saw on a window sill; one on top of a 4x4 inch ironwood fence post; another was on a 1x3 inch road marker with a 1x3 nailed against the top, allowing it a two inch space. Its first egg had been knocked off by a passing truck. As I stepped back it moved up to the egg, raised its long breast feathers like an apron, sat down facing the egg and covered it completely with its feathers. It was a pretty sight. One had an egg in a crotch that was too narrow for the bird to sit comfortably. A kindly person had cut away a small branch and the bird felt more at ease. One was shown me sitting on the egg of a sooty tern (larger than its own) which it had completely covered with its feathers.

A humanitarian individual, Arthur Wagner, has seven or eight chicks each on a perch fixed around the trunk of a banyan tree. These little orphan chicks have been separated from their parents by one mishap or another and brought to him by the finders. He catches small fish, keeps them in a bucket of sea water and feeds the birds with his fingers. When I last called to see the birds he had one newly hatched by an electric light bulb to keep it warm. One he had raised was flying around. Wagner said they learned to fly themselves and also to catch fish.

Why could we not bring some of these hand raised chicks here to start a colony on Koahikaipo by Makapuu head? There are no rats there to interfere with them and they could thrive there. They could raise their young on the rocks as they do on Laysan island. Popoia island, by Lanikai, is an ideal place for them, but for rats. Why not destroy the rats, establish the white tern and make of the island a little paradise. I failed to get a permit to transport some of these harmless birds across the island of Oahu five years ago. A more enlightened policy may prevail now. Perhaps the Hui Manu might undertake this importation. I should be delighted to give any assistance I could.

One of the most beautiful sights in bird life is the midday frolicking flight of this bird and two other species. They fly up and down, backwards and forwards over a given area for hours. There would be about a score of these white terns to be seen from the advantageous lookout I had on the sun porch or balcony of the commanders residence. I never tired of watching them and regretted only that I had not more time for this enjoyment. Sometimes three or more would rise to a great height. I was informed these were males competing for the attention of a female. Once mated, they fly in pairs and very graceful they are, flying up and down among the trees and fluttering, stationary in the air, where the vegetation is thick. It is a joy to watch them.

The white tern is sacred in the South seas, and on Niihau of the Hawaiian group. The natives of the Ellis group are afraid of it. They say it is a "bad bird" and will bring trouble on them if they interfere with it. It is almost sacred on Midway, as everyone loves it. The purity of its plumage, beauty of its flight, gentleness of its voice and friendliness to man certainly earn reverence for it.

The silky white plumage of the red-tailed bird (Bos'n), its bright red bill and two long red tail feathers give it a distinctive and beautiful appearance. It can readily be seen at close quarters as it sits upon its nest, for it will fight rather than leave its egg or young. Thus the beautiful rosy blush in the feathers of some individuals, can be seen to advantage. In flight this bird gives a spectacular display. On warm sunny days it rises into the air and goes through a variety of evolutions. It flies up and down uttering its rather harsh cry. There will be groups in different areas sometimes mingled with white and sooty terns, the whole making a beautiful display.

It has become famous for its flights backwards. Walter Donaghho thus described it: "The air above Eastern island early this afternoon was filled with hundreds of Bos'n birds all going through their curious aerial dance, in which the birds fly backwards in circles. (Going backwards the birds fly upwards in a half circle, then drive forwards down, sweeping upward again to complete the circle.)" I have not seen this but have seen them stop in flight, sometimes in company, and take a fluttering flight backwards with the wind. In their frolicking flight they turn their tails sideways and down underneath them at intervals, holding it in these positions for several seconds at a time.

Like other of the sea birds their displays are different at different periods of the breeding season. To see these three species as I saw them from about 11 a.m. to the middle of the afternoon on sunny days is a sight one could never tire of. The red-tailed tropic bird has lost the use of its legs for walking or standing. In rising on the wing it flaps along the ground for a short distance and seems to have no trouble in getting into flight. Its heavy breast feathers and air cushion under the skin breaks its fall when landing. But if tossed into the air it can not take wing and drops heavily onto the ground.

I have never had the good fortune to be on a sea breeding island when the Bonin island petrel arrives about the middle of August, so shall quote a description from Rothschild as given by Schauinsland on Laysan island in August 1896: "Against the dissolving evening glow was sharply traced the silhouette of a magnificent flier which cut through the air with the keenest and at the same time the most elegant movements, inaudible and with almost no movement of its wings. The manner in which it dashed along was unknown to us and we saw that a new arrival had reached our island. The next evening there were more and the third, thousands filled the air. The new guests were pretty birds barely the size of domestic pigeons ... " Walter Donaghoo on Midway in September, 1940, says: "They literally filled the air."

The Laysan albatross or gooney bird is a beautiful bird. Let me quote Mrs. Hector McD. Moir describing a pair that visited Kauai on March 19, 1945: "Their flight was the most thrilling bird flight we have ever seen. There was high wind blowing and they soared and coasted and rushed past us at a terrific rate of speed, their wing tips literally brushing the tops of the weeds ... They continued their ecstatic flight. We will never forget the magnificence of it."

Imagine visiting Laysan island in the late 1880's where about a million of these beautiful birds came in to nest. I was told that the island was white with them. Even now there are believed to be over 100,000 on the two islands of Midway. Laysan island which has been undisturbed by the war and is recovering from the abuse of its bird life in the early 1900's will have infinitely more. It will offer an ideal place to see the famous gooney dance in the early months of the year and the young exercising their wings in July, when the whole island will appear to be about to take flight. I saw this on Lisiansky island in 1891. It was a wonderful sight. I shall describe the dance as I saw it in 1891: Half a dozen will stand facing each other, bobbing their heads and rubbing their bills together and going through a variety of actions. But when two get together, it is a better sight. They approach each other with peculiar stepping motions (somewhat like a cakewalk strut). They bob and bow frantically to one another, then rub their bills together with a whistle; pause, snapping their bills with lightning speed, then one will shake its head and whistle; one or both will raise a wing straightening itself up on its legs, clap its bill under the wing, then raise its head and stretch it up the full length on its neck with bill perpendicular and make a long groaning sound. Between acts they go through the motions of the cakewalk. It is most amusing to watch them. They perform this without tiring, completely ignoring the observer's presence.

not

I have/seen the black-footed albatross dance, but most observers say that it is a more vigorous and more graceful dance than that of the white gooney.

To be continued

BOOK REVIEW:

Matthews, G.V.T. Bird Navigation. Cambridge University Press. 1955. 141 pp. Illus. Bibliography. Cambridge monographs in experimental biology, No. 3 "The scope of this short book is limited to the study of only one aspect of bird migration that of the manner in which birds find their way in unknown country; their navigation." - p. 1. "A Manx shearwater, taken across the Atlantic and released more than three thousand miles from its nest, was back on its egg within twelve and a half days. How did it find its way? Dr. Matthews has spent several years investigating this ability of birds to return home, both before migrations and after experimental dispersement, and has done much of the really critical research in this field." - Taken from book jacket.

This book is available at the Library of the Hawaii Sugar Planter's Association Experiment Station.

OSPREY AT HAUULA BEACH

The Society's Field Trip, October 9th, really began at 10:30 the night before, when our intrepid hiker Grace Gossard received an excited call from Paul Breese reporting that he had seen an osprey out at Hauula on the windward side. And so as we gathered at the Library Sunday morning the talk was of little else than the osprey. In due course the prospect of hiking up Aiea trail seemed less and less attractive, so when we started out it was in the direction of Hauula rather than toward Aiea. Grace Gossard, Ruth Rockafellow, Al Labrecque, Mace Norton, Chuck Hansen and Bob Pyle comprised the party. We reached Hauula village around 9:30 and continued on a mile or two northward, keeping a watchful eye aloft for soaring hawks. When we reached the little lagoon next to the long racks used for drying fish nets, we stopped and continued our investigation on foot along the beach. Upon our return to the lagoon, our growing discouragement was suddenly dispelled as first Chuck and then Grace spotted our quarry, the osprey.

For the next three hours this bird put on a show for us the likes of which we had never before experienced, either here or on the mainland. The osprey is a large hawk with a wingspread of 4 to 6 feet, which feeds almost exclusively on fish. The lagoon was small, barely 75 feet across and a hundred yards long, but was several feet deep in the center and was fed by a fresh water stream coming in under the highway. The osprey would hover on motionless wings up near the tops of the tall trees, supported by the tradewind. Then, apparently spotting his prey, he would glide slowly outward, shake his feet a couple of times, then dive with outstretched talons straight down across the lagoon to hurtle into the shallow water on the far edge. It seemed to crash into the sand with great force, the impact softened only by an inch or two of water over the sand. It would sit in the water a moment, shake out its feathers a bit, then fly off to a low tree limb. We watched it go through this performance several times, and on one occasion we could see that it's methods were productive. It caught what was apparently a mullet, about 6 or 7 inches in length, which it held proudly in its talons, first in the shallow water, then on the nearby dry sand, and finally over in a small grassy area.

It also made several dives into other shallow spots in the lagoon, even where the ground was rocky rather than sandy. Its hovering near the tree tops was evidently for the purpose of watching the lagoon without appearing too obvious to the fish, since it could not be seen against the trees as easily as it could be seen against the sky. As it made its dives, it kept its wings out stretched right down to the final moment. We speculated on whether this might be for the purpose of driving or herding the fish ahead of it toward the shallow water, since it always made its dive across the lagoon toward the far edge.

During the morning we had excellent opportunities to study this bird close by. Its pattern was well-marked, particularly about the head, just as is shown in the mainland bird books. It had a dingy area in the middle of its white breast which may have been dirt. When not hovering or diving, it perched on dead tree branches 20 or 30 feet above the ground, occasionally lower. On one occasion it perched on one of the net racks -- three feet above the ground -- and allowed approach to within about ten feet before flying off.

From its flight and general appearance, the bird seemed to be in good health. The young boys from the locality who watched it with us, reported they had first seen it on Friday, October 7th, and had seen it fishing out over the reef in the ocean. They said they had seen it catch fish on several occasions, and since we saw that it did not eat the mullet for at least half an hour after catching it, we concluded it was able to get all the food it needed. We could see that the lagoon was well-stocked with fish.

After eating lunch by the lagoon, we reluctantly decided to head back to town. At Kahana Bay, both coming and going, we counted at least 8 adult coots and at least 4 juvenile birds hatched this year. The juveniles, while nearly as large as the adults,

were entirely different in pattern. They were light gray above and white below, and in the distance resembled a small mainland grebe rather than their very dark parents. At least one adult gallinule was seen.

We also spent an hour or two on the Castle trail gathering strawberry guavas and had an enjoyable visit with Mrs. Guidett.

Bob Pyle

FIELD NOTES:

Field Trip - October 23, 1955: Eight birders showed up for our trek around the islands to observe shore and water birds. In the group was Coco Rockafellow, Billy Pyle, Arthur Nakagami, Peggy Ferris, Kay Imamura, Laura Draper, Grace Gossard, and our congenial guest, Ed Wilson from Anapalis. At our first stop, Kahana Bay, we met Al Stoops and Chuck Hanson, who had started birding at five A.M. Kahana Bay revealed about a dozen coot and one (possibly two) adult gallinule. A good deal of time and thought was put into discussion of some birds who were almost coot size which were gray and had a grebe-like appearance, and exhibited tilting feeding habits. Some of the smaller ones had a reddish hue to the bill and frontal plate, but eventually the consensus was they were young coot. A surprise to all of us was to hear the clear concise song of the Chinese thrush, followed by an elepaio call, and accompanied by the singing of the liothrix. All of these seemed out of place in such a low area as Kahana, although the mountains there are near to the shore.

At our next stop, a couple miles beyond Hauula, we hoped to see the osprey we observed 2 weeks ago, but it was no where around. We spoke again to Mr. H. A. Walker who has a home at the Kahuku end of the lagoon and learned that it disappeared from the area on October 10. This was confirmed by 3 youngsters who lived in the neighborhood and who had been there on our first trip and had been interested in the bird. Mr. Walker said the osprey continued to fish during the time he was there but did not seem to eat the fish he caught. David Goodside, who was up from Hawaii, reported to me that he had seen an osprey in November 1951 in Hilo. It hung around a mullet pond for some time and eventually was shot by the owner of the pond as it seemed to be so voracious in its habits, taking a great many fish, but not eating all that it caught. Perhaps this was a characteristic in our recent osprey, and he went the way of the other bird. Hauula in addition revealed only one plover, one tattler, and four sanderlings.

Kahuku pond, our next stop, was amazingly low on water, and the usual number of birds was considerably reduced. We have learned that the water level of this pond is dependent upon the workings of the Kahuku sugar mill, so it is understandable bird life there will fluctuate. On the pond side we spotted a flock of pintails most of which were on the canal, but many took off soon after we arrived. The stilt, sanderling, plover, turnstone and coot were all less numerous than we observed on our earlier fall trips to the pond. No gallinule were seen.

Of keen interest was the dowitcher we sighted upon arrival, and which stayed close by to aid us in identification. Peterson's description of their fall plumage fitted the bird well. It was slightly larger than the golden plover with whom it was feeding, straight long snipe-like bill, gray breast with white lower rump and tail which was quite noticeable in flight. The wings were edged in white. Peterson speaks of its feeding like a sewing machine, rapidly jabbing its bill perpendicularly into the mud, and our bird certainly upheld the comment.

We stopped briefly at the small pond north of Kahuku where in earlier days the curlew had been observed, but this area is so beleaguered with stock car racing near by we felt we were lucky to spot even 9 pintail ducks.

We arrived at the Waipahu mud flats (West Loch) which in mid-afternoon light is a hard place to bird from the shore. By walking out over the pickleweed, and stepping occasionally into muck we were able to face towards shore and could see much better. Plover, stilt, and sanderling were numerous; night herons and pintails were fairly common; a few wanderling tattlers were seen. There were no ruddy turnstones. We had a good view of one black bellied plover which when seen with the golden plover could not be misidentified.

Grace Gossard

+++++

Bird Note: On October 20 a mocking bird was seen near the parking lot at the Kamehameha School for girls. It was first observed on the trunk of a tree growing at an angle, then flew into the branches and leaves where it remained for several minutes moving about before it took flight. It did not sing.

Grace Gossard

DECEMBER ACTIVITIES:

FIELD TRIPS: December 11 - To Kahuku to observe shore birds. Meet in front of the Library of Hawaii at 8:00 a.m.

December 26 - Christmas bird count. Call Miss Grace Gossard for details.

MEETING: December 19 - At the Aquarium at 7:30 p.m.

* - * - *

HAWAII AUDUBON SOCIETY OFFICERS:

President:	Mr. Robert L. Pyle
Vice-Presidents:	Miss Grace Gossard
	Mr. Al Labrecque
Secretary:	Miss Margaret Newman
Treasurer:	Mrs. Blanche A. Pedley
Editor:	Mrs. Priscilla G. Harpham

MAILING ADDR SS: P.O. Box 5032, Honolulu 14, Hawaii
Material for the ELEPAIO: 3661 Tantalus Drive, Honolulu 14, Hawaii

DUES: Regular - \$2.00 per annum
Junior (18 years and under) - \$1.00 per annum
Life - \$50.00