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## WILDLIFE OF LAYSAN ISLAND Continued By Rick Warner

This is the second of two parts, narrating the five man expedition to Laysan Island during May and June of 1958. The purposes of this trip were several, primary emphasis being placed on a complete census of the island, banding of several thousand sea birds, and observations on the bird fauna in general. The second major purpose was to capture alive a number of the rare and unique Laysan teal, which would ultimately be sent to selected aviculturists throughout the world for propagation. It was felt that this, more than any other approach, would best protect the teal from an early extinction.

The major projects to which our group assigned themselves went smoothly and without problems of any significance. The important, if distasteful, job of banding young albatrosses was done a thousand birds at a time to spread the work out over several days. The main reason for the banding activities, other than providing badly needed life-history information, is, if possible, to cast some light on the bird problem at Midway Islands.

For many thousands of years the albatrosses have used the Midway Islands as breeding grounds; civilized man's first full time occupancy began shortly after the turn of the century, when a cable station was established on Sand Island, the larger of the two main islands. A few years back the Navy greatly expanded its air facility there, building extensive runways and enormous hangars. At the same time new construction for dependent housing and other habitat-altering activities were instituted, and the albatross soon became dispossessed of much of its ancestral nesting grounds. What had been almost a unique symbiotic relationship between man and the albatross degenerated into something much less. Previous to all the recent activity the gooney bird and man had lived in reasonable harmony, the humans amused by the peculiar antics of the creatures as they went through the strange and bizarre courtship dance, and the albatrosses no doubt enjoying the equally bizarre behavior of the newcomers.

A decision somewhere in the internal organs of the pentagon changed all this. Man and bird came to compete for nesting sites; and for air space. And as man is rather more adequately equipped than birds for this sort of competition, the albatross shortly became a displaced species on Midway. High mortality to eggs and young aggravated the problem, creating large numbers of "unemployed" birds which spent most of their time congregating on runways or soaring over and through the patterns followed by the increasing number of aircraft utilizing the island. "Bird strikes" became a commonly used word, ordinarily being expressed in the same vein that "fleas" are referred to when discussing dogs. Eventually, however, the incipient hostility toward the albatross reached such proportions that it was concluded steps were necessary to correct the problem. Fortunately a sufficient number of conservation watchdogs were at



hand to guide the decisions of the military, and after considerable dickering the Fish and Wildlife Service was given a few thousand dollars to study the problem. Biologists were assigned to investigate the situation, and with certain notable exceptions the Navy and the conservationists worked together in an attempt to find an adequate solution.

It was quickly discovered that pathetically little was known about the albatross, and it soon became equally apparent that the problem was far more complex than originally suspected. So the biologists went to work; they designed a project aimed at learning something of the life history and the habits of the albatross, as experience has demonstrated a thousand times over that this is the only logical way to seek a solution. Birds were banded and released, birds were painted and their flight patterns studied. Experimental killing of large numbers within fixed boundaries was attempted, and the subsequent results analysed. And as the data was amassed, an immediate solution became less and less likely. Other questions appeared, one of the principal ones being "what about the breeding colonies on other islands?" Would the offspring from Laysan and Lisianski attempt to establish nesting sites on islands other than those where they first saw the light of day? This and other unknowns had to be evaluated. Hence the banding program on Laysan Island.

Unfortunately, perhaps tragically, the Navy decided it could not wait for the slow turnings of the wheels of scientific research to resolve the dilemma. A few weeks ago the military withdrew its support of the Fish and Wildlife project, and the Service was forced to recall its personnel to the mainland. Many, if not most, of the questions remain unanswered; enigmas now that stand like shoals in an uncharted sea, ready to founder the inevitable "quick cures" that will surely be attempted. At this point it is perhaps academic to point out that the damage sustained from one "bird strike" often costs more than an entire year of the research program so recently terminated.

Observations, banding, and ultimately live-capturing numbers of the Laysan teal occupied most of our evening hours. After the sun had gone down and the heat and glare of the sand abated, the teal would come out in large numbers from the beach morning glory and the scaevola patches where they passed the heat of the day, and would spend the better part of the night searching out the insects and plant foods that make up their diet. Most of their time was consumed searching for the larvae of a moth which is very common on the island. These the ducks would find by sifting through the sand under certain prostrate succulent plants, seizing the larvae and gobbling them down eagerly whenever one was found. This feeding activity was universally practiced by the ducks as observed during this and a previous visit to the island. It strongly suggests that at this time of the year at least, the teal are highly if not entirely insectivorous. It also offers one possible solution to the question "how do these birds manage to survive with no standing water?" Historically of course Laysan Island did have a fresh (or almost fresh) water pond at the southerly end of the Lagoon. However, diligent searching has failed to locate such a source of water and we must conclude that the drifting sands during earlier, less tranquil, periods in the island's history have completely filled in the depression. Dew or rain during the summer months is inadequate to fulfill such a need, and the lack of a concentration of ducks around the one small pool of fresh water which we did find among the rocks at the ocean's edge further strengthens the hypothesis. The distribution of ducks was surprisingly even throughout the island; so much so that their relationship with and attachment to the vegetative areas wherein the moth larvae could be found stood out as the only foci of activity. It is quite possible then that the succulent larvae provide adequate metabolic water to sustain the birds during this driest time of the year.

Approximately sixty teal were banded in the northwest quadrant of the island, boundaries for the area being a line east from the ironwood tree to the lagoon, and north to the beginning of the sand dunes area. In the short time we were there no significant observations were possible on movement of the birds within or out of this area.



Live-capturing of the teal to be taken to Honolulu was accomplished in the same manner as that used in banding. One man with a Coleman lantern and net in hand, and a headlamp secured to his brow would seek out the nocturnal feeding areas of the ducks. After a feeding bird was sighted he would, with the exercise of reasonable discretion, slip up on the unsuspecting, or more accurately, unwary subject. A quick sweep with the net, and the victim was either banded and released or placed in specially constructed quarters for the long voyage back to permanent captivity. With this method we captured well over a hundred birds, of which thirty-six were retained to provide stock for what we hope will be a perpetually maintained population in other parts of the world.

The monk seal, now apparently reestablished among these islands in fair numbers, provided many hours of interesting observation. These aquatic mammals showed little inclination toward pugnacity, the females with young being much the most sensitive toward any disturbance. We found it possible to swim in the lagoon with several of these inquisitive and curious beasts for company. In reality they seemed as interested in us as we in them, and many times have come so close in an attempt to scrutinize the swimmer as to have alarmed both parties. One example of this, taken from the writer's notes, perhaps will illustrate the point. Dale Rice and the writer had completed a morning's census activities, and had retired to the bay to escape the heat and perhaps spear a fish for dinner. The water was extremely clear and we could see for well over one hundred feet. Fish were everywhere; large multi-colored parrot fish, an occasional ulua, many small papio, and many species with which I was unfamiliar. An occasional anemone was seen among the coral, but very few gastropods. Moving quite slowly we approached several seals which were swimming nearby; the creatures, upon seeing us, were obviously torn between the emotions of fear and curiosity. One of the bolder of the group, apparently determined to get a good, close-up view of the intruders, drifted slowly up to us. His large brown eyes regarded us with mixed curiosity and apprehension but he came resolutely on, determined to learn the nature of the strange beasts with disproportionate limbs and cyclops eyes.

By now the three of us had drifted over a submerged reef, and the incoming wavelets would periodically roll over us, temporarily obscuring our view until the myriad tiny bubbles of air had dissipated. Had I wished to I could have reached out and patted the bewhiskered muzzle, but dismissed the idea as impractical. We had reached the range where anxiety and curiosity balanced out, and were floating there contemplating each other when an unexpectedly large wave roared in over the reef. There was a moment of great confusion as the surge mixed us up like fish in a barrel, then the scene was obliterated by the dazzling glare of the froth and bubbles. For what seemed an eternity there was neither up nor down, both Dale and the seal being obscured by the iridescent fog. A large hairy body tumbled against me, then thrashed madly about as the poor frightened beast attempted to escape to safer waters. As the water cleared we could see our erstwhile friend making the greatest possible haste to regions of less chaos, his curiosity apparently amply satisfied.

One very quickly develops a deep affection for the island's wildlife when circumstances permit such close association as we were able to experience. Typical of this was our technique for photographing the teal as they went about their nocturnal business. We had discovered that by turning out all lights one could approach within flashbulb range without difficulty. The moon, being almost full, provided ample light for sighting and we spent many pleasant hours observing and taking photographs. One pair of ducks in particular became quite accustomed to our unusual behavior, and obliged us by feeding right at our feet. On one occasion one walked between my legs as though they were tree trunks, and stopped long enough to seek out a moth larva two inches from the end of my right big toe. If our activity disturbed them, as it occasionally did, the group would waddle around to the far side of a bunch grass clump, peer up at us through the stems while they quacked softly to each other, and then would move off slowly, feeding as they went.



The harmony seen among the many species of birds inhabiting the island, and the quiet dignity with which each kind pursued its life among the bunch grass and beach morning glory impressed us deeply. There was no evidence of conflict between the species as they sought nesting sites, laid eggs, and raised their young side by side on the sand. The feeling was more that of cooperation, of sharing an area that all of them realized was for their joint use. We humans were treated in much the same manner; we were left alone, perhaps examined with curiosity when we first appeared on the scene, then left to our own devices until we demonstrated our irresponsibility or malice.

Laysan Island has about it a charm and fascination that is difficult to analyse, yet so real as to be inescapable. By the end of our stay we had all developed an attachment for the place which made the contemplation of our impending departure rather depressing. Perhaps the following, taken from the writer's notes, will illustrate this. Ted Landers and I had been out until 3 AM that last night taking photos of the teal and shearwaters. "We walked slowly back to camp in the moonlight, reluctant to leave the tranquility we had found. Our lamps were turned off and we strolled silently through the moonlit herbage, our ears now so accustomed to the calls of the sea birds that the gentle breeze seemed the only sound. Overhead the gibbous moon imparted to the scattered fleece of cloud a silvery jewel-like lustre; and beyond, the pulsating light of a myriad stars glimmered down, a reminder of the eternity of limitless space that lay beyond.

"When we reached camp I bid Ted goodnight, and yet unable to sleep took the lantern and went in search of the Bulwer's petrels that were nesting under the remains of Max Schlemmer's roof. Stretching out on the sand near the nesting area I quietly watched the little black petrels as they went about their life's business. On the sand nearby a pair were talking of love, occasionally nibbling affectionately at one another. They took no notice of my presence, and when a third bird strolled onto the scene with the characteristic waddling, near-sighted gait peculiar to these birds, I was inspected with the same detachment as though I were another bunch grass or building remnant under which a burrow might be excavated. For almost an hour I lay there seeing the world as a petrel would see it, my eyes only inches above the sand; in complete sympathy with the activities of these diminutive creatures that would occasionally spread their wings and with bat-like flight disappear into the night, their places soon to be taken by other members of the colony returning from feeding at sea.

"Sleep finally came that night as I lay there watching the shearwaters wheeling across the face of the moon, the cries of the ever-restless terns blending with the soft rustling of the bunch grass as it stirred from the caressing of the cool night wind."

This, then, is Laysan Island. To the scientist a living laboratory, to the adventurer a place of challenge and beauty. For many times over and for many different reasons it well deserves its title of "the greatest bird island in the world."

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#### UNUSUAL BIRDS SIGHTED

By Joseph E. King

Dr. Frank Richardson, presently of the University of Washington and formerly a resident of Hawaii, recently spent several days in Hawaii on his return from an AEC project in the Marshall Islands. On Labor Day morning Dr. Richardson, my son Peter and I set forth to see some of the bird sights of Oahu. Dr. Richardson was interested, of course, in renewing his acquaintance with some of the areas where he had done research during the year (1954, I believe) that he was the recipient of a Bishop-Yale grant.



We will not list all of the birds sighted during the day but we did want to get on record the occurrence of four rarities:

White Tern (Gygis alba). A pair were observed flying between the mainland of Oahu, at Ulupau Head, and the Island of Moku Manu. The White Tern has been seen here before, but very rarely.

Blue-faced Booby (Sula dactylatra). While studying Moku Manu through the telescope we spotted a single booby of this species resting on the ground near the eastern tip of the island, at the same general location where Dr. Richardson had found this species before.

Snowy Plover (Charadrius alexandrinus). A single bird, first taken as a sanderling but later identified as a small, white, un-ringed plover, was sighted on the mud flats on the eastern side of the Kaneohe Marine Air Station. The Snowy Plover does not appear on Mr. Bryan's checklist for the Hawaiian Islands.

Black-bellied Plover (Squatarola squatarola). A single, large, gray plover of this species was found on the mud flat at the Kuliouou Beach Park, Honolulu. It was distinctly larger and lighter in color than the Golden Plovers which surrounded it.

So it was a fine day for renewing old acquaintances and making new ones.

September 3, 1958.

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#### FIELD NOTES:

Field Trip, August 10, 1958.

Hoping for a fine day in the mountains, a trip on the Poamoho Trail was scheduled to start at six o'clock in the morning but only eight members, and no visitors, were on hand at that hour. Tremendous rains two days before had us worried, and it took only a very short ride on the road in the pineapple fields to tell us it would be impossible to carry out our plans.

The sun was shining enticingly on the Waianae Range and it was remembered that the society had not visited Mount Kalena for some years. We applied for permission to traverse Schofield Reservation, only to be met with "KAPU" across the entrance to the trail up Kalena. The area was being used for shooting practice in summer maneuvers. Here we heard Leiothrix, white-eye and doves.

Believing it too early, yet curious, we decided to visit Waipahu Flats to see if any migrants had returned from the nesting grounds in the far north. Golden plover in winter plumage, with one or two specimens still in summer dress, were seen through the 'scope among numerous Hawaiian stilt, and before we left the spot we added to our list sanderling, turnstone, tattler, night heron and coot.

The day being yet young, we decided to visit East Loch, but dumping and filling have destroyed the old feeding grounds and are lost to the birds.

Next to be visited was Salt Lake where coots only were observed through glasses.

Moanalua Gardens being close by, we drove there to eat our lunch under the trees, then went our separate ways.

Margaret Smail



Field Trip, August 23, 1958, Popoia Island.

A party of ten, including members and guests, departed the Library of Hawaii at about 4:10 p.m. One more person joined the group at Kailua Beach where we were met by Frank Gonsalves and transported in his skiff to the island which lies about one-half mile offshore. Despite the presence of campers on the island we immediately saw birds. Between 5:45 p.m. (the time we arrived), and dusk (about 7:00 p.m.), we found 13 adult Wedge-tailed Shearwater in their nesting holes in the coral rock, and 18 young shearwater, one-third to one-half grown, also in holes in the rock. Some of the young were with a parent bird but most were alone. One adult shearwater was found brooding an egg, and one egg was found without an adult in the nest. A few shearwater were flying over the island at the time we arrived and their numbers increased greatly by dusk.

On the southwest corner of the island in separate holes in the rock we located an adult Bulwer's Petrel and a two-thirds grown young of the same species. This petrel is usually seen on visits to the island but always in small numbers. Prior to 7:00 p.m. we also sighted 5 Ruddy Turnstone, 1 Wandering Tattler (heard), and 1 Golden Plover. Just as darkness was approaching, 5 Great Frigate-birds flew over the island at considerable altitude. A small number of Sooty Terns were seen and heard overhead.

As the light faded the shearwater became more and more numerous and started to alight on the island and to waddle very awkwardly to their burrows or gather in groups to "rest" and talk things over after the day at sea. At 7:00 p.m. 35 shearwater were observed on the ground or in flight over the island and dozens more could be seen with binoculars while looking offshore. At 7:10 p.m. about 75 birds were on, or over, the island. At 7:20, which was the latest that a count could be made, there were two aggregations of resting birds, one with 75 and the other with 35 shearwater. By this time the "moaning" of the birds was heard on all sides.

Only one dead shearwater was sighted.

The night-blooming maiopilo was everywhere in evidence and the beach heliotrope, not as prominent, was also in flower. The weather was perfect and there was a three-quarter moon overhead. As always the visit was an interesting experience that was enjoyed by all.

Joseph E. King

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Field Trip, September 14, 1958, to Kalena Trail.

The day started auspiciously at the Library of Hawaii with the sight of a Frigate Bird soaring high over head. American Golden Plover were observed in numbers on the lawns of Schofield as we came through. A Bush Warbler was not only heard, but actually seen distinctly by Blanche Pedley and Euphie Shields at the foot of the steep slope which led to the trail.

Frank Stephenson.

On the upper portion of the trail in the Kalena district, rear of Schofield Barracks, we had a fabulous day. About 1 mile above the point where we joined the trail along the ridgetop we entered an area that provided some of the most exciting birding that any of our group had experienced on Oahu. Along the crest of the ridge in a dense ohia-koa forest we encountered large numbers of Amakihi (I estimated that I saw 50) in a variety of plumage states. There were immature birds of light gray-green color with prominent double wing-bars and a flesh-colored bill that did not appear as prominently down-curved as in the adult. A few of the Amakihi were almost uniformly dark greenish-yellow, with dark-colored, down-curved bill and no wing bars. We wondered if these were possibly young males that were approaching maturity. The mature males were a brilliant yellow on the head, upper back and upper breast, and had a dark eye-streak, a feature which most of us had not noticed before on the Amakihi.



A visitor from England, Lt. Gen. Gerald Lathbury, and I were able to study a Creeper at close range. The bird was light gray below and darker gray-green above; the posterior wing bar was prominent while the anterior bar was represented by a mere spot; the bill was flesh-colored, not markedly down-curved but almost straight, and appeared thicker near the base and generally shorter than in the Amakihi. The bird seemed larger in overall body size than the Amakihi and was proportioned differently. It also displayed the characteristic food-searching behavior which we associate with the mainland Brown Creeper. On our way down the trail I saw a second specimen of the Creeper.

The high point of the trip, however, were the excellent views we obtained of Iiwi, a bird which in the past 12 or 15 years has been seen very rarely on Oahu. Three adults in brilliant crimson plumage were observed plus at least 5 juveniles yellow-green in color with some spotting of orange or crimson. It was very encouraging to see that the Iiwi were reproducing here. The songs of the Iiwi mixed with those of Amakihi and Apapane were heard frequently. Apapane, both adults and juveniles, were numerous, perhaps 25 were seen and many more heard. Elepaio were distributed all along the trail, and Leiostrix were heard singing in the ravine below. White-eye, North American Cardinal, and House Finch were also sighted.

Joseph E. King

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I had the privilege of spending Saturday morning, Sept. 13, 1958, with Lt. Gen. Gerald Lathbury of the British Army, an enthusiastic bird observer. Our chief object that morning was to see waterfowl and shore birds. Two unusual records were obtained: (1) a Skylark at Salt Lake, sighted in flight about 100 yards south of the south shore; and (2) a Least Tern at West Loch, Pearl Harbor. I do not believe the Skylark has been seen previously in the Salt Lake Area, so we have further evidence of its expanded range on Oahu. The Least Tern is a rare visitor to the Hawaiian Islands, having been seen only once before on Oahu, in 1953 at the Kaneohe Marine Air Station.

Joseph E. King

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A pair of elepaio were seen twice in my garden in Woodlawn during the week of September 1. Each time they were flitting around in a Christmas berry tree, vocal and gay as usual.

Euphie Shields

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HELP FOR THE NENE: The Federal government has allotted a grant of \$15,000 annually for the next five years for research, propagation and care of the Nene. This must be gratifying to those who have struggled so valiantly to carry on the work of preservation with very limited funds. According to local news stories, a part of the fund will be used to create more sanctuaries. C. Brewer & Co. Ltd. has recently turned over 8,100 acres of the Keauhou Ranch property for a Nene sanctuary under a cooperative agreement. The outlook for the Nene is indeed much brighter than it has been for many years.

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A LETTER from Al Labrecque encloses a clipping from the Albertan, Calgary, newspaper which reports that three baby whooping cranes have been sighted in the northwestern Canadian breeding grounds. This increases the known number to 35; the complete count will not be known until their return to the Aransas Wildlife Refuge in Texas.

Al also writes: "My brother's skepticism notwithstanding (he says there won't be any for five or six weeks) I still maintain I saw a flock of some 600 Canada Geese circling and wheeling toward a lake in western Saskatchewan. There are sea gulls on the lakes here. There are magpies now -- formerly none. I disturbed a conference



being held in the middle of the road by 50 or 60 crows. Many ducks and coots on the small lakes. A beaver on the North Saskatchewan river gave us a fine exhibition of tail-slapping last Sunday. Most interesting."

Al was revisiting old haunts in Canada -- this was written from Hartell, Alberta, on August 28th.

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#### OCTOBER ACTIVITIES:

FIELD TRIPS: FRANK STEPHENSON WILL LEAD OCTOBER TRIPS.

October 12 - To Waianu Trail, in the Waiahole Valley. Beautiful scenery, interesting vegetation, and, we hope, birds.

October 26 - To Pauoa Flats Trail (Trail #2a); branches off from the Manoa Cliff Trail (Trail #2), which is a loop trail along the Manoa Cliffs to back of Tantalus, and runs out to the rim of Pali overlooking Nuuanu Valley and the reservoir. Some of the birds reported heard and seen from this area are: apapane, amakihi, elepaio, owl, Shama thrush, Chinese thrush, and other more numerous birds - leiothrix, white-eye, and ricebird. Let's see what we can find of bird life close to home.

Meet at the Library of Hawaii at 7:00 a.m. for each trip.

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MEETING: October 20 - At the Aquarium auditorium at 7:30 p.m. Miss E. K. Lemon of Victoria, B.C., who is visiting Honolulu, will show slides of the flora and fauna of Victoria and Vancouver Island.

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