

THE ELEPAIO

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On July 18th the Society had its first bird walk since the Blitz. Nine people turned up and set off up the Woodlawn ridge trail. Its a steep trail and the day was hot, but we forgot our discomfort at the sight of a koae or white-tailed tropic bird sailing around, looking so cool and unhurried. They nest in crevices of the steep cliffs at the head of the valley but are less numerous than formerly, probably because of the mongoose.

The shade of a koa tree where we rested was so welcome that I stayed there, but the others reached the forest and found it cooler and more interesting among the trees. Some of us sat on a grassy bank and learnt to pick out the different birds from the tangle of notes we heard. White-eyes were plentiful, small parties continually moving about, keeping in touch with each other with tinkling notes. Thrushes were singing and hill robins were numerous, a family of young were calling for food, we heard the noisy chatter of the old birds and snatches of their song. The song is very like that of the thrush, but it is not so full and varied. Next day two of us were exploring near the water tank lower down and came across another group. They are getting quite numerous and pushing further down the slopes, this lot was somewhere near the 500 feet elevation so that we may soon expect to see them in the residential districts. For the benefit of those who are not familiar with the bird; it is about the size of a sparrow, red bill, orange throat shading into yellow on the breast, green or grayish green above with a red line along the edge of the closed wing. They are insect eaters and would pay no attention to sunflower seed. They might be attracted to the bird table by fruit or suet, on Hawaii they eat bread crumbs greedily. Birds know what is good for them and eat papaya seeds eagerly. We generally throw them away but if they are put in the used rinds from the breakfast table the linnets will soon clean them up and it will reduce the consumption of sunflower seed. We are putting out suet, two wire soap racks tied together and hung from a branch make a good holder and the birds are taking to it slowly. In time insect eating birds will get fond of it and we may have white-eyes, thrushes, mocking birds and hill robins at the bird tables.

To return to our walk. As we sat on the bank an elepaio came and inspected us and went on his business, linnets were singing their pretty rippling songs, small parties of them were moving about and we heard their coarse sparrow-like call notes. In Hawaii the male linnets, or to give it its full name, the California house finch, runs very much to yellow on the breast and head, instead of the usual crimson color. All shades between crimson and yellow can be seen but yellow certainly predominates. One authority tried to prove that the linnets in Hawaii has developed into a new species. This seems to us a little premature, at most a color variation which appears to persist in Hawaii may be in process of fixation and in time may deserve sub-specific rank.

To get back to the trail. The song of the amakihi and its thin call note were heard occasionally, but we failed to hear the apapane, which is usually about in that locality. Forest birds move about according to the flowering of the trees which provide the bulk of their food, the lehuas were not in flower there to any extent, possibly accounting for the absence of the birds.

It was a very enjoyable walk, though at the end some found it easier to slide down the steep slopes, and they did not bother to use ti leaves. We finished up at 3449 Paty Drive with a cold drink and a unanimous decision to go on the next walk, which will be at 2.00 p.m. Saturday, August 22nd, to Manoa Falls. Meet at corner of Upper Manoa Road and Oahu Avenue (bus terminus near Waioli Tea Rooms). Will those who have cars please bring them if possible?

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BIRDS OF HAWAII and Adventures in Bird Study

An Ocean Cruise
By George C. Munro
No 8 contd.

On Laysan Island the degree in which the birds prey on one another is an interesting study. The frigate birds take the young and the curlew, Telespiza and rail suck the eggs. No bird can safely leave its egg or nestling till it is grown sufficiently to care for itself. The gooney egg season was over when we were on Laysan but Captain Freeman told us that the curlew was an adept at sucking gooney's eggs. Leaning well back it brings its bill down on the egg putting a hole in it. Then after trimming the edges of the hole it inserts its bill and quickly sucks up the contents. The previous year's young frigates, recognizable by their white heads, hover over the terns' nesting place and pick up any unprotected chick. They then fly out over the water with a stream of comrades following in close pursuit. When on drops its prey, probably to kill it, he drops down and catches it before it reaches the water if another has not already seized it. If it does fall into the water it is deftly picked up from the surface without the frigate touching the water except with its bill. Generally, however, one of the others has secured it. One I saw at Lisiansky Island dropped a tern chick into the water, and instead of picking it up from the wing it settled beside it in the water, and stayed there a few seconds. This is very unusual. I have watched them when catching fish off the surface of the water in the lagoon; when one secured a fish sometimes another would fly up under it and snatch the fish from its bill. The frigate bird has so long deserted the water as a habitat that the webs of its feet have become so atrophied that they are almost gone. Likewise having deserted the land, it cannot stand on its feet, walk or rise from a perfectly level surface. Its home is in the air. When it comes to land it must be on an elevation or have a slope from which to take off. We saw in 1924 on Howland Island a large rookery of full-fledged young on their old nests on the ground. The site was a flat on the edge of a slope which faced the prevailing wind to facilitate the takeoff. There was terrible confusion when I disturbed them. On another slope, however, at some time a large number had died as they sat. The undisturbed skeletons were scattered all around. They may have perished because of calm weather or change in the direction of the wind which confined them to the ground till they died. Or possibly the

boobys from which they obtained their food had deserted the island for a time. I have been told by an eyewitness that the booby leaves an island for a season, perhaps in self defense and the frigates die in numbers; but I have not enough evidence to state this as a fact. When we disturbed the old frigates from their nests, last year's young birds dropped down and selected the proper sized chicks to swallow and picked them neatly off the nests. We saw them do this repeatedly. I saw one swallow a young bird that looked as large as my clenched fist. Brown boobys are their favorite victims for robbery but these were very scarce on Laysan at that time so the frigates pestered the little wedge-tailed shearwaters. It was pathetic to see an eighteen inch long shearwater harried by a number of these birds with a seven foot spread of wing. It is rather a fine sight to see about 100 of these birds sailing with motionless wings back and forward facing the wind, moving their heads from side to side and spreading and closing their long forked tails. A quotation from my journal: "It is interesting to watch the frigate birds when a rain-squall is coming up, they rise in two or three large flocks and circle round the edge of the cloud dodging the rain. After the shower is past you will see them in a long stream sailing slowly homewards at a great height some almost out of sight. They lower themselves by dropping like a stone for a short distance at a time."

June 27, 1891: We packed up and Captain Freeth took us out to the Kaalokai and we bid a most reluctant farewell to Laysan Island. We worked hard there for ten days collecting, preserving bird skins and blowing eggs, but surroundings had been pleasant. Captain Freeth was good company and he gave us much help and information about the island and its inhabitants. We had obtained a good series of most of the birds from egg to the adult bird. We even found nests of the small birds and the duck. We left with a very friendly feeling for all the inhabitants of the island.

We had much trouble with our specimens. A bluebottle fly about as big as a housefly was troublesome. They spotted our white skins and laid masses of eggs in the feathers. The skin eating beetle grub swarmed in the skins and kept us working on them all the way back to Honolulu. As with the birds the flies were unafraid and would sit still in one place and allow themselves to be crushed without attempting to escape. I consider myself fortunate to have seen Laysan before it suffered so much injury. My memory of it is that it was at that time the most fascinating spot I have ever seen, even eclipsing the heavily populated bird forests of Hawaii and Kauai in 1891. What a legacy it would have been to hand down to posterity had it been retained in its pristine condition without interference with the balance of nature which was so nicely adjusted there. If given proper care it may still recover to be an extremely interesting island. Besides birds seal and turtle visit there and will no doubt if not molested settle there as on the French Frigate Shoal and Lisiansky.

Feb. 18, 1942

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My statement in the June 1942 "Elepaio" that W. Alanson Bryan's advice went unheeded till 1923 is not quite correct. The Biological Survey sent an expedition there in 1912.

Also my statement in the November 1941 "Elepaio" that the expedition to Nihoa in 1923 was of the Whitney expedition is in error. It was a Biological Survey - Bishop Museum expedition. While the Whitney expedition investigated other parts of the Pacific it was left to the Bishop Museum to make an ornithological investigation of the Hawaiian Islands and neighbouring groups.

George C. Munro