

T H E E L E P A I O

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BIRDS OF HAWAII
and
Adventures in Bird Study

An Ocean Cruise
By George C. Munro
No. 11

On another place on the wall of that house on Midway was painted:

"J. A. Jorgensen
here from September
22nd 1886 to Jan. 9th 1888
here is plenty fresh water
one well at depths from 3 to 4
feet will keep water at any time."

Palmer and I spent the night of July 11, 1891 in the little house on Sand Island of Midway. Palmer slept but I wanted to examine and copy the records preserved in the house. Fifty years - a half century has passed since I sat alone in that house on Midway which had been the scene of so much fear, isolation and desperation. I was a vigorous young man intent on my consuming interest - the study of natural history. On that night there was not one thing to hint of the future of that indescribably desolate, lonely isle. That where I sat a cable station would be built - soil brought bag by bag to create an oasis midway twix east and west. That comfortable family life would come to be on that very spot. That it should ever be a contested goal of two great warring nations was inconceivable.

In that year the world was and had for some time seen the stirring of cultural impulses throughout the Pacific - a wave of progress which was to mount for the next half century till the thunderbolt of war struck down the whole structure - yet that young man sat intent on copying his records utterly without prescience of things to come. Much of that night passed in the perusal of those engrossing records and turning them over in mind. Palmer slept peacefully on but when I had finished copying them sleep for me was out of the question. I stood in the doorway of the house and looked over the large expanse of white sand under the moon light broken only by a few green mounds of Scaevola bushes and the little group of crosses in the cemetery. The utter desolation, the sighing of the wind round the house, the moans of the solitary petrel and the occasional harsh squawk of the tropic bird under the house, the total absence of other birds whose constant screaming day and night was never out of our ears on other islands, was depressing. The musty smell of dry gooney meat hung on the air - a reminder of the island's scarcity and hardship - giving one pause to question a woman's existence on such fare and of

Jorgensen living there alone for nearly a year with little hope of rescue. A timeless melancholy seemed to pervade the very atmosphere and desolation to reign! As Laysan Island had furnished me with the most fascinating experience so Sand Island of Midway gave me the most weird I have known in a long life.

The battered hull of the "General Siegal", a schooner of not more than 50 tons was lying on the sand with many old spars and logs scattered about. According to the story of this wreck the crew repaired a boat and left for islands to the southwest. The story goes that Jorgensen begged his shipmates to allow him to accompany them. They believed that he had killed their captain and were deaf to his entreaties. It was said he even waded into the water after the boat pleading desperately but vainly.

Jorgensen was a castaway on Midway Island from November 17, 1886 to January 9, 1888, 13 months and 23 days and a great part of that time he was alone. He was rescued by Walker and installed as Second Mate of the "Wandering Minstrel". Then he was wrecked again on the same island February 3, 1888 and spent another eight months on the island, then his hazardous voyage to the Marshall Islands as described by Captain Cameron. He surely had experiences. According to Cameron, Hanker who was Second Mate of the "Wandering Minstrel" quarreled with Walker, who had him put in irons and his post was given to Jorgensen. Hanker had his little eccentricities and kept alone after the wreck. He secured a large barrel that landed on the beach from the wreck. Walker laid claim to the barrel but Hanker defied him to take it from him. This is part of a very interesting story Mr. Hanker told me when I came across him in Kona, Hawaii later in the year 1891. Hanker made the barrel his home and lived in it for some time as it lay on the sand. Wishing to remove his quarters to Eastern Island he persuaded Cameron to row him across the lagoon. The barrel was too large to be taken on the boat and was considered too awkward to tow across, so Hanker took it apart and loaded it on the boat in that way. But when he came to put it together again he found that two staves had been lost on the way over and it could not be restored as a barrel, so he built it into a sort of kennel and made this his home till rescued. We saw this unique structure when collecting birds on Eastern Island.

The story of Captain Cameron and Jorgensen fitting up a boat and their voyage to the Marshall Islands is told in detail in "John Cameron's Odyssey." Captain Walker blamed Captain Cameron for omitting to report the plight of those he left on Midway when he reached the Marshall Islands. It is more likely, however, that information given by Cameron caused Johnson to sail for Midway in the hope that it would be a profitable voyage. Whether it was so is not known, but it is known that Johnson was paid a substantial sum by Walker to charter his vessel to take him, his family and crew to Honolulu. Also that Johnson after landing them in Honolulu returned to Midway evidently to salvage anything he could of the wreck of the "Wandering Minstrel". This was of course within the law - if of debatable ethics. Captain Walker had evidently expected to find everything at Midway as he had left it two years before. He seemed much annoyed when he found that Johnson had returned to Midway after taking him to Honolulu.

Though apparently no vessel had visited Midway from the time the "Norma" returned there in June 1889, two years before, strange to say the day we arrived there we sighted a sail coming round the reef. It came into the lagoon and proved to be the "Charles G. Wilson" of San Francisco trading in the South Seas. The Captain said he was on his way to San Francisco; but on leaving the island he headed to the south.

Give a Dog a Bad Name

That has been the case with the mynah in Hawaii. One of the first questions the newly arrived tourist asks is "Why is there such a scarcity of bird life?" And most of them follow it up with "Is it true that the mynah killed off the native birds?"

Early authorities seem unanimous in condemning the mynah for the destruction of nests and eggs of native birds, but fail to give specific instances.

Too much weight should not be attached to Rothschild's remarks, since he never visited the Islands and was only repeating what his collector, Palmer, reported to him. In "Avifauna of Laysan" he repeatedly blames the mynah for helping in the destruction of native birds. Page 299 "Palmer found it very numerous and very harmful to the native birds" and on page 300 he states that the mynah "kills and eats the young and eggs of small birds". Again, in extracts from Palmer's diary, page 19, "There are the enormous number of introduced birds, especially the troublesome mynahs, which do much harm to all sorts of small birds".

Another authority, Wilson, in "Birds of the Sandwich Islands", carefully avoids the subject. The only mention of the mynah in his book is in a list of imported birds on page xxv, where he seems to be uncertain of its nomenclature and lists it "Acridotheres tristis?"

Perkins in "Fauna Hawaiiensis" has nothing to say in its favor and has many rather vague accusations on the old theme of nest robbing. Perkins has given us the best descriptions of the native forest birds that have been written and his observations carry weight. On page 393, discussing the causes of the extinction of Hawaiian birds, he says "Such causes are the introduction - - - of the mynah, which not only attacks and drives away other birds, but also devours their eggs and young." On page 394, "The mynah, which I have myself seen devouring both young and eggs of other species - - -".

The preceding observations were probably all made in the 1890's. Writers in the present century are more moderate and some even praise the mynah. W.A. Bryan in the "Natural History of Hawaii" page 306 says "There is a popular though erroneous belief in Hawaii that the mynah is responsible for the disappearance of the native birds. The fact that this noisy stranger is frequently found in the forests at an elevation of five or six thousand feet, is offered as an explanation for the singular passing from the forest regions of many species of native birds. There is little reason, however, for supposing this to be the true cause. There may be cases, about settlements especially, where the mynah has been known to interfere with the nests and eggs of certain birds, particularly those of the English sparrow, a species with which its habits bring it in sharp and direct contact; but so far as the opinions of the best observers and my own experience go, the mynah, when he finds himself in the forest, lives at peace with the native birds. The general habits of the forest birds differ widely from those of the mynah, and their nesting and food habits are so different that the two seldom come into conflict." In "Notes on the Birds of the Waianae Mountains" (Bishop Museum Occasional Papers Vol. II No.3 page 45) he says "It might be well here to say that at no time during our protracted stay in the field, did we see a Mina in any way molest one of the native birds, nor did I find a nest which gave any signs of having been disturbed by one. My observations lead me to believe that the introduction of the Mina has had little or nothing to do with decrease in the numbers of the native avifauna, notwithstanding a popular belief to the contrary."

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In "Some Birds of Molokai" (Bishop Museum Occasional Papers, Vol. IV, NO. 2, Page 57) he says "Nowhere were they observed in conflict with the native birds. They are indeed so seldom seen in any numbers in the regions frequented by our native birds, that they can hardly be said to seriously affect the decrease or disappearance of the Hawaiian avifauna".

According to Caum (Exotic Birds of Hawaii, page 44) the mynah "is reported to have been introduced from India in 1865 by Dr. William Hillebrand to combat the plague of army worms that was ravaging the pasture lands of the islands".

It is now believed that the mynah has done and is continuing to do good work in helping to check outbreaks of army worms, which still do considerable damage. It has, however, several black marks against it. It damages fruit, particularly figs, and has been the chief cause of the rapid spread of the lantana by eating the fruit and dropping the seed in new areas. On the charge of nest robbing we believe it is innocent, except for a few extremely rare instances. Over a period of eighteen years observation we have never heard of or seen an instance. In one case we saw nests of the mynah and house sparrow in the same coconut palm, the mynahs and the sparrows feeding their respective broods with no interference, though the nests were only about one foot apart.

Mr. Munro was closely associated with Palmer on the Rothschild expedition, no doubt he has some comment to make on Palmer's accusations against the mynah.

J.d'A.N.

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FROM "ONE OF OUR ISLAND BASES"

We are glad to think that the "Elepaio" is reaching some of the men on duty at lonely outposts and perhaps suggesting one way to relieve the boredom by studying birdlife. We are allowed to quote from letters to our Secretary from Captain J.R. Dudley, U.S.N., whom we congratulate on his recent promotion and wish him and his men all possible good luck. From a letter dated 9/12/42 "It often appears that birds present a hazard to aircraft, this is especially true when the plane is near a landing place where a collision may result in damage to the aircraft and death to the bird involved. There has been very little interference of this sort at - - -, which I consider most fortunate. In fact there is a definite prohibition at - - - against wilful or unsupervised destruction of bird, animal or plant life. The possibility of these being an ultimate source of food, in case all communication is lost with the usual sources, is impressed on all personnel. Furthermore, experience in the present war shows the value of conserving all possible natural cover and even encouraging its increase. We - - - are trying to avoid as much as possible any disturbance of the balance provided by nature." Another letter dated 10/13/42 "Recently we have had a number of migratory birds. About thirty wild ducks have visited here and there have been some geese seen. These are all very thirsty and hungry and their apparent weakness in the legs makes them quite tame."

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BIRD WALK

The bird walk arranged for November 14th was postponed, due to rain. Meet same time, same place, on November 28th.

GENERAL MEETING AND ELECTION OF OFFICERS

December is the month for our General Meeting and Election of Officers. If members wish to hold an election it can be arranged. If not, Miss Hatch and I are willing to hold office for another year. Mr. Dunn will continue as Vice-President.

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