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BIRDS OF HAWAII and Adventures in Bird Study

An Ocean Cruise
By George C. Munro
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On July 18, 1891 we sailed out of Midway Islands Lagoon and lay under the lee of the reef till next morning. However, Walker's dream of big sharks to be caught did not materialize. So in the morning we took our course to the northeast. The Captain's plan was to run north till he caught the westerly winds and then run down southeasterly to the main islands. Relations between Palmer and the Captain had become so strained that there was little conversation amongst us. Consequently we did not follow the course of the ship very closely. We gathered that we sailed northeast till we reached about the 36th degree of latitude and about 400 or 500 miles from Midway before turning and sailing southeast.

All the distance gooneys accompanied us; the dark-rumped petrel (Pterodroma phaeopygia sandwichensis) the Uau of the Hawaiians was seen about as far north as we went, also the white-tailed tropic bird. Dolphins (mahimahi) were present and several were caught, furnishing us a nice change of diet. We were amazed at their speed when chasing flying fish. A sail fish (quote from journal) "about 10 feet long came up close to the stern it had a long thin snout or spear about 18 inches long, large fins and body banded transversely." We did not then know it was a sail fish.

We needed adult specimens of the black-footed gooney and fished for them over the stern. It was not necessary to hook them; they would cling to the bait bracing themselves with their feet against the water till we pulled them up close to the boat and slipped a noose over their heads. There were young and old birds amongst them and one day a young white gooney accompanied them. This was the only occasion that a Laysan albatross came near our craft. We noted a great difference among the adults of the same species in the greyish white markings. On one this characteristic continued right over his head and down to his shoulders. On others the white under and over the tail was more or less missing. One bird so young that he flew unsteadily had no white on its forehead at all. Another thin and hungry chased the old birds which made way for it to attack the salmon hung over the stern to attract sharks. The young birds kept up an incessant squeaking when feeding. One day there were nine of them accompanying us. Towards evening they would fly ahead of the boat, settle on the water in a group and sit preening their feathers till the boat was well past them when they would repeat. It was on this part of the voyage, on August 3, that we saw the gooney dive down and stay under for about half a minute. We had a good opportunity to study the black-footed gooney and took several specimens.

During calm weather on July 31, when the surface of the sea was perfectly smooth we saw the small white crustacean mentioned before running on the surface of the water. They were pursued by a reddish swimming creature which seemed to feed upon them. When far from land we saw a Pacific Golden Plover with black spotted breast flying alone. It seemed tired and inclined to alight on the boat and flew round several times. Three times it alighted on the water and sat there for a few seconds at a time. The uau which we had seen as far north as we had gone became more numerous as we approached the main group. At first I had noted it as a "white-headed petrel" but later I noticed that as it came nearer only the forehead was white but at a distance the whole head appeared to be white. The white-rumped storm petrel was seen occasionally and after sighting Kauai was numerous. Newell's shearwater (Puffinus newelli) was seen for the first time on the trip a few days before sighting Kauai. It was easily distinguished from any of the other petrels. Large flocks of wedge-tailed shearwaters were seen as we approached the islands. White tern and the little grey tern were seen after we sighted Kauai. It is likely that all of these even now nest on Kauai in inaccessible places in cliffs and valleys on the north side of the island.

At sunrise on the morning of August 14 we were delighted to see Kauai. As we approached we had a fine view of the northwest side from Mana to Hanalei. The only clouds were on the top of Waialeale. We could see the entrances of Kalalau and Hanakapeai valleys very plainly and sighted the most northerly part of the island. It had been squally with a rough sea on the 13th and it still ran high and water was coming over the boat but we were happy as we were nearing the three months' mail awaiting us in Honolulu. At daybreak we were in sight of both islands but were tantalizingly delayed with three or four hours of calm, especially so as we could see a schooner sailing along the coast of Oahu with a breeze.

All day of the 17th we were beating up the channel and to cap all we got aground at Sand Island and had some trouble to kedge the boat off. This minor mishap made us begin to realize in retrospect how fortunate we had been throughout the whole three months of our voyage - a realization which strengthened as time went on.

But behind the suntan and beard was a fine sense of accomplishment. Treasured in a safe place was the journal from which these notes were drawn; tying 1891 to 1941.

In all cases in this narrative quotations are from my journal unless otherwise specified.

Feb. 27, 1942

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There will be no meeting of the Society on February 6th., contrary to the notice in the Star-Bulletin of January 9th.

At present meetings would have to be held in daylight hours and there is more benefit and enjoyment to be had from a walk than a meeting. The majority of members feel that since their spare time is so limited they would rather use it for a bird walk.

In future if there be any business it will be discussed during a rest on the walk, until such time as we can resume our regular meetings.

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HILL ROBIN. It was interesting to come across in "Country-Side", the English nature magazine, dated June 10th 1905, an account of the attempted introduction of the hill robin into England. Frank Finn, a well known naturalist, obtained several dozen from dealers and liberated them in St. James's Park, London. Later about fifteen were turned out in Regent's Park.

In reply to enquiries Mr. Finn reported a year later that the birds seemed to have disappeared, nothing had been seen of them three months after they had been liberated. A similar case occurred in Germany, though there they were known to have bred, as fledged young were seen. A year later, in 1907, a correspondent reported seeing one in St. James's Park, "which was in full feather and colours beautiful." There the account seems closed, there is no further mention of the bird in later issues of the paper.

We have been more fortunate in Hawaii, hill robins are plentiful on the outskirts of Honolulu, perhaps soon they will be as familiar in our gardens as cardinals, though they cannot be attracted by sunflower seed. They are almost omnivorous except for that and, though primarily insect eating birds, will take worms, fruit, crumbs and green food.

In England, where they are well known as cage birds, they are known as Pekin robins. Mr. Finn knew them well in China and the Himalayas, where they are common. They are not known in the wild in Japan and the name Japanese hill robin is unfortunate. They are not even robins as they belong to the family of babblers, so they are close relatives of the Chinese thrush, which has so delighted us with its song in the valleys of Hawaii for years. The hill robin's song is so similar to the thrush's that probably many people have thought they were hearing a thrush when it was really a hill robin. On close attention the character of the songs is different, that of the thrush is fuller and has more repetition of a set phrase. The relationship is also shown in the nesting, the nests of both birds being open and placed in bushes or low down in tangled growth.

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J.d'A.N

BIRD WALK

Saturday afternoon brought together again the members of the Audubon Society, eager for the experience of a new trail. Miss Hatch, Miss Shields, Miss Delamere, Miss Kojima, Mr. Webb, Mr. McDonald from Mississippi and the Northwoods drove up to the end of the road on Alewa Heights, picking up Mrs. Laune on the way.

The trail leads off from the main road, along a track overgrown with grass and upward into the trees, ironwood and eucalyptus. The trail is little used and became more difficult to follow but a short distance farther on it was clearer and the walking was much easier. We were rewarded by a gorgeous sweeping picture of Nuuanu Valley with the carefully patterned Country Club at our feet and the constant shifting of sunlight and shade on the rugged green hills.

Birds were few, we heard some familiar songs but the birds did not show themselves. The valleys on both sides of the trail provided constantly changing pictures as the trail went upward, narrowing at times to a few feet and falling away sharply to the valleys below.

The return journey passed all too quickly. At the end of the trail we were all comfortably tired and thirsty. Mrs. Laune will never know how gratefully we received her invitation to "stop at the house and have something to eat." It was the perfect ending for an afternoon on the trail.

O.M.N.

Next walk, meet corner Wyllie and Liliha, Saturday February 13th., at 2.00 p.m. for a walk up Kapalama Valley.