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The Indian Mynah (Acridotheres tristis) in Hawaii

By George C. Munro

This paper is in response to a suggestion by J.d'A.N. in the Elepaio of December 1942 to submit my observations regarding the behavior of the mynah towards other birds, which I am pleased to do.

When I landed in Honolulu with the Rothschild expedition on December 13, 1890 the first bird I saw was a mynah and I duly entered him in my journal saying: "I have noticed only one bird, I think it is a starling, a handsome slaty bird, pretty common about the town. It sings pretty well." Such were my impressions of the mynah in Hawaii on my arrival in Honolulu fifty two years ago and they have changed little since. The mynah is a member of the starling family. He is a handsome bird with his black head and neck, brown body, wings black, brown and white, tail black with white tip, below tail white. His legs beak, bare skin of face and irides are yellow. The white does not show much till the bird is in flight and then the white markings are conspicuous. And he sings: perhaps not noticeably. He has so many cries and calls that they merge into his song calls. It is not an exceedingly sweet song but pleasing if one stops to listen to it with an unprejudiced ear. On the 14th I saw sparrows and on the 16th Chinese doves. The first three birds I saw in Hawaii! Is it to be wondered at that I have a soft spot for these three which have continued to entertain me ever since?

To me the mynah more than any other bird has enlivened the domestic scene all these years. Rival pairs fighting for a nesting site and their mysterious ringside fights are an absorbing study as also is their strategy in stealing meat from a feeding cat. Two birds will sit on a twig just out of reach of the cat and scold it so vociferously that the cat becomes confused and perhaps leaves its food for a second. The mynah then dives down and is off before the cat can turn round. The old timers jogging horseback across pasture lands or sightseeing malihinis (strangers) on country roads alike have smiled to see industrious Mr. Mynah perched between the horns of contented cattle or running up and down the gall-scarred back of an old horse cleaning the old scars and catching flies. To see him, with indignant squawk when switched with lazy swinging tails, settle behind the heels of the grazing animals to grab insects disturbed by their slowly moving feet, contributes humor to the homely scene. They may even be seen following a flock of guinea fowl, the guineas picking up the grass seed and the mynahs catching the disturbed insects. With a field glass one can sometimes see a mynah picking under the flanks and in the ears of a resting steer lying chewing its cud. Is it ticks or simply excrescences on the skin the bird is getting? Ticks in Hawaii are only in animals' ears and I think the birds are simply cleaning the animals' skin. Anyway the steer apparently enjoys these attentions. Watch the mynahs' quick gathering to a grass fire to feed on roasted insects, a group standing

round a fire of cocoanut husks beady-eyed to catch their escaping prey, or perhaps, the most interesting of all a continuous mass of mynahs alighting close behind a heavy chain drawn between two tractors, (a system of cactus destruction practised on Lanai). They are feeding on the cockroaches exposed by the chain as it turns over the partly dried cactus leaves which cover the ground. The birds are thick on the ground for some distance behind the tractors and as the food is exhausted they rise and fly to the chain and go through the same maneuver again. Thus there is a continuous chain of birds in the air and on the ground.

Can England's famed rookeries surpass the nightly flight of great flocks of mynahs to their roosts on some huge banyan or mango tree? To see them approach speedily down wind, or more deliberately from the opposite direction at sunset in bands, pairs, singly, each finding his appointed place, is a lovely sight. To hear the arguments and admonitions to "move over" - "make room" - the chatter of hundreds of birds in evening conference, then with the last sunlight sudden hush - perhaps a belated chitter - and just as one thinks all is well for the night a sudden raucous alarm as some sentry thinks he sees a marauder: then quiet till all too soon a full-throated clamor announces the coming of dawn. Disturbed sleepers curse the morning choruses, adding to his already unpopular reputation.

Why has the mynah been unpopular among the early residents of Hawaii? Its introduction is credited to Dr. William Hillebrand in 1865 ostensibly to combat the army worm, the caterpillar that is such a curse to graziers and cane planters. I can testify that it materially helps in this. Someone told me when I arrived that the mynah was introduced to kill the ricebirds which were a nuisance in the rice fields but if so it certainly has failed in that. It was blamed for spreading the seed of lantana, but why should it be blamed more than the Chinese dove which also feeds on lantana berries? The native forest birds of Oahu were disappearing in the early eighteen-eighties (or before) and there were few bird students in Hawaii at that time to study closely and elucidate the matter so it was concluded that the mynah was responsible. Did he not invade the dove cotes and usurp these nesting places? However, the chief reason for the unpopularity of the mynah was most likely the noise of their celebrations on arriving at the roost and their greeting of daybreak. Some criticized their jaunty strutting across the lawns. Their cocky independent manner irritated them. Overlooking the usefulness of the bird it was vainly persecuted with the shotgun to drive it from the favourite roost. However, it has been found that a disturbance of the branching regularity of the roosting tree would be sufficient to induce it to change. A few branches lopped off or even branches bent and tied down towards the ground released at night to spring suddenly upwards will cause the birds to leave and find another roosting place.

To return to the subject of the mynah's behaviour towards the native perching birds I can say that in my half century of experience with Hawaiian birds and the mynah, I have never seen it display hostility towards native or other birds. Pairs of mynahs fight among themselves for nesting sites and larger groups fight probably for sport but interfere little with other birds. Mynahs, Chinese doves and sparrows feed together on kitchen scraps outside my office window. Most aggression there is between doves. Occasionally a badly disposed mynah will chase sparrows and doves from the food, but this is rare and the different species generally feed together in peace. Spoiled food which used to go into the waste pail is now set aside for these birds. They appreciate it and use quite a variety, especially cereal preparations in any form. It is interesting to watch a dozen each of doves and mynahs and half a

dozen sparrows feeding together on a patch of lawn in amity.

I have never seen a mynah interfere with the nests of other birds. At variance with my experience and also that of Henshaw who wrote "Birds of the Hawaiian Possessions"; Perkins who exclusively studied the Hawaiian fauna for ten years, and Palmer who collected birds in Hawaii for two years for Rothschild both stated they saw it destroying native birds' nests. Others I have talked with on the subject had seen it destroying the nests of imported birds. Perkins who is the best authority on Hawaiian forest birds would not have made the statement if he were not certain of the fact. While I was with Palmer in the Rothschild expedition for over a year in the Hawaiian forests I know of no instance of mynahs attacking other birds. But after I severed my connection with the expedition Palmer was my guest in my home at Makaweli, Kauai. He had just returned from Halemanu, Kauai and mentioned that he had seen the mynahs tearing up the nests of native birds there. I doubt if the general prejudice against the mynah at that time would influence him to make the statement if he were not sure it was a fact. At that time a dozen species of native birds swarmed in the forests at Halemanu close to the present Kokee camps. The outer forests there are comparatively dry and suitable to the mynah. However, I think the mynah had little to do with the destruction of native birds by attacking them. But at the same time it may have played an important part in their decrease in another way i.e. by spreading introduced disease amongst them. When the Kokee camps were opened domestic fowls were taken there. Mynahs attracted by the food to be obtained, frequent poultry pens if not barred out and so could carry imported disease from the poultry into the forest that surrounds the camps and so infect the native birds. Like the native Hawaiians the native birds at that time were no doubt susceptible to new diseases and quickly fell victims.

I have often taken up the cudgels in favor of the mynah and quote from a paper "What We Know of Bird Life in Hawaii" read before the 1927 meeting of the Hawaiian Academy of Science and published in the "Hawaiian Forester and Agriculturalist" of October-December 1927. In this paper I stated: "A good word for the much abused mynah bird might be in season, as I believe he is more of a friend than an enemy to man. His work in army worm invasions on grass lands, with that of the kolea akekeke is of inestimable value to the grazier; on wire worms in plowed fields and in reducing parasites on stock surely offsets the harm he does to fruit or the noise of his evening chorus. Although Perkins and Palmer record seeing them destroy the nests of native birds, other close observers have not noticed this and he probably does not play an important part in the decrease of the Hawaiian forest birds".

When I wrote that paper I had not realized the part played by introduced diseases in the destruction of the native Hawaiian birds. During the ten years following I became fully convinced that introduced bird diseases were mainly responsible for the reduction of the native birds. I mentioned this in my report to the Bishop Museum in 1936, feeling sure that sleeping sickness or avian malaria were mainly responsible for the decrease in the Hawaiian perching birds. In 1938 Dr. Alicata found pigeon malaria in Honolulu and in 1941 Paul Baldwin found malaria in imported birds in the Hawaii National Park. It is my firm belief from evidence I have gathered that the Hawaiian birds have been destroyed by these or similar diseases. And that the mynahs, and other imported birds, have been to a great extent responsible for their spread from domestic birds into the native forests. And thus the mynah may have been an indirect menace to Hawaiian bird life.

BIRD NOTES FROM GUADALCANAL

There is at least one happy man on Guadalcanal. Walter Donaghho has written us about the birds there and we found it so interesting that we know all members of the Society will enjoy reading it and will take pride that at least one member is in the front line. Apparently he has had to leave his typewriter behind and his writing has not improved, so if there are any mistakes in spelling put it down to inability to decipher his writing. Best of luck to you, Walter.

"Dear Mr. Northwood and the Audubon Society; Fate has placed me down into a rich tropical paradise, and I am having some great experiences with the birds here. There are many; some that I could name, some that are strange. We are camped in a cocoanut grove. Not one mile distant begins the jungle, a tongue of which follows the course of a stream down into the cocoa belt. Red Torella (?) parrots and green vermilion-breasted parakeets are making quite a racket as they forage for food in the crowns of the cocoa palms. I also hear the twittering notes of the *phyzomela longeata* (notes which closely resemble the white-eye, too. I thought that that is what it was for a long time). This bird is very pretty; lemon yellow breast, olive green back and a purple bib around the throat. Large white cockatoos fly out of a palm, startled by my approach, and fly about, calling "A-a, A-a --- A-a, A-a!" (Hawaiian "A"). And the sweet clear bell-like notes of the black, white-breasted (white crescent over each eye) fantail flycatcher float down to us from the top of a palm. There he is, vigorously wagging his tail back and forth. There he goes after some fly.

I hear some bird calling loudly with notes that sound like the squeak of a rubber cat. After a short search I find that it is a kingfisher, with beautiful bright iridescent blue wings, black crown and bill and a white breast. It flies over to a dead palm trunk and disappears into its nest hole half way up. (I climbed up to one of these nests and found two naked chicks inside).

Soon I come to the lazy river, lined with swamp grass, backed by stands of Hau and Venna trees. A Nankeen Night Heron, black above, black crown, brown breast, flies up with a loud "quirk" and disappears up stream. Swiftlets dart about overhead, hot in the pursuit of their insect prey. A hawk soars over the palms on the opposite bank (*Accipiter abogularis* ?) Is buff with dark brown bars. Color similar to brown phase of Io. Whitney Ornithological Expedition to the South Pacific has it listed.

I hear beautiful thrush-like songs coming from the grove of cypress trees standing over there in the water. I go over and it is full of Quail thrush (?) The bird, brown in color, resembles a Quail thrush closely. It also, when flushed from the weeds, which it also inhabits, (and it can also conceal itself in these weeds! While stalking one, I got up to four feet of where it sat, singing merrily away in weeds not one foot in height. Yet I didn't see it, and it flew away undetected) flies up, beating the wings with a whirring sound in the manner of a quail. The blending of many thrush songs filled the grove with melody, making a very beautiful effect.

Something large just flew out of that palm. I go over to where I saw it land, scaring on the way a three foot monitor lizard, which makes off through the weeds and runs up the trunk of a palm. It is a cuckoo falcon. Slate grey back and head, white breast barred with black. It also has a large yellow eye and is the size of a pigeon.

The cocoanut grove now gives way to jungle, and what magnificent jungle! Great, liana-festooned Banyan, Homba (a mahogany) and Kauri (?) trees, as well as many others. A red-backed white-headed eagle flies and soars slowly along the wall of trees. (This eagle is very small; size of a large hawk. There is another eagle here, the whistling eagle).

I am attracted by a bird uttering a low, descending whistle and cross the sand bar, through stands of wild cane, to investigate. Entering a secondary growth of vine-covered Hau, Hiiaka and venna trees, I stalk the bird, now uttering a loud "tsweet". Something moves in that tree over there. I go over and find a thickhead (*Pachycephala cinnimonea*. Whitney S. Sea Exp.) Size of a robin, it has a cinnamon colored breast and blue black upperparts and tail. The bill is bluish white. There are many other birds flying about, some which are strange to me. There is a dark greenish black flycatcher with a clean white breast (female brown) which I believe is *Myiagra cervinicauda*. Also a slate colored cuckoo shrike with a white grey-barred breast (Ramsey's). A loud beating of wings causes me to look over in that direction. A large brown bird flies up from the ground and comes to rest on a limb of a small tree. A megapode. (I feel fairly certain of this identity; the bird has the appearance of the Benchley's megapode).

Going deeper into the jungle I am attracted by notes closely resembling one of the calls of the elepaio (so closely do they resemble the elepaio that I expected, as I stalked it, to see some kind of flycatcher). However it is a kingfisher; dark blue black upperparts and tail and a clean white breast. (These kingfishers eat lizards. I have, on several occasions, seen the light blue species fly up with a lizard in its beak. It perched upon a palm frond and proceeded to beat the daylights out of the poor lizard. However, I believe it was softening the lizard up a bit for its young, as it flew over to the nest hole and fed them).

To be continued

BIRD WALK. Fifteen members and friends availed themselves of the kind permission of Dr. Homer C. Barnes, principal of Kamehameha Boys' School, to use the trails in Kuahiwi Alapaki on February 13th.

A mocking bird welcomed us in the school grounds with its beautiful song, delivered from a flowering spray of bougainvillea close to the road. A new bird for most of the members. Several old mocking bird nests were seen in the carissa bushes lining the road. They make a fine citadel for a bird's nest with their long thorns. The large red fruit also seems acceptable to the birds, we saw several which had been eaten. Due to the war, the trails were not in their usual good condition, but we enjoyed the privilege of seeing the plantings of fine trees. The opinion of members was asked at an impromptu meeting held during a rest about holding regular meetings. It was unanimously decided that during present conditions it is better not to hold regular meetings and that if any necessary business comes up it can be decided upon during a rest period on a walk.

Next walk: Saturday March 20th at 2.00 p.m. Meet at end of Paty Drive, five minutes walk from bus stop at Woodlawn and Seaview Rise. Many members said they would like to take the Woodlawn ridge trail again. Nailed shoes are advisable, its steep.

HONOLULU AUDUBON SOCIETY

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