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Birds of Hawaii and Adventures in Bird Study The Alae Awi By George C. Munro

In the May number of the "Elepaio" Mr. Northwood notes an exception to my classification of the alae awi. It may clarify matters for me to explain that there are two alae awis. The alae awi which Henshaw mentions in his "Birds of the Hawaiian Islands" also appears in Ed. Bryan's check list under the same name. Caum calls it in his "Exotic Birds of Hawaii" the alae iwi. It is the pokeko or swamp hen of New Zealand, a bird with which I was familiar in my earliest boyhood. I have a vivid remembrance of an old tattooed New Zealand flax garbed Maori warrior, wearing a large piece of skin of the pokeko's beautiful blue breast stuck in a hole in the lobe of his ear. Cannibal though he may have been in his prime he was quite harmless and very interesting to a small child who still recalls the incident.

The bird with the brown frontal plate, the alae awi of the Hawaiians is an entirely different bird. The specimen in the Gay and Robinson collection was no doubt taken in the eighteen eighties. Mr. Francis Gay gave me the name in 1891 and handed me the skin to take to Palmer who was then in Honolulu arranging for the Midway trip. If it had been the same as the pokeko (Porphyrio melanotus) of which there were then specimens in my private collection I should have noticed it at once. The pokeko has a bright red frontal plate and a heavy red bill. The name alae awi was probably given the pokeko by the Hawaiians as it was, like the rare alae awi different from the other two alaes. Or it may have been iwi as Caum has it after the red iwi, the pokeko's red bill and frontal shield are much more conspicuous than those of the Hawaiian Gallinule. I doubt if the pokeko were ever common on Oahu. If it had been it is inexplicable that it should be so rare now none of the present bird students has ever seen it to my knowledge. The pokeko is a hardy bird and would not have been easily exterminated if common. There is no question in my mind as to the genuineness of Mr. Gay's information which I recorded in my journal at the time.

Dr. Perkins also has something to say about the alae awi, he says: "Occasionally the frontal shield instead of being white is of a rich dark chocolate-brown color. I shot one such specimen on Oahu in 1892 and have seen others since. Whether this variation is due to age I do not know, but the natives called it by a different specific name." In a footnote he says: "The Alae awi is known to the natives of Oahu, Molokai and Maui; it differs from the Alae keo as follows: frontal shield dark rich chocolate (redder after drying), beak white but the lower mandible with two red-brown spots, which are separated by a bright yellow line, a little behind the tip; the upper mandible has a single transverse red-brown spot placed above those on the lower. Legs down to and including the basal joint of toes bright apple green in

front, except the joints themselves."

It might be well to explain here that Porphyrio melanotus has a wide range being found in New Zealand, New Guinea, New Caledonia, Australia, Tasmania, Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. There are several subspecies. The New Zealand subspecies according to Oliver in "New Zealand Birds" is P. melanotus stanleyi. Ed. Bryan's list gives the bird imported here as P. poliocephalus melanotus. It is supposed to have been brought from Australia. Caley in "What Bird Is That" 1932 (Australian) lists it as also does Oliver as P. melanotus. Caley's colored figure of the bird is little different, if any, from the New Zealand species. It is known in New Zealand by the Maori name Pukeko or the same as in Australia as Swamp Hen.

The Bishop Museum will no doubt have a specimen of the imported bird in its collection and Bryan will have the latest classification, so there need be no confusion in the matter.

oOo

HAWAIIAN HAWK. Judge John Albert Matthewman of the Fifth Circuit Court, whom we welcome as a member, has some interesting recollections of birds from the years when he lived at the Huehue Ranch, North Kona, Hawaii. The Judge is a keen observer of birds and related an incident concerning the Hawaiian hawk which shows that the hawk does at times feed on smaller birds.

A flock of mynahs was streaming across the sky, being chased and slowly overtaken by a hawk. When the hawk caught up with the flock it seized the last bird and took it to a post to devour it. Judge Matthewman also said that occasionally the hawk would take chickens from the yard; the mynahs were the first birds to give the alarm on the approach of the hawk.

Senator Francis Brown has told us that he has seen the hawk occasionally taking young pheasants. This does not please the Senator, but, as we pointed out to him, pheasants are small enough to be taken by a hawk for only about one month of the year, for the remaining eleven months the hawk lives on rats and mice, which are among the worst enemies of game birds.

The Hawaiian hawk or Io belongs to the genus Buteo (Buzzards), which are large broad-winged hawks with broad rounded tails. On the whole they are most beneficial birds, since their food is almost entirely rats and mice. But to a farmer a hawk is a bird that takes his chickens and he shoots them all when he can. Some hawks certainly are harmful, though we have none in Hawaii, these are the accipiters or hawks with short rounded wings and long tails.

Perkins in Fauna Hawaiiensis (Volume 1, Part 4, page 447) says: "Peale says that small birds are its (the Io's) food, a statement which I am unable to corroborate, although on rare occasions it certainly does catch these. Mice are certainly a much more common food, and I have taken five full-grown ones from one bird, and from another four or five smaller ones and a large part of an adult Californian quail. - - - On account of its sluggish habits, conspicuous appearance, and slow flight the Io is not so common but that it might be exterminated comparatively easily, and indeed it has been slaughtered without just cause in some localities. It should rather be protected as a beneficial species, for it is far more useful than injurious."

Rothschild (Avifauna of Laysan, page 238) says: "The food of this Buzzard is evidently varied. Wilson found small birds in its stomach; Palmer mice, small birds, moths, and spiders."

Henshaw (Birds of the Hawaiian Islands, page 81) says: "I have

dissected more than thirty adult hawks collected upon the windward side of Hawaii, and have yet to find the first evidence of the chicken-eating propensities alleged against the bird. I have found as many as four mice in the crop and stomach of a single bird, and nearly every hawk examined had the remains of at least one mouse or rat. In the stomach of but two individuals have I found native birds. One of these had killed two akakanis and the other had killed an amakihi."

There is the evidence from the literature. Although has been quoted to show that the Hawaiian hawk feeds largely on rats and mice, occasionally taking small birds. It is clearly a beneficial species.

Mrs. Helen Shiras Baldwin of the Manuiki Audubon Society estimates that there are only about one hundred individuals on the island of Hawaii, and that means in the world, for the hawk is indigenous to these islands. With a little more thoughtless shooting the bird could easily become extinct.

J.d'A.N.

JAPANESE BLUEBIRD A memorandum from Mrs. Mary C. Evans, dated May 21st, gives some definite records of the bluebird on Oahu.

Mr. Nam Chung claims to have seen a bluebird twice, and maybe a third time, at the Wahiawa Dam, elevation about 1,000 ft.

Mr. Fuyuki Okumura claims that the bluebird is continuously around his home at Wahiawa and sings beautifully.

Mr. Moseley Cummins lives at Alencastre and Maigret Sts., St. Louis Heights, elevation about 800 ft. He says the bluebird is around his home continuously. He is interested in birds and puts food out for them daily.

Lieut. Edward A. Dolles lives at Nahala at sea level. He claims that the bluebird comes to his home practically every day. He also puts out food for the birds. He last saw one on May 16th.

Mrs. Evans adds "Sunday May 23rd. Francis and I saw the bluebird this morning about 7 a.m. at the corner of Alencastre and Maigret Sts. in St. Louis Heights. It was flying about 40 ft from us, tried to fly into a house on the corner - that is, it almost flew against the screen. Perhaps there was a fly there."

BIRDS AGAINST MEN by Louis J. Halle Jr.

From his encounter with the wild merganser duck who "refused to be Lucy", preferring rather death by freezing to the hospitality of man, through to his account of Lorenzo, the royal parrot from Central America, Louis J. Halle Jr. holds the attention of his reader. His last chapter, "Birds against Stone Men", seems to belong rather to an account of the ancient Maya civilization than to a book on birds. The bird element seems a bit forced, rather dragged in, than an integral part of the chapter.

The chapter "By Sovereignty of Nature" shows a side of the author a bit difficult to reconcile with one's idea of a real bird lover when he steals Akbar, the young hawk, from his nest and trains him to hunt, accidentally mutilating one of his wings.

The chapter on the kingbirds and their family is truly delightful with the picture it gives of the author again and again replacing the fledgling in the tree in the teeth of violent opposition from its parents.

Most interesting of all, I think, is the chapter on "Lorenzo", the Central American parrot. Mr. Halle's difficulties in extricating Lorenzo from the custom house will bring a quick smile, especially to those who have ever encountered Latin American officialdom, and his

perseverance (even allowing the plane on which he was booked to depart without him) shows a real devotion to the parrot.

That it was possible to transport three parrots, Maria, Pedro and Lorenzo from Central America to eastern United States (near New York City) and to establish them there as contented happy birds was in itself rather surprising. The author even tells how Lorenzo enjoyed riding out a blizzard on his perch in the tree. All of the parrots had complete freedom and could fly about out of doors all day if they wished, returning at night for food.

No true bird lover will be able to read the account of Lorenzo's death without actually suffering with the author.

Mary C. Evans

BIRD WALK Seven of the oldtimers and two newcomers, Pt. Klein of the U.S. Army and Mr. Sylva, met at the Punahou rendezvous at the usual hour Saturday afternoon. We exchanged many interesting bits of information concerning things ornithological. Miss Hatch had had a letter from a marine on Palmyra who had received and enjoyed "The Elepaio". He may have some real "bird" stories to tell later. Miss Peppin, who hunts with a camera, discovered a mejiro's nest in a photogenic spot in her garden. The results, she says, are not what they ought to be but camera artists always say that! Mr. Klein explained the camping activities and inviting trails followed by various nature clubs back in his home state, New York. Mrs. Evans has adopted an ever-hungry mejiro and in her busy life finds time to search for the elusive Japanese bluebird, to study Spanish, and even to read nature books (see elsewhere in this "Elepaio" her review of Birds Against Men). Mr. Sylva told of seeing the akiapolaau (none on Oahu) in the Hawaii National Park.

And so to Tantalus. The trail begins rather steeply from the main road. The wind was blowing in the tree tops, which probably accounted for the absence of the usual scolding white-eyes and the inquisitive "chat-chat" of the elepaio. At the top where we rested a heavy gale was blowing and we left the mountain top and the sun and wind to find a quieter spot in the hope of seeing some birds. The trail led downward through a bamboo grove. Finding a sheltered place beyond we sat patiently (and motionless) and were rewarded with the songs of the hill robin and distantly, the elepaio. Only a mejiro settled briefly on a nearby branch and then was gone.

The afternoon was passing much too rapidly as we turned homeward. We remembered the enchantment of the sunlight slanting through the dark green bamboo, the earliest yellow ginger sending its fragrance along the trail, the gorgeous red lehua flowering just below us on the hillside and finally, the trail winding through a cypress grove where closely-planted trees with dense crowns shut out wind and sun, creating a deep stillness among the brown lower branches. It was not a day for birds but it had been a lovely afternoon!

C.M.N.

Next walk: meet mauka corner of Woodlawn and Alani
at 2.00 p.m. August 14th.

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