

THE ELEPAIO

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For the Better Protection of Wildlife in Hawaii

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Bird Banding in Hawaii

By George C. Munro

Banding migratory seabirds is fascinating work. But before you find yourself set ashore some dark night on one of our offshore islands with flashlight in one hand and bird in the other you will have enjoyed some small measure of adventure arriving at your quest.

The suspense element in my bird banding adventure lies in finding my launch man's available time corresponding with my own, the weather, and the idiosyncracies of his motor. My man, a fine Hawaiian, is under agreement to take me, more or less at my convenience, to Rabbit Island, Mokulua, Flat Island, Moku Manu and others of less importance, eight in all - a total of 28 landings. As we made 23 landings last year I know this is possible. Yet the fact remains that I am never certain of my trip until the engine coughs its last protest and settles into the rhythmic swing of freshening swells as we leave Oahu behind and see the rocky shore of the nearing isle sharpen in the morning sun. The scramble through the surf is no novelty to us old timers, yet a slip today means a broken leg with as much reality as in the old days of small boat landings.

Once ashore with one's faithful "Man Friday", housekeeping is set up. This, of course, is a simple matter as we are to stay but one night and that is to be spent catching and banding birds. No moment of darkness can be lost if we are to get over 200 bands nicely adjusted on the birds before daylight. Each of us selects a small cave or overhanging rock under which shelter to dispose our food and dry clothes. I spread my thin kapok mattress so as to be able to take a comfortable rest some time during the day preparatory to the active night's work.

Let us stop for a moment and picture us at work of a dark night on Popoia or Flat Island about a quarter of a mile off the shore at Kailua. The sooty blackness is broken by the feeble flicker of flashlights as two men wander in search of Wedge-tailed Shearwaters which are now since March coming in from the sea to mate and dig their nesting burrows. Imagine the dramatic quality of hands completely detached by the surrounding night from the body, working freely in a pool of light, and how the bird is re-created bit by bit as the flash plays over him from beak to tail, telling us what is our quarry.

The aluminum bands bent into cylinders are received from the Biological Survey strung on thin copper wires in lots of 100, each lot in an envelop to itself. Each band has a number stamped on it and the words "Notify Biological Survey, Washington, D.C.". As



the light falls suddenly on the bird, its eyes are dazzled and it fails to see the approaching catcher's hand that grabs it by the wings and back. The bird struggles and cries, bites viciously with its astonishingly powerful one and a half inches long hooked beak and scratches with its sharp little claws. The catcher's hands are, however, protected by thick cotton gloves. The catcher brings the bird to the bander who is fortunate if he finds a place where birds are plentiful and he can sit at his work. While the catcher is getting the bird, the bander has taken a band off the wire by inserting the end of his tapered tweezers into one end of the little cylinder and gently opening the tweezers until the band gapes sufficiently at the ends to go over the bird's leg. The catcher then on the right of the bander, holds the bird by the wings and neck on its side in a small depression if one happens to be there. A flashlight on the ground on each side sheds light on the bird's leg; there is no spare hand to hold the light. The bander catches the left foot of the bird with his left hand, slips the band over its shin with his right, holds it in place with his left, while he carefully brings the ends of the band together with the tweezers. Then as these birds' legs are quite flat the band must be carefully squeezed to fit the leg and move freely up and down without hurting or inconveniencing the bird. If the catcher is the least bit careless in holding the head of the bird, the flexibility of its neck and the lightning speed with which it strikes will leave the bander's exposed finger-tips torn and bleeding. One wonders when banding this eighteen inch long petrel what it would mean to band its cousin the wandering albatross with its up to 17 feet spread of wing which might break a man's arm with a stroke, or with its powerful beak clip off his finger.

Finally the band is fixed and the bird freed to take flight. No longer is he just a wild thing on the wing. He is now a bird citizen numbered in the Biological Census; he has a duty to perform. We shall watch for him. And so through the hours we repeat endlessly till wearied, one dims the flash and stretches cramped muscles; peers into the vast dark and listens to the sounds of the night; the deep diapason of the open sea breaking on the seaward side and the sibilant whisper of the landward shore; the hollow rumble of the birds moving in their burrows and kicking out the loose dust; the weird cries of the birds on the wing, on the surface of the ground, and in the burrows beneath. The voices of these birds are remarkable; they moan with a long drawn au-u-u, then with indrawing breath through the nostrils, a snoring ehooing sound; this is repeated with increasing loudness till they eventually break into a loud wailing u-a-u-u longdrawn. At about 3:00 A. M. before the outgoing birds take flight for the open sea, they have worked up into a perfect frenzy and the island resounds with the uncanny chorus. At times the sound is like a number of babies crying at once, some low and softly, and others loud and harshly. Again it sounds like a number of cats fighting.

At such times the challenge of the universe must receive some reply. These sensations have no money value, but are forces that move men to all adventure. If benefits accrue that is to the good of Mankind; but hobby and research is for the good of the man. Such were the forces behind Audubon when he made the



first start of bird banding in America. Let me now quote from the manual for bird banders:

"Bird banding in America dates from the time of Audubon, who about 1803, used silver wire to mark a brood of phoebes. He was rewarded the following season by two of his marked birds returning to nest in the same vicinity. In the early part of the present century several marking or banding schemes were projected, one of which resulted in the organization of the American Banders Association. The work accomplished by that association, together with the development of the method of systematic trapping, demonstrated the possibilities of extensive banding operations. With the realization that the information obtained from banded migratory birds would be of great value in connection with the administration of the migratory bird treaty act of July 3, 1918, the Biological Survey in 1920 took over the work of the American Bird Banding Association.

"The marking of birds with numbered bands and studies incident thereto constitute an important and an interesting field of ornithological research to the student who has some leisure time. This method of investigation is fostered by the Bureau of Biological Survey - not to replace other existing forms, but rather to supplement these and permit attack upon ornithological problems from other angles. At the end of 1928 more than 400,000 birds had been banded under permit in the United States and Canada by cooperatives of the Biological Survey, and from these more than 19,000 usable return records had been reported to the bureau.

"Banding properly done is neither cruel nor in any other way harmful. The weight of the bits of aluminum or copper from which the bands are made does not burden the birds, and if the bands are correctly placed there is slight danger of their becoming caught on twigs, thorns or nesting material. The number of fatalities reported from this cause is so small as to be negligible."

To be continued.

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Other references to bird-banding activities may be found in THE ELEPAIO, v. I, p. 35, 41; v. II, p. 3; v. IV, p. 33, 42. In the preface to Mr. George C. Munro's recent book, BIRDS OF HAWAII, (Tongg, 1944) is also to be found brief mention of this operation.

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In Natural History for November, 1944, on page 437, is an article by Thomas M. Blackman, entitled "A rare goose". In it Mr. Blackman explains that the Hawaiian goose, or nene, once threatened with extinction, now has a better chance to survive on the slopes of the highest mountain island in the world, Hawaii.

Mr. Blackman is the author also of BIRDS OF THE CENTRAL PACIFIC OCEAN (Tongg, 1944) and GLIDERS OF MIDWAY (Tongg, 1944).



The following letter from one of our members will be of interest to all. We appreciate Commander Steele's letter and hope to hear from him again.

Dear Miss Hatch:

The forested green hills of Saipan are so similar to a small slice of Oahu that I am often reminded of our pleasant bird walks in the Koolau Range. I thought perhaps my fellow hikers and readers of THE ELEPAIO would like to hear of the bird life on Saipan. In general it is the same as Oahu, but much more limited--and therefore, difficult to write about to Honolulu readers. To date, I have seen about a dozen Plover, a few scattered Woods Doves, one pair of White Terns, and one faithful Ulili that comes daily to feed on the beach near my tent.

However, there is one spectacular and colorful individual that is good for a letter in his own right. I will call him the Saipan King-fisher, because I do not know his proper name.

I first saw him perched triumphantly on the rusty wreck of a Jap plane that had crashed on the beach months ago. From his air of assured superiority you would assume that he had brought that Jap plane down personally and single-handed. At first sight, I thought he was a parrot because of his build and his conspicuous coloring--but he was undoubtedly a King-fisher, about twice the size of the North American King-fisher with a strong rugged body and short legs.

He has only two colors--pure snow white and Kelly green. The white is startlingly white, and covers his head, neck, chest and belly. The green is dark in the shade, but flashes with a brilliant sheen in the sun. In flight, he is a flashing whirl of green and white.

He has a snow white crest which he carries with great dignity and precise military bearing, worthy of any plumed knight. A narrow but distinct mask of green runs from both eyes to meet in the back of his head. Hard, piercing eyes glare from the mask. His beak is strong and cruel, shaped like a bayonet.

And is he tough! It is obvious from every move as he struts along a limb, that he will brook no nonsense from any bird in the Pacific.

I have had little opportunity to study his habits, as I have sighted only seven individuals to date. On one occasion, I saw a lone bird perched on a limb over a clear inland pool. He was still as a rock and concentrating on the water below, waiting to strike his prey. A typical King-fisher pose. I know nothing of his nesting habits, but hope to get some native Chamorro to show me something interesting in this line. I saw two of them flying down the beach, and they were quarreling, scolding, and screaming to high heaven.

Finally, the Saipan King-fisher is a bird you could love,--and if Walt Disney ever saw him, he would have a new celebrity to add



to his collection of eccentric characters.

In closing, I look forward to the day when I can again join the Audubon hikers on the trails of Oahu.

Sincerely,  
(Signed) P. D. Steele  
Lt. Cmdr., USNR

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December Walk. A group of 16 were out to see the birds in the Kuliouou area on Saturday, Dec. 9. It was a nice day after the rain of a few days before. Birds were plentiful. Mr. Cogswell conducted the walk, along the main road, into the fish pond area and through the kiawe area.

Coots were first seen, then two plover in the cattle pens. The herons followed. While crossing the pond, a heron and a wandering tattler were seen. Some five hundred yards away on the mud-flat were a group of birds which proved to be plover and turnstone. Continuing through the field, there were more plover and turnstone.

Those making the trip were: Mrs. Bernice Kuhns, Miss Alice Reid, Miss Elizabeth Carey, Miss Alice Carlson, Miss Unoyo Kojima, Miss Mary Laune, Miss Evelyn Giddings, Mr. H. L. Cogswell, Mr. R. Sylva, Robert, Gustave and Stanley Schubert, Joseph Medeiros, Mr. Dunn and his daughter, Nathalie Piilani, who made her first field trip.

Total birds seen: 58 turnstone; 65 coot, 36 plover, 12 heron, 7 pintail, 2 shoveler and one unidentified duck.

Charles M. Dunn

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HONOLULU AUDUBON SOCIETY  
Treasurer's Report  
1944

REVENUE

Balance from 1943	55.19
Membership dues	73.25
Subscriptions to ELEPAIO	10.50
Total revenue	138.94

EXPENSES

Dues to National Society	10.00
Publishing and Mailing ELEPAIO	55.25
Total expenses	65.25
Balance in bank, Dec. 9, 1944	73.69
	138.94
	138.94

The officers are happy to report that the Society has maintained a steady growth, despite difficulties in carrying on many of our activities during war time. We now have a total of 88 members, and mail ELEPAIOS to 32 other addresses, including among our subscribers several universities and museums of natural history.



Responses on the questionnaire recently sent to members seem to show approval of our present course--walks, with meetings as needed along the trail. Only three members indicated that they would be able to attend meetings regularly, with several others holding out hopes of occasional attendance, while the rest felt they could not attend meetings at present.

While the majority indicated that the present time for walks is satisfactory, some find Sunday a better time, hence we shall try an occasional Sunday walk, starting with this month.

May we remind members that dues for 1945 are now payable? The dollar should be sent to Miss Blanche Anderson, 3669 Kawelolani Place, Honolulu, 17.

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Dear Members: I enjoy the ELEPAIO very much and can about follow along on the trail as if I were there.

Here in Arizona we're getting a little snow, the mountain peaks are covered this morning and a cold wind is blowing. My scout troop will soon be fixing the feeders for the birds, which is done each year during the winter months.

I have taken several hikes since I have been here, identified several birds new to me. One especially was the Road Runner, which rarely flies, and kills rattlesnakes for sport. Which reminds me of my last hike up a nearby canyon when I nearly stepped on a 3-foot diamond-back rattlesnake. I now have it in my room as a pet, in a cage, though.

Other birds new to me were the House finch, Gambrell Quail, California Quail, Bandtailed pigeon and others.

Give all my regards and best wishes for a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Sincerely, Kendall V. Webb (Signed)

Thank you for your good wishes. We are glad to hear from our members who are elsewhere.

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JANUARY Bird Walk: To Aiea Heights, Sunday, Jan. 21. Meet at the Library of Hawaii at 9:00 A.M., or Aiea Postoffice at 9:30. Bring lunch. Will members who can provide transportation from town, or who will need transportation, please call Miss Hatch, 76085, if possible?

A complete report on the Christmas bird count, which was very successful, will be carried in the next issue.

#### HONOLULU AUDUBON SOCIETY

President: Miss Grenville Hatch, 1548 Wilhelmina Rise, Honolulu 17, Hawaii; Vice President: Harold T. Cantlin; Sec.-Treas: Miss Blanche Anderson, 3669 Kawelolani Place, Honolulu 17, Hawaii.

Dues \$1.00 a year.