

# THE ELEPAIO

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## Tragedy in Bird Life By George C. Munro

When on June 16, 1891, I landed on Laysan Island of the Hawaiian Chain, I was impressed with the immense numbers of sea birds that frequented the island in the breeding season. There were 20 species, and some in countless numbers. But of more enthralling interest were five species of land birds: a rail, a duck, a flycatcher and two species of the endemic Hawaiian honey-eating family Drepaniidae. How did these birds, two of them distinctly forest birds and one a freshwater swimmer, come to be on a little coral island about one mile long and two miles wide, far in the interior of whirlwinds as it is believed birds are sometimes carried long distances? The flightless rail could not maintain itself in the still air in the middle of a cyclone. Or were they inhabitants of a large forested island before it was gradually submerged and the little coral island built on what was left of it? In 1891, there were remnants of plants that are now not uncommon in the forests of the main group. Notable of these was a native palm and a sandalwood. Be that as it may, the rail and Telespiza, the latter generally known as Laysan canary or Laysan finch, were extremely common and a number were taken to Sand Island of Midway as related in the June 1944 "Elepaio". When Mr. Daniel Morrison was in charge of the Cable Station at Midway from 1903 to 1915, he and Mrs. Morrison released eleven tame canaries on the island. They were fed by the residents but it is also supposed they fed on the seeds of the imported ironwood trees growing there. Reverting to a wild state they bred freely, increased in numbers and changed from yellow birds to white and brown and intergrades between.

Guano workers released rabbits on Laysan. When the guano works were abandoned the rabbits increased till they destroyed the vegetation. Without vegetation insects could not exist and the birds depending on these succumbed; the rail, flycatcher and one of the honeyeaters disappeared from the island. Fortunately a few of the duck and Telespiza still remained. The rabbits being exterminated, these have made a recovery but the other two are gone. It was sufficiently tragic for the Laysan flycatcher and the red representative of our apapane to be thus unnecessarily exterminated, but this year has seen the end of the Laysan rail which a few months before occurred in numbers on Sand Island of Midway.

Some months ago I met a man on the street in Honolulu who told me that the small birds of Midway had disappeared. I was



astounded and could scarcely believe it. I made further inquiries and eventually applied for permission from Admiral Nimitz to investigate the matter. He kindly did so and asked the Commander in charge of the Base, Commodore Gail Morgan, to assist me. The Commodore gave me wonderful help and had a thorough investigation made which I append to this.

During the time the Commercial Cable Company's employees were sole inhabitants of the island they were careful not to allow pre-daceous animals of any kind to land there. This could be accomplished when ships seldom visited there. But the threat of war brought added population and then it became more difficult to enforce these regulations. The stress of war brought still greater difficulties and rats eventually invaded the islands with apparently disastrous effect on the birds.

When I first heard of it I made sure that bird diseases which undoubtedly destroyed many of the Hawaiian forest birds had been introduced to Midway. Or supposing that the germs were already there in domestic fowl that the mosquito that carries these diseases had reached there. I can scarcely believe that rats are wholly responsible. That they could exterminate the birds before they were noticeably decreasing seems scarcely possible, but it may be so.

The wonderful experiment of the Morrisons on Midway is also gone. No specimen has been saved to show the changes in plumage as the birds went back to natural conditions.

A program of rodent control has been undertaken on Midway but unless rats are exterminated the Bonin petrel will be affected, Bulwer's petrel entirely killed out on the islands and the lovely white tern seriously endangered. My experience on Popoia Island off Oahu convinces me that the gentle little Bulwer's petrel is helpless where there are any large rats. On Howland Island in 1924 the small Polynesian rat did not seem to menace the birds in any way.

The experience of Laysan shows how careful we should be not to disturb the balance of nature in our commercial undertakings where it can be avoided. And when we declare a sanctuary for nature we should give it supervision and care. When peace comes let us spare no effort to have the bird sanctuary islands off the Hawaiian group made secure and kept safe for the birds. There are many who are averse to birds being taken for specimens that will surely come in and help to save the thousands that may be menaced by neglect.

November 27, 1944

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Information in connection with questions on birds of this station, submitted with letter of October 11, 1944 from George C. Munro, 2064 Makiki St., Honolulu 4, Hawaii.

1. Of the Laysan rail (*Porzana palmeri*)  
     Laysan finch (*Telespiza cantans*)  
     Common House canary (*Serinus serinus canaria*)



All individuals of all three species are gone from both islands except that two individuals of the house canary were seen in the vicinity of the Cable Station, 20 October, 1944.

2. Rails and finches were reported still present on the smaller island after they had disappeared from the larger island. At that time (fall of 1943) rats were absent or uncommon on the smaller island. About August, 1943, the nearly complete disappearance of the Laysan rail from the larger island was noticed. The disappearance of these birds was abrupt. They were not missed until they were virtually gone. Rats were not common at the time (they had first been reported on the larger island early in 1943-February or March). Disappearance of the Laysan rail was attributed to rats. Mr. Smith, of the Cable Station, advises that about 15 November, 1943, he saw a young rail on the larger island, and heard the mother calling to it from a thicket. This was his last observation of this rail; no later observations by others are reported.

The Laysan finch was considerably more abundant than the rail. Its disappearance followed that of the rail, and was likewise abrupt. There are no observations or records of droopy, sick or listless birds. The finches were rapidly thinned out until there were no more (fall of 1943). Destruction of this species was likewise attributed to rats.

The canary population in 1943 was about 500. Following the disappearance of rail and finch, rat droppings were noted in the trough at the Cable Station where the canaries were fed, and the canaries stopped coming to the feeding trough and porch of the Cable Station. The canaries were thinned out, more gradually than the rail and finch, but likewise with no sign of sickness. A group of a half dozen was seen in August 1944, and two canaries probably from the same group were seen 20 October, 1944.

No records are available of last observations of any of these birds from the smaller island. None are known to exist there at present. Sequence of disappearance of these birds is in the apparent order of the vulnerability to rat predation.

3. There are no records or reports of signs of disease among these birds, in connection with their decrease and disappearance.

4. Rats are on both islands, and are numerous. There is no type of terrain or cover (or absence of cover) on either island that does not have its own population of rats. Although rats were established first on the larger island (first reported early in 1943), rat population density now is greater on the smaller island. In brush-covered (*scaevola*) terrain most favorable for them, rat population exceeds 100 per acre. (Computed from bait eaten from feed pans).

Rats are *Rattus rattus alexandrinus*, (the gray or roof rat, the predominant variety, 80% of whole), and *Rattus rattus rattus* (the black rat).



Most of the rats live in burrows of the "small moaning birds" (Bonin Island petrel), and are believed to sustain themselves largely at the expense of that species, including eggs and young. These birds are not so numerous that effect of rat predation on their numbers is not immediately apparent.

5. Adults of the white tern (*Gygis alba*), are not obviously lessened in numbers; few young were seen in the past several months, and immature individuals under observation disappeared overnight.

(signed) R. S. Alsatt

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The Christmas Bird Count  
By Harold T. Cantlin

For the first time since the beginning of the war the Honolulu Audubon Society, on Sunday, December 17, participated in the Christmas Bird Count. This activity is an annual event sponsored by the Audubon Magazine and is now in its forty-fifth year.

The areas covered by this society this year included several residential areas in Honolulu; the ti-leaf and upper Manoa trail; Kalihi flats; Kaupa pond; Kawaiui swamp; and Kaelepulu pond. These areas, in which a total of twenty hours were spent, included the following types of terrain: sandy beach - 1%; swamps and low-land streams - 39%; farms and roadsides - 14%; tidal flats - 14%; koa-lehua forest - 15%; Kukui-guava forest - 2%; residential areas - 15%.

The temperature ranged from 64 degrees to 74 degrees F., the sky was partly overcast, wind NE 8-12 to 19-24 m.p.h.

The count taken by 14 observers, who covered twenty-five miles on foot, resulted in the following: Frigate bird, 3; American egret, 1; blackcrowned night heron, 97; pintail, 36, (plus est. 400 probables); mallard, 9; gallinule, 6; coot, 421; Pacific golden plover, 219; ruddy turnstone, 196; wandering tattler, 21; sand-erling, 2; Hawaiian stilt, 455 (est.); ring-billed gull, 6; Chinese dove, 95; barred dove, 485; Japanese tit, 1; English sparrow, 172; rice bird, 391; Kentucky cardinal, 52; Brazilian cardinal, 2; house finch, 29; Chinese thrush, 18; Japanese hill robin, 183; mynah, 317; elepaio, 17; white eye, 124; apapane, 39; amakihi, 27. Total, 28 species; approximately 3,823 individuals.

Observers included Blanche Anderson, Thomas M. Blackman, Harold T. Cantlin, Howard L. Cogswell, Cpl. I. A. Dahl, Charles M. Dunn, Francis Evans, Mary Evans, Lorin Gill, Grenville Hatch, Unoyo Kojima, Bernice M. Kuhns, Hazel Peppin, Gustave Schubert.

COMMENTS. An important achievement of this year's bird count was the establishment of the number of Hawaiian stilt existing on this island. Many former counts have resulted in not more than 260 birds, but with observers at Kalihi Flats and Kaelepulu pond a new high in the number of individuals was observed.



An estimated 300 were seen at Kaelepulu and 155 were noted at Kalihi.

Special mention must be given to the report of Howard L. Cogswell which included the American egret, most probably the first time this species has been observed on these islands in a wild state. Cogswell was able to get within 150 yards of the bird and with 8X binoculars noted its characteristic field marks. Also on his list was the Japanese tit, a first for the Bird Count, and at Kalihi he also recorded the ring-billed gulls.

A group of ducks, approximately 400, was observed at Kaelepulu but because of the nature of the surroundings it was impossible to get close enough to identify them. Because the Pintail is the only duck that migrates here in such large numbers it was decided that this flock must have been of that species.

It would be unjust in writing this report not to mention the difficulties encountered by several observers (including the writer), in their search for the Hawaiian duck. A small area of water was noticed quite some distance inside Kawainui swamp, and since many reports told of this duck having been seen in this swamp, it was decided to get as near as possible to the water. Just inside the swamp the grass grew in a cushion-like mass which made it necessary almost to crawl for short distances. In an attempt to step up onto a large clump of grass one would sink down to the former level. Thus it became a constant climbing process although no height was ever actually gained. Farther in, an area of burnt over cane like growth was encountered, which proceeded constantly to trip, scratch and blacken the searchers until their return from the swamp. The duck was not seen, but two night herons were flushed making the search party successful.

Such success was had observing shore birds at Kaelepulu pond that it is suggested a field trip "must" for bird students who may be interested. This mud flat was, in former years, the nesting place of the Hawaiian stilt, and it would be interesting, during the spring months to see if these unique birds still nest there. Their nests have been seen there as late as 1935.

Altogether the count was a great success and it has given the society many ideas for the future.

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#### Recent Birding on Oahu Yields Interesting Records. By Howard L. Cogswell

Having been able to visit several areas on Oahu not regularly covered by members of the society on field trips these days, I have seen some birds which may be of interest to readers of the "Elepaio".

Repeated observation of a flock of several hundred ducks flying ewa over the Pearl Harbor area in the mornings finally led Harold Cantlin and the writer to an extensive mud flat area near



Waipahu which seems to be a mecca for shorebirds and ducks now. Several counts taken there and at the Moana-lua Kalihi flats and ponds in Honolulu follow:

	Moanalua-Kalihi flats						Waipahu flats			
Date	9/12	10/14	11/4	12/14	12/17	12/21	12/15	12/22	12/25	
Am. Egret				1	1	1	:			
Bl.-cr. Night Heron	x	7	x	30	61	x	:	10	x	x
Mallard (?)							:	1		
European Widgeon							:	14	x	12
Baldpate		3					:	300+	250	225
Pintail	1?	4			33		:	8	4	8
Shoveller							:		2	2
Haw. Gallinule	6 (9/26)		2	6	6	6	:			
Haw. Coot	130	100	225	150	236	200	:			
Golden Plover	2	5	10	100	68	60	:	xx	2-300	2-300
Ruddy Turnstone	2	23	30	75	42	75	:	xxx	2-300	2-300
Wand. Tattler		2	6	15	8		:	x	20	xx
Dowitcher							:	1	1	
Sanderling				3	2	6	:	xx	200	200
Haw. Stilt	212	200	186	200	155		:		25	
Ring-billed Gull				4	6	2	:		1	

Three of the species listed above constitute, so far as is known, first records for the Hawaiian Islands. They are the American egret (*Casmerodius egretta*), Dowitcher (*Limnodromus griseus*), and the European Widgeon (*Mareca penelope*). I am familiar with the Egret and the Dowitcher from California where they are common and all identifying marks were carefully noted--the Egret's heavy yellow bill, black legs, and size compared to the Night Heron's; the Dowitcher's white lower back and barred tail, long straight bill and mud-probing habits. The European Widgeon's chestnut head was prominent in contrast to his gray body and made him easily separable from the Baldpates and other ducks with him. There are other records of the Widgeon all through the western Pacific area, in the Marshall islands and they migrate regularly in small numbers through North America, so they are to be expected as a chance migrant in Hawaii also. The Baldpates and Ring-billed Gulls, however, have been recorded a sufficient number of times before to be called "occasional" migrants rather than "chance" or "accidental", I believe.

Ducks in general seem to be fairly numerous this year, above the average from what I can learn from those who have been afield here in the last few years. Pintails, of course, outnumber all other species combined. On a visit to Kaelepulu pond, which was such a fruitful area for our Christmas count, on January 6, 1945, Mr. Cantlin and I saw a flock estimated at 350 Pintails with a few Shovellers. When we approached too closely they flew up and circled high over the hills toward Kaneohe and were last seen directly over Kalihi Pass. We couldn't be sure that they flew through the pass, but consider it likely that they did and that they were prob-



ably headed for the areas west of Honolulu mentioned above.

As for the forest birds the two best spots around Honolulu are still the "ti-leaf slide" above Woodlawn and the Aiea Heights trail. Both have numerous Amakihis and Apanapes now in full song, and are surpassed only by the forest above Wahiawa, to which I paid a visit on Dec. 31, finishing up the old year right with my first sight of an Iiwi. Three more were also heard giving their "squeaky hinge" note, which is music unexcelled to both Iiwi and to the bird-watcher.

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WANTED: photogenic nests! If any member of the society finds a nest in a spot suitable for photographing, will he please relay the information to Miss Peppin or Mr. Cantlin, both of whom are anxious to add more pictures to their collections? Or, if more convenient to telephone Miss Hatch, she will pass on the needed information.

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Next bird walk: To Tantalus, Sunday, February 11. Meet at Punahou and Nehoa Streets at 10:00 A. M.