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VA GLIMPSE OF MOKU MANU FROM THE MAINLAND OF OAHU

By Robert J. Watson, Lieut, USNR

For any bird lover, the tiny Hawaiian isles of Moku Manu, with their fascinating abundance of sea-bird life, are sure to rank among the major attractions of Oahu. Having been thwarted in attempts to make a visit to Moku Manu, and not wishing to leave the islands without at least a glimpse of this fascinating spot, I resolved upon the next best thing - to visit Moku Manu by field glass, as it were, from the Oahu mainland.

With this purpose in mind, I made my way on the afternoon of February 9, 1946, to Mokapu Point, the northeastern tip of the Mokapu peninsula, where the sloping, grassy hillsides drop off abruptly on the seaward side in a line of towering cliffs, facing Moku Manu some three-fourths of a mile away. From this vantage point one enjoys an excellent opportunity of gazing down upon the westernmost isle of Moku Manu. Armed with a pair of six-power field glasses, I spent the afternoon surveying the scene. The results were unspectacular, but on the whole quite well worth while - certainly far better than leaving Oahu without even a glimpse of its offshore sea birds. I should heartily recommend such a trip to anyone wanting a glimpse of Moku Manu but unable to visit the isle in person.

As I had expected, the islet was teeming with birds. Faintly, across three-quarters of a mile of open water, the clamor of their voices could be heard, audible above the swishing roar of wind and sea. Most conspicuous were the red-legged boobies, their white bodies showing up clearly against the darker background, black primaries contrasting with snowy plumage when, ever restless, they rose on the wing to circle above the island, or floated on motionless pinions down the slopes to seek a new perch. The largest congregation of these birds were clustered along the sloping hillsides on the right-hand side of the island, where the land slopes at about a thirty degree angle. Mingling with the boobies were some smaller white birds, doubtless tropic birds, though too small for positive identification at this distance. Also unidentifiable were the countless hordes of smaller brown birds, with lighter underparts, swarming together on the flat top of the island and soaring above it in considerable numbers; these I took to be shearwaters, but could not be sure. Frigate birds were, of course, readily distinguishable by their large size, dark color, and characteristic shape as they drifted above the island. A number of sooty tern commuted back and forth between Moku Manu and the mainland, often dipping conveniently low so as to afford an excellent opportunity to study them at fairly close range. A pair of noddies

ranged out from the cliffs on the mainland, below and to the right of my observation point, cruising in every few minutes to perch in the crevices of the rock. I looked for brown boobies among the crowd, but could not distinguish any; at such a distance, however, they could have been overlooked.

The above observations are, of course, much too sketchy to be of any value. I believe, however, that with glasses of higher magnification - at least eight -, perhaps ten - or twelve-power - it might be possible to make some worthwhile observations on the birds of Moku Manu from this part of the Oahu mainland. Admittedly, such observations would be much less satisfactory than data obtained "on the spot" by visits to the islands. In view, however, of the great difficulty of landing on Moku Manu thruout much of the year, and the consequent inability to make local observations, might not observations made from the nearby mainland provide much useful information? Could not data be obtained on fluctuations in the population of the birds on Moku Manu, on their daily and seasonal movements, on nesting periods, and such subjects? The suggestion may perhaps be impractical, but is offered for whatever it may be worth.

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Lieut. Watson and Sgt. Peterson have both been recently discharged from the service, and are now settling down to birding in mainland areas. We regret the loss of their enthusiastic help to our society. It is to be hoped that Lieut. Watson's suggestion may be acted upon, and the observations reported for THE ELEPAIO.

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LAYSAN ISLAND IN 1891
by George C. Munro
continued from last issue

The birds had no fear of man and even the bluebottle flies allowed themselves to be crushed without trying to escape. The small birds-- a flightless rail, a finch-like Drepanid and a flycatcher called by the residents "miller bird"-- were numerous and not difficult to catch with a handnet. The rail was so inquisitive that when the net was held edgewise on the ground it would approach to examine it closely, to find itself imprisoned when the net was turned quickly over it. The finch would sing while held in the hand and take food offered by the person holding it. The red honeyeater and Laysan duck or teal were not so common and we had to shoot the teal to get specimens. All of these five birds were found only on Laysan Island and most of them were new to science at that time. The honeyeater was named Himatione freethii in honor of Captain Freeth. It was a modified form of the Hawaiian Apapane (Himatione sanguinae). The so-called finch (Telospiza cantans) closely allied to the Hawaiian Ou (Psittacirostra psittacea) was taken in numbers to Honolulu as a cage bird, but though a sweet singer and perfectly at home anywhere if given plenty to eat, they did not survive long and it was really a waste. The rail was also carried away as a curiosity. The officers of our boat released some of both species on Eastern Island of Midway and later importations were made so that in 1929 they swarmed there as they formerly did on Laysan.

The eggs of the sea birds were largely used as food by the guano workers and those of some species were very palatable, without fishy flavor. Many birds, principally Laysan albatross, were killed in striking the buildings and flagpole. The birds were not accustomed to obstructions when landing on the island and we often had to dodge out of the way of an alighting albatross. Many young of this species were killed on the carline for although Captain Freeth sent a man along each side of the line in front of the cars to throw off the birds, some would resent this attention and rush back snapping their bills in defiance and be crushed by the wheels. Whenever anyone passed through the colonies of laying or sitting birds and disturbed them from their nests, many eggs were destroyed by other birds. This was very noticeable when coming back through the sooty tern rookeries where numbers of eggs were to be seen freshly broken. It did not seem possible that the rail with its slender bill could break the shells but we saw one in the act. It leaned well back and brought the end of its bill down on the top of an egg with all the force it could muster, and flapping its wings and jumping off the ground, it eventually broke through. It then cleared a channel across the top of the egg and was about to enjoy its hard-earned meal when the tern returned and drove it off. The bill of the finch is heavy and strong which enabled it to break into the eggs easily when the parent birds were absent. They soon learned to follow an intruder through the rookeries to attack the unprotected eggs. The teal was also killed for food. A photograph of dead game of the island taken before we were there shows a number of teal in the lot. This was soon stopped. Collectors like ourselves took a number of every species and some of their eggs. It will be seen by this that reduction of the birds had already commenced, although it seems incredible that any difference would be made in such hordes, and likely not much difference was made during the guano operations which came to an end about 1906. Early in 1909, the island with most of the others of the chain was by executive order of President Roosevelt set apart as a bird sanctuary. Then for fourteen years tragedy stalked the island. In 1909 Japanese plume hunters settled there and killed off the birds by the acre, it might be said, clearing off several hundred acres. Fortunately the depredators were stopped before they had destroyed all of the albatrosses. Estimates differ as to the number killed and that of other birds taken can not even be guessed at. Probably not less than one million birds altogether were destroyed. Strange to say, two years later the remaining birds still remained crowded on the old nest sites, leaving the raided areas bare.

By 1901 when the island was visited by Professors Homer R. Dill and William Alanson Bryan, rabbits released about 1903 had increased enormously. Some species of plants had been destroyed by them and these scientists drew attention to the danger of eventual extermination of the plant life and consequently of the insects and land birds. The miller bird was already much reduced as also was the teal. Both were in the habit of coming around the buildings hunting moths, the teal in the twilight and the miller bird extending its search inside the houses even by lamplight, breaking test tubes in the laboratory by trying to perch on the edges and toppling them over. The miller birds, even the nestlings, swallowed the large moths whole, wings and all, but the honeyeater carefully picked the body to pieces holding the insect in one claw--Captain Freeth said, always the left claw.

Of the wonderful sights to be seen on Laysan in its original condition there were three which must have stood out conspicuously: the island when the Laysan albatross was nesting; the young birds fully fledged and exercising their wings; and a flight of frigate birds disturbed from their nests. Though less than half the size of the wandering albatross (Diomedea exulans) The Laysan species is a large bird with a six foot spread of wing, body white, and of graceful appearance--distributed over the whole island and massed on large areas, the sight must have been a wonderful one. We did not see this as the birds come ashore in November and the old birds had left before our arrival, at least there were comparatively few to be seen and we hurried to secure the specimens we needed. The wing exercise of full-fledged young we saw on Lisiansky Island in July. They preferred a stiff breeze for this and on whatever part of the island the wind blew strongly there was a mass of waving wings. What must the sight have been on Laysan where the birds were no much thicker! They would jump up off their feet and float a short distance with the wind, then after alighting, turned and walked sedately back to the starting point presumably to avoid crowding on one side of the island. A flock of several hundred black frigate birds with a seven foot spread of wing, heads to the wind, sailing back and forth, passing and repassing one another with scarcely any movement of wing, long forked tails alternately opening and closing and heads moving quickly from side to side, is one of the most beautiful bird sights I have seen. The frigate bird, to avoid getting wet in the heavy showers that at times passed over the island, soared in large numbers up around the edge of the cloud to the upper air. When the shower was over they came down by straight drops for short distances at a time.

Compare our arrival on this wonderful island with that of Dr. Alexander Wetmore in 1923. To quote from his article in the National Geographic Magazine: "On every hand extended a barren waste of sand. Two coconut palms, a stunted hau tree and an ironwood or two--were the only bits of green that greeted the eye. Other vegetation had vanished. The desolateness of the scene was so depressing that unconsciously we talked in undertones." The miller bird was extinct, only three red birds were to be seen, two rails and a few dozen finches. The red birds disappeared in a storm during their stay, when also a number of seabirds were buried alive in their burrows, the protecting grasses having been killed out by the rabbits, leaving nothing to stay the drifting sand.

Dr. Wetmore's party exterminated the remaining rabbits. By destroying the vegetation they had starved themselves down to a few hundred. Possibly the plant life will to some extent recover and the island be in the future a good home for the inquisitive rail and impudent finch and a secure nesting place for the burrowing petrel and shearwater as well as the surface nesting birds which are not much affected by the changed conditions. Dr. Wetmore saw twenty ducks, a surprising recovery. Sad to say the cheery little flycatcher or miller bird and the interesting red honeyeater are gone for good.

In its original condition Laysan was ideal as a bird sanctuary of its kind. The five endemic species of land birds made it unique for a sand island. There was vegetation to hold the sand and harbor the insects to feed the land birds, no obstacles for the heavy sea-

birds to collide with when landing, no wells or pits to trap them and no trailing vines luxuriant enough to trip them up when taking a run off to get into the air as Dr. Wetmore found on Ocean Island.

In 1924 a Bishop Museum expedition visited Baker and Howland Islands lying near the equator. On Baker Island there were several brick tanks left by former guano workers. In the bottoms of these tanks there were numbers of live gannet in every stage of starvation, trampling over the bodies of former victims. On Howland Island there was a well dug in the coral with a thick layer of skeletons of the same species on the dry floor. The birds blunder into these traps and can not rise out of them. Even a plover was a prisoner in one. There is a cistern on Laysan that undoubtedly traps the albatross in the same way and it should be filled up.¹ The buildings and coconut trees should also be removed and the island restored as much as possible to its original state.

Laysan is easy of access in the summer when most of the seabirds are ashore and there seems to be no reason why it could not be made available under careful supervision for visits by students or even tourists. With proper care taken the birds would not be injured and the wonderful sights would be enjoyed.

We saw only two species along the chain that are not included in the Laysan list of birds. One of these was the Hawaiian stormy petrel, easily recognized by its white upper tail coverts showing a white patch at the top of the tail and the other a little gray tern which approaches in beauty the small white tern or love bird.

Landing on Sand Island of the Midway reef we found experiences reversed. This island had been almost denuded of birds by shipwrecked crews and their discordant cries were missed. Quoting from my journal: "It is a desolate island, the most forbidding and weird that we have visited--where Captain Walker, his wife and three sons spent fourteen weary months-----."

"But that is another story."

¹ Information has since been received that the cistern has filled in with windblown sand.

In 1943 both the rail and Telespiza disappeared from Midway supposedly killed out by rats. It is feared that the rail is now extinct. Telespiza, according to evidence by Coultas and Dr. Gerritt P. Wilder then Custodian for the Reservation, made a good recovery on Laysan, but neither saw any evidence of the rail there.

FIELD NOTE: A Hawaiian owl was noted flying in full daylight at Kaelepulu pond, on January 19th of this year, by Rus Peterson.

We should be glad to receive more field notes from our members. A compilation should be interesting, and would record valuable information.

FEBRUARY BIRD WALK:

Sunday morning, February 10th, found eight anxious hikers at the public library, hoping for a day with the mountain birds of Poamoho. Widespread storms the preceding week and rain falling in the mountains as they watched, however, forced the decision to postpone the Poamoho trip till a better day. Instead, the Audubonites (everywhere an adaptable breed) promptly decided on a half day's search for the birds of nearby coastal Oahu.

First stop was Moanalua. Presently six Coots were recognized by characteristic "pumping" motion in swimming, perhaps 300 yards across the pond. A peculiar barking announced two Black-crowned Night Herons flying from an adjacent tree. Meanwhile, dove species were noted: many friendly little Barred Doves flew or walked nearby and several large attractive Chinese Doves obligingly perched, then swooped low overhead. The skeptics were convinced that the distant "post" was another Night Heron only when it cautiously ventured to move around. Ubiquitous, flashy Mynahs and quarrelsome English Sparrows were custodians of the area as the party left.

Next followed a tedious search along back roads bordering sugar fields, taro patches and muck flats. Few shore birds were seen, and at too great a distance for satisfaction. However, three chattering companies of tiny brown and chestnut Rice birds enlivened the roadside ditches and the group was pleased to note a Water Buffalo placidly resting under a tree. Finally, near Waipahu, birds were spotted wading in a small stream. Perfect views immediately followed of: a half-dozen Ruddy Turnstones, three glistening white Sanderlings and several spotted Golden Plovers. This assemblage of winter visitants to Hawaii was scarcely 20 yards away and bunched together in bright sunlight. A few minutes later three large, dark-slaty Wandering Tattlers joined the flock, uttering an occasional loud and melodious whistle. All this time two brilliant Kentucky Cardinals watched the party, one pouring forth music loud and long from the top of a telephone pole. Finally, a trim scarlet, gray and white Brazilian Cardinal perched briefly in a bush top.

A quick visit at noon to Kalihi flats to find the Hawaiian Stilt was unsuccessful, but many Night Herons, Plovers and Turnstones were seen. After a return to beautiful Moanalua Gardens to enjoy the collections of orchids, pansies and other flowers, the group split forces, some returning at once to home or barracks. The others consumed lunches afield as a Mongoose went slinking through the tall grass to end the trip. A hasty accounting showed 14 bird species for the day.

John S. Webb

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To many of us, the monthly field trip is one of the high lights of the month, and one we would like all our members and friends to enjoy with us. Our mileage is usually small; the trip seldom strenuous, and you can be assured of pleasant company of all ages, for we consider it one of our strong points that we are fortunate enough to count among our regulars several of school age as well as those of more mature years. It is indeed a day of peace which goes far toward strengthening us for the more troublous ones of our everyday life.

CATALOGUE OF THE BIRDS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM. 27 vols. Lond. 1874.

The University of Hawaii Library has recently acquired this important scientific work. Attached to the title page of the first volume is the following account from a contemporary newspaper:

"A wonderful piece of scientific work has just been accomplished in the completion of the final volume of the British Museum Catalogue of Birds. This undertaking, the most important of its kind ever attempted, was commenced a quarter of a century ago. The catalogue is a complete list of every bird known at the time of publication. It contains an account of eleven thousand six hundred and fourteen species, divided into two thousand two hundred and fifty five genera and one hundred and twenty-four families. The number of specimens referred to in the work does not fall far short of four hundred thousand, about three hundred and fifty thousand of which are to be found in the cabinets of the Museum. The catalogue, illustrated by innumerable woodcuts, consists altogether of twenty-seven bulky volumes, and would have astonished beyond words those early ornithologists, Aristotle and Pliny, whose meagre lists deal with not much more than one hundred and seventy sorts. Modern research, stimulated by the perpetual interest which the winged and feathered world inspires in man, have brought the slender lists of antiquity up to the prodigious number mentioned; and until Central Africa, Tibet, and the Antarctic regions have been explored, with certain portions of South America, it cannot be safely asserted that we know all the birds of the Earth. In scientific reality, birds are nothing more or less than developed reptiles. One of the greatest of naturalists, rising from his inspection of the fossil archaeopteryx, justly exclaimed: 'Birds are only glorified reptiles.' They have been even included with lizards and their like under the name of sauropsida, but none can tell, even with the aid of the fossil slabs, by what magic of Nature the feathers came upon skin and scale, and the lacertain fore-arm evolved into the beautiful soaring wing."

"Were there, perhaps, once veritable dragons, plumed and pinioned gigantic creatures of the air and water, which darkened the sky with their hideous and colossal wings, and are at the bottom of all the old stories about rocs and flying monsters? Could the pterodactyl actually take to the air? Strange it is to reflect how, if Nature had put a hand upon the wing end of birds, as she has almost done in the case of one or two species, and of the flying-fox, the lordship of the earth might have been obtained by this branch of the vertebrates. Birds already are superior to all men and beasts by their supreme command of the regions of the atmosphere. Speech they might evidently have acquired, as is sufficiently proved by the example of the parrot, starling and jackdaw. What was there, then to prevent the gradual realization of that fancy of Aristophanes - a 'Cloud-cuckoo-town', everywhere, with learned, wise and powerful birds directing terrestrial affairs, and slowly establishing ornithological laws, literatures, and institutions? The egg-problems presented, no doubt, a difficulty, for it would be awkward to have dominating families brought up on that principle, which is, of course, lower than the mammalian method and inferior to it in vital degree. Yet the dinornis, the moa, and even the ostrich, cassowary, emu and condor, show plainly enough what might have been made of the bird world if Nature had

worked upon that line in the days before the ape ascended into the agnostic. It is a curious tribute from man to birds, that being as a class so beautiful, brilliant in colour, and largely melodious, we do not like to think of them as modified reptiles. What can there be in common, the poet asks, between the toad under a stone and the skylark 'hanging in heaven'? Nevertheless, they are structurally almost similar, in teeth, bones and general build. As birds evolved they got, indeed, a 'keeled sternum' which no reptile possessed, except the pterodactyl, but the learned believe this might have come by the constant exercise of wings. Then there is to be considered, no doubt, the great question of 'biconcave vertebrae', but the fossil ichthyornis has, strange to say, one vertebra which is both concave and convex. Once well established, however, the birds appear to have stuck tightly to their type. The geese painted on the old fresco at Mayolun, 3000 B.C. so precisely resemble those of today that Egyptologists can declare their species with certainty. Altogether, there is plenty of matter for thought in the catalogue of the birds just finished by the British Museum."

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The Society has recently received a file of THE AUDUBON WARBLER, organ of the Oregon Audubon Society, of Portland, Oregon. These, with the WESTERN Tanager, published by the Los Angeles Audubon Society, are available for the use of our members.

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The January-February issue of the CONDOR carries an article by Dr. Harvey I. Fisher and Paul Baldwin, entitled "War and the Birds of the Midway Atoll" which gives in detail the findings of their survey on that island. Our members, who will recall their briefer article published in the ELEPAIO, August 1945, will be interested in reading the complete account.

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Miss Janet Bell, of the University of Hawaii library, has prepared an index for the first five volumes of the ELEPAIO. Anyone who has not received this, but who would like a copy, please send a request to Mrs. Pedley.

APRIL BIRD WALK: To Pa Lohua, April 14th. Meet at the Library of Hawaii at 8:30; or at the Aiea Post office at 9:00. This used to be one of our favorite walks before the war, and the trail has but recently been re-opened.

7:30 P.M.

APRIL MEETING: At the Library of Hawaii, Monday evening, April 15th. Dr. Harold Palmer of the University of Hawaii, will talk on the geology of the island, illustrating his lecture with slides. Come and bring your friends.

HONOLULU AUDUBON SOCIETY

President, Mr. Gordon Pearsall, Makiki Hotel, 1661 Piikoi St., Vice-Presidents, Miss Grenville Hatch, 1548 Wilhelmina Rise, Mr. Francis Evans, 132 A. Royal Circle; Sec-Treas., Mrs. Blanche Anderson Pedley, 3770 Sierra Drive, Honolulu 17; Advisors, Mr. George C. Munro, Lt. Col. E. H. Bryan Jr.; Editor, THE ELEPAIO, Miss Charlotta Hoskins, 3212 Loulu St., Honolulu 54, Hawaii.

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