

T H E E L E P A I O

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A Recent Trip to Midway Islands, Pacific Ocean.
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and Paul H. Baldwin, of the National Park Service.

Because of concern about the fate of the Laysan Rail and the Laysan Finch and about the possible general effect of war activities on insular populations of birds in the Hawaiian Archipelago the authors flew to Midway through the courtesy of the United States Navy. Baldwin represented the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and Fisher the Territorial Board of Agriculture and Forestry; the two agencies have dual control of the refuge on the leeward islands of the Hawaiian Chain.

Originally we had hoped to find enough individuals of the rail and the finch to start colonies anew on Laysan Island. A careful search of eleven days, starting on May 7, 1945, convinced us that no rails or finches remained on either of the two islands making up Midway. It is probable that rats played an important part, if not the most important part, in the destruction of these birds. See Elepaio, Vol. 5, pp. 48-51, February, 1945.

Eastern Island of Midway Atoll was probably the last home of the rail, as E. L. Caum and Sergeant Lewis W. Walker, United States Marine Corps, saw two there in July, 1944. About 75 acres of Scaevola shrub habitat which still exists there was searched by the authors on hands and knees. Possible feeding places such as the carcasses of dead birds where flies were breeding were watched, but no rails visited them. Sand Island, Midway, has about 300 acres of shrub remaining, as well as the original grove of ironwoods set out by the Pacific Cable Company. However, the bunchgrass which the rails frequented so much in pre-war days is gone. Other retreats of the rail, such as close-plantings of exotic shrubs also were tenantless.

Mr. G. C. Munro has informed us that in 1929, Capt. Anderson set seven pairs of Laysan Rails from Midway on Pearl and Hermes Reef. Mr. George Kaufmann, who lived at Midway from 1929 to 1931, has confirmed this but adds that he himself visited Pearl and Hermes Reef during 1930 and found no sign of rails (letter). At that time he saw no live vegetation and found that storms had left only tall clumps of dead bunchgrass. He looked inside some of these clumps but found no birds. Three or four large sea birds were on the islets while he was there. Since the rail depended upon insects, birds' eggs and meat scraps for food, it seems impossible that the transplanted colony could have continued to exist under these circumstances, even if

a few living specimens had been overlooked during Kaufmann's visit.

The absence of the Laysan Finches on Midway was attested by the presence of an Hibiscus hedge in full bloom. We were told that when the finches were present they "debudded" the hedge so rapidly that seldom was a red blossom found. Records concerning the present status of the Laysan finch were incomplete. It is gone from Midway. The only other known colony was on Laysan. According to E. H. Bryan, Jr. (letter dated April 3, 1937, to G. C. Munro), W. F. Coultas saw "at least 1000" finch at Laysan in 1936. Bryan (personal communication) desires to retract his statement (Bryan and Greenway, Contribution to the Ornithology of the Hawaiian Islands. Bull. Mus. Comp. Zool., XCIV: 136, 1944) that the finch is extinct, because his writing of the statement published in 1945 antedated the findings of 1936.

A number of factors connected with the war have acted to decrease the populations of the various species of birds. Among the most important of these factors are the utilization of so much of the ground surface by military forces and the continued disturbance of all parts of the island by man and his machines. In colonial, ground-nesting birds the slightest disturbance may throw the entire colony into an uproar; this is happening daily in the tern colonies for example. Indiscriminate reduction of populations of petrels and shearwaters is taking place as a result of the efforts of various services to maintain lawns and gardens. Many other deleterious factors which are taking their toll will be discussed more fully in a later publication.

Populations of the various species by counts on the ground, in the air, and on the basis of the numbers of nests were censused; and the results shown in the following table.

	Sand Island	Eastern Island
Laysan Albatross	75,000	35,000
Black-footed Albatross	35,000	18,000
Wedge-tailed Shearwater	40,000	22,000
Christmas Island Shearwater	0	400
Bonin Island Petrel	25,000	0
Bulwer's Petrel	0	600
Red-tailed Tropic Bird	10,000	9,000
Red-footed Booby	0	450
Blue-faced Booby	3	0
Frigate Bird	0	60
Pacific Golden Plover	150	100
Bristle-thighed Curlew	12	8
Ruddy Turnstone	250	100
Gray-backed Tern	0	750
Noddy Tern	0?	10
Sooty Tern	170,000	4,000
Hawaiian Black Noddy Tern	1,350	750
Fairy Tern	15,000	5,000
Chinese Pheasant	2 or 3	0
Domestic Pigeon	50	0
Unidentified Dove	2?	0
Domestic Canary	30	0

It is to be remembered in any comparison of these figures with those of other investigators that some of these birds are migratory and others come in only to nest at certain seasons. Consequently, seasonal factors must be considered.

The abundance of some species such as terns, shearwaters and petrels on one island and their absence on the other island certainly should command some attention. Are ecological factors involved, or is it the result of war activity?

The canary, as indicated above, is surviving despite earlier reports of its elimination from the fauna. The Brown Booby was not seen, though Hadden (Planter's Record, XLV: 179-221, 1941) reported that this was the most common of the three boobies found at Midway. The Blue-faced Booby appears to be on the verge of extinction on these islands.

In general, the birds at Midway seem to be holding up well under the intensive war use of the islands. However, the bird populations may be so large in some cases that the effects of rats, reduced space for breeding, and loss of adults and young through accidents may become apparent only gradually. The continued effect of these forces will become apparent perhaps in the next few years.

Because we feel the next few years will be the critical years in the existence of these birds it is recommended that an immediate survey be made of the fauna of all the leeward islands. The rail was present a year ago, the finch five years ago and the Brown Booby four years ago; extinction in a small circumscribed area may occur with great speed. There is danger in allowing populations of colonial nesting birds to decrease to very low levels. It has been found by European workers that a certain number of individuals must be present in a colony for successful breeding and maintenance of the colony. There is a psychological interdependence among colonial birds that is apparently an important factor in the initiation of the reproductive cycle. Midway, as one atoll, may not be so important, but as an example of what may happen on militarily-occupied islands it is significant in pointing the need for prompt and continued supervision.

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THE SMALL BIRDS OF MIDWAY by George C. Munro

In the February Elepaio I wrote on the disappearance of the three small birds from two islands on the Midway reef. A short time ago, acting on information given me by Mr. Walter Donaghho about the Laysan rail, I conferred with Captain William G. Anderson. He told me that in June 1929 he released 7 pairs of Laysan rail from Sand Island of Midway, on an islet of the Pearl and Hermes reef. They were thriving and should be there now if not killed by storms. In 1931 a severe storm killed numbers of sea birds on the sand islet and the rail may have gone with them. While a guest of Commodore Gail Morgan, Commander of the Naval Operating Base at Midway, from June 8 to June 15, 1945, I found additional information about the rail.

I was given a copy of a recent letter to the Commander of the Submarine Base at Midway from Dr. Alexander Wetmore. He said that when making an investigation of the birds of the Reservation in 1923, he took 8 rails from Midway back to Laysan. But as the island was then in a desert condition, caused by devastation of the vegetation by rabbits he questioned that they would survive. Just before I left Midway on the 15th, I met Captain John Jayne, Commander of the Submarine Base at Midway. He had spent two years there when building the Submarine Base and was well acquainted with the rail. He has just returned to the island and told me he was sure he saw a rail a week before. Knowing the bird so well he could hardly be mistaken about its identification. Copies of letters shown me by Mr. S. F. Smith who represents the Commercial Pacific Cable Company on Midway, gave authentic information about the rail. In letters written by Mr. Daniel Morrison, formerly in charge of the Cable Station it is shown that all the rails on the Midway Islands were descended from the ones released on Eastern Island by the sons of Captain F. D. Walker in July 1891. A note in my journal on July 13, 1891 on Eastern Island says: "Freddie released a pair of rails and finches." There is still hope that the Laysan rail may survive. It may be on Midway, Laysan or the Pearl and Hermes reef. It is sincerely to be hoped that it does and will increase again.

There are 30 canaries on Sand Island that have escaped the rats. I saw one drinking at a watering place. Its color was a light yellow fading to lighter towards the tail. They will increase now that the rats are reduced in numbers. I made careful inquiry about the change in color from Mr. S. F. Smith, Superintendent of the Cable Station. He had counted 400 canaries and said that some had changed to pale yellow and a few had grayish markings but none had turned brown.

The Morrisons called them Canton canaries as Mr. Morrison had bought them from the hands of the S. S. Siberia which had just arrived from China in March 1909. They released 13 in January 1910 and by 1911 they had increased to 60.

The rat eradication campaign has been very thoroughly handled by Captain H. L. Wyatt who gave me the following figures. There are 900 trapping and poisoning stations on Sand Island and 400 on Eastern Island. An estimate of 14,000 rats were killed with poisoning and trapping from January to April 1945.

We trust that future Commanders of the Base will take as active and kindly an interest in the birds and plant life of the island as does Commodore Gail Morgan at present. Midway Island will surely be one of the show places of the Territory of Hawaii in the future.

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The following are excerpts from two letters recently received from Howard L. Cogswell, now stationed somewhere in the Pacific area.

"Oceanic birds enroute were notable chiefly by their scarcity; I saw more near Hawaii than the entire balance of the trip. Red-footed and Brown Boobies, Frigate-birds, Noddy and Sooty Terns, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and Black-footed Albatrosses were the chief species with numerous?? Sooty Storm Petrels and a few other glimpses. Only

about 3 Tropic birds (Red-tailed) the entire trip, and one (my first) Laysan Albatross. Near some atolls where we stopped I added the White Tern, and White-faced Shearwater near this end.

The island we're on is beautiful in the spots not ravaged by war--with pines, jacarandas, lantana, and numerous green undergrowth species....

I've gradually worked at identifying the birds around our camp until now I have only one "?" left to remove. A nest of the Red-bellied Rock Thrush some 40 feet up in an old smokestack has been one of my active points of observation. I climbed up to it once and saw the five gangly, blind, but wide-mouthed youngsters at arm's reach. The parent birds are very pugnacious and are always driving sparrows (Tree Sparrows) away from the vicinity.

The one species that caused me more trouble than any other was the Brown-eared Bulbul. Though noisy and conspicuous they are at the same time so wary that I just couldn't get close enough to see details of their plumage. At first I thought they might be jays for their raucous cries and pitching flight were very much like the California Jay. Piece by piece I learned more and more about them until one morning I got one in good light through the binoculars and saw his brown "ear" mark. The subspecies here seems to be much darker than the one figured in the book I brought with me.

...It is so much like California some of these days, (except for the humidity) that I'm actually half believing I'm there sometimes. But when the old air raid siren blows and sometimes the shrapnel starts falling -- and we high tail it into our foxholes -- my illusions are quickly shattered.

Just in case any of the Oahu birding gang is interested, here is my complete bird list from the island:

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|--|---|
| 1. Old world Tree Sparrow | 10. Crow (Species?) |
| 2. White-eye | 11. Black-naped (?) Tern |
| 3. Ashy Minivet (mostly migrants, they're gone now). | 12. Greater Egret (like American at Honolulu) |
| 4. Red-bellied Rock Thrush | 13. E. Gray Heron |
| 5. Wandering Tattler | 14. Brown-eared Bulbul |
| 6. Common(?) Sandpiper | 15. The unknown: a little sparrow sized bird with a loud flight note. |
| 7. Common Kingfisher | |
| 8. House Swallow | |
| 9. Great Tit | |

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Mr. Munro inserts the following corrections to his book, "Birds of Hawaii".

There are some other errors which I was under the impression I had already mentioned. Page 11, fourth paragraph, 1st line, second word should be of not to. Page 35, 3rd paragraph, second line should be 33.87 inches, not 26 inches, referring to the blue-faced booby, which I had already said was the largest of the three boobies. Page 43, second paragraph, 14th line from bottom should be March 9, 1941, not March 1891. Page 76, fifth paragraph, third line should be May 14, 1825, not May 4. Page 85, bottom line, should be 1890s not 1880s. Page 115, third paragraph, bottom line should be 1834 not 1934.

Flame in the Forest by William Bridges, is an article on tropical birds in Colliers' for May 5, 1945. In it, Mr. Bridges reports on the fabulous tropical birds taken by Charles Cordier for the bird house at New York's great Bronx Zoo.

Scarlet cock of the rock, heavenly sylph, white-footed racket-tail, club-winged manakin, are a few of the exotic tropical American birds Mr. Cordier has brought into the Zoo in two collections during the last few years.

In the rain forests and jungles of Colombia Cordier spreads his lures and nets after watching and observing the habits and haunts of the birds, sometimes for weeks at a time. The story of the capture of the specimens is nearly as fabulous as the birds themselves.

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The June 4th, 1945 issue of Life Magazine carries six pages of delightful paintings of birds by Rogers Tory Peterson. The article is entitled Courtship of Birds, and the painting portray the rituals of bird courtship. Brief explanatory notes accompany each. The pictures are in color, full of careful detail, and as charming as the birds themselves.

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The following unusual variation in a common bird is reported by Lieut. Fred M. Packard, USNR, a competent and careful observer.

"While waiting for a bus at Landing C, Pearl Harbor this morning (10 May 1945), an English sparrow began to hop about beneath the shade tree where I was standing, gathering nesting material. She was an ordinary female of the species in every way except one: she had a bright smoky-blue crest! I watched her from a distance of five to fifteen feet periodically for over an hour, and could not be mistaken about it. The fore crown was the usual indeterminate brown, but the crown feathers for the outer half of their length were of this vivid color, and projected back from her head to form a flat crest similar to that of the cedar waxwing. As any odd hybridism must certainly be ruled out, and as I have never heard of a blue melanism, I am at a loss to explain such a pattern. Her nest is in the tree under which I was standing... - and she is mated with a typical English sparrow."

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We wish to announce, tardily, that Miss Charlotta Hoskins is editing the ELEPAIO, and has been doing so for a number of months. The Society extends gratitude, and appreciation for the excellent work which she is doing. (G.H.)

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AUGUST WALKS: August 12. To Aiea Heights trail. Meet at Library of Hawaii at 8:30, or at Aiea Post Office at 9:15. Those able to provide, or needing transportation, please call 76085, a day or so in advance, if possible.

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