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Notes on Birds of the South Pacific

By Terence O. Clark, Lieut., USNR

I just completed a 10,000 mile trip by air, visiting many of the NATS detachments, Johnson, Kwajelein, Ebeye, Guam, Saipan, Sangley Point, Manila, Samar, Cebu and Manus. While the business involved kept me from making anything like the study of the avifauna I would like to have made, I did tour several of the installations in the ubiquitous jeep, and made complete notes of the birds observed, basing my subsequent identification of "Birds of the Southwest Pacific" by Ernst Mayer, "Birds of the Central Pacific Ocean," by Thomas Blackman as well as your own¹ "Birds of Hawaii," all of which I carried with me.

No sight identification can be conclusive in my estimation, but the ones listed were carefully considered and I am convinced they are accurate. Several others observed that I could not reconcile, -mainly doves and pigeons, are not listed.

Our first stop, on May 17, around 5:30 P.M. was Johnson Island. The Wedgetailed Shearwaters were very active, apparently just coming in from the feeding grounds. They were a rich shade of brown above, and appeared darker below. A pair of Red-tailed Tropic Birds flapped high above, their long tails indicating their family. Two Great Frigate Birds sailed over the island, and as we took off an hour later, we passed several more as the plane gained altitude.

Kwajelein was transited during the dark hours, and we arrived in Guam on the 19th of May, around 10:00 A.M., spending twenty-five hours there. Little opportunity for bird study was left by a full schedule, but two birds forced themselves on my attention by their frequent appearance.

The first was the Micronesian Starling (*Aplonis opacus guami-Momyiama*), which is the counterpart of the Hawaiian Mynah in noisy self-assertiveness. A yellow eye, large black bill, glossy black plumage, (except for occasional individuals with dirty white bellies) and a shrill squeaky whistle are good field identification features.

The second was a real gem, - the Cardinal Honey-eater (*Myzomela cardinalis saffordi-Wetmore*). I saw four of these lovely red and black creatures. The first was perched on a small tree in the center of an area that had been "bull-dozed" for the air field, and his shrill, single-note whistle attracted my attention to the spot. The bird is so brilliant that it at first seems all red. Later one

¹Lieut. Clark's article was written as a letter to George C. Munro, and is being printed here by his kind permission.

notices the black wings and abdomen. Actually, the only red areas are the head, breast and a wide stripe down the back. Mayr states that *Myzomela c.* feeds in the tree tops, but this was not true of the four I noted. I observed a pair on the edge of a steep bluff, just below the Officers' Club. It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and although the pilots were gathering for "beer muster", their noisy banter failed to disturb these birds, a scant twenty feet away. The fourth was observed the next morning calling from a ten-foot perch in a small clump of trees.

My cot was none too comfortable and I awakened early. I noted that the first bird calls on the island corresponded exactly with the first rays of the sun, which touched the sky at 5:29 A.M. Among the notes heard were the clear whistles of the honey-eater, the harsh calls of the starling and the sibilant "steam-vent" of a dove.

The dove was very hard to find in repose long enough to really see it, and seemed to be longer-legged than our North American species. The general gray coloration and the yellow-pink throat and breast were the field marks on which I based my identification as the Philippine Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia bitorquata dusumieri-Temminck*), an importation.

Just at dusk a small slim bird, about ten inches long, flew overhead, its flight marking it as a heron, but identification was impossible in the short time it was in sight.

We arrived in Saipan on May 20th, just after noon, departing about midnight, but a jeep trip around the north end of the island, taking us to the very top of the 800-foot ridge, revealed a total of nine identified species, the best record for any of our stop-overs.

The first bird I met on Saipan was Lieutenant Commander Steele's Kingfisher, so effectively described in the January 1945 ELEPAIO. As we left the seaplane base we drove through a clump of tall trees bordering a creek bed, and *Halcyon chloris albicilla-Dumont* took off with typical strident rattle. During the ride that followed, I noted at least six of these White-collared Kingfishers, usually perched like a Derby Flycatcher in the Rio Grande area, ready to challenge any interloper.

My view of this bird showed the white head and underparts Lieutenant Steele mentions, but the back, wings and tail were a bright metallic blue-green, and not my idea of a true Kelly green. The birds were uniformly nervous and noisy and I saw them only singly.

I had better views of *Streptopelia b.d.* and excellent ones of *aplonis o.g.* on this trip, and a real thrill when, near the top of the ridge, two green and yellow Marianas Fruit Doves whipped across the road and perched in some small trees. These birds appear in the field more like parrots than doves, and my first thought was that they were parrots. The green above and peach and yellow underparts are all that one observes in the quick transit of their course, but the island contains no other similarly marked birds, so the identification is safe.

Well up on the ridge we flushed the other honey-eater, the well named golden bird, (*Cleptornis marchei*-Oustalet). The head and underparts are a rich yellow-bronze shade, and like its cardinal cousin the first impression is that the birds is one color only. Actually, the back, wings and tail are a rich olive shade. A pair of these beauties were feeding in a clump of bushes close to the road and were in no hurry to move on as the jeep pulled along side of them.

In a shady draw two Edible Nest Swiftlets raced past in the families' characteristic flight and disappeared over the tops of some large-leafed trees. They were dark gray above and lighter below, and again are the only species found on Saipan.

From high on the ridge I looked down on a lovely pure white heron flapping sedately up a stream bed. Identification by elimination labels it as a Reef Heron, (*Demigretta s. sacra* Gmelin) probably heading westward.

Our final bird was found right in the camp area. Trees that in south Texas I would label as Salt-Cedars grow to a considerable height along the sandy beach and from this grove I heard a lisping note that sounded much like a pidgeon-English speaking Chickadee. On coming into view, they proved to be my new acquaintance from Oahu, the White-eye; in this case, *Zosterops conspicillata saipani*-Dubois. These four-inch mites are as unconcerned about the observer as their Hawaiian cousins, and look much like Vireos. The eye ring is broad and the forehead a soled white. Otherwise, they are gray-green above and dull yellow below.

This account of one afternoon's incidental observation on Saipan should indicate the possibilities for systematic collecting there. I do not know how complete American museum collections are of the birds of this island, but as it has been Japanese mandated since the last war, I judge they are not extensive. Excellent facilities are available now for such scientific activity, here and elsewhere, and it would be interesting to have the official reaction of the Navy Department if approached by one or more of the important museums for permission to collect on some of these islands.

To be continued.

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Pekin Nightingale on Mountain Top By George C. Munro

On April 4, 1945 I received from Dr. V.G. Clark the dessicated body of a Pekin nightingale or Japanese hill robin (*Leiothrix lutea*) which she had recently found in the vicinity of the pond near the top of Maunakea, Hawaii. The pond is at 13,007 feet elevation; the highest point is 13,764 feet. The place where the bird was found is about 3,000 feet above the highest forest line. The cold dry air of the mountain had taken all of the moisture out of the flesh without decomposition so that the fine plumage is practically intact. It is probably an immature male as its upper parts are slate color with a tinge of green on its forehead and cheeks, instead of the olive green of the adult male; throat yellow and a band of rusty color across the breast; under parts yellowish; wing colors as far as

can be seen are normal, except that the red is a rusty red instead of crimson; outer part of bill red, base of bill and nostrils black.

On June 2, 1943 Dr. Clark sent me a specimen of the Hawaii akepa (Loxops) which she obtained also by a small pool at about 13,010 feet elevation on Maunaloa. "Birds of Hawaii", page 110.

These two specimens are of considerable interest showing that some birds stray to high elevations on to the bare open rocky country of the Hawaii mountain tops. Lost there they are unable to find their way back to the forest and die of starvation or cold. It is quite a contribution to scientific research when travellers to out of the way places bring away specimens such as these. For this Dr. Clark is to be commended as not everyone will do this, especially when suffering from the cold, sunburn and fatigue which one experiences in a trip of this sort.

When David Douglas, Botanist, scaled Maunaloa on January 29, 1824, he wrote in a letter to a friend describing the trip: "Near the top I saw one small bird about the size of a common sparrow, of a light mixed gray color with a faintly yellow beak. No other living creature met my view above the woody regions. The little creature which was perched on a block of lava was so tame as to permit me to catch it with my hand, when I instantly released it to liberty. I also saw a dead hawk in one of the caves." Showing how birds can be driven up the mountain with the wind and get lost there, he says: "The summit of this extraordinary mountain is so flat that from this point no part of the island can be seen, not even the high peaks of Mouna Keah, nor the distant horizon of the sea though the sky was remarkably clear. It is a horizon of itself about seven miles in diameter." Further on he says: "As I stood on the brink of the ledge along the East side, to the hump, so to speak, of the mountain, the point which as seen from Mouna Keah appears the highest..." the wind was so strong that he could hardly stand against it.

Archibald Menzies, surgeon of Vancouver's expedition had scaled Maunaloa, reaching to top on February 16, 1794. He mentioned seeing geese and crows. When David Douglas ascended it in January 1824 he found a native who had accompanied Menzies in his climb. Menzies was the first white man to reach the top, and the publication "Hawaii Nei 128 years ago" said he was probably the first human being to do so. This was Menzies diary published by Mr. W. F. Wilson, Honolulu, in 1920. Wilson also compiled the account of David Douglas' ascent of Maunaloa and of Douglas' death in a cattle trap on the side of Maunakea from letters written by Douglas to friends, and other records.

May 27, 1945.

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The July Atlantic Monthly carries an article entitled "Birds of Midway," by Captain T. McKean Downs, which was evidently written prior to the disappearance of the small birds.

We continue with notes from recent letters from Howard L. Cogswell, from some South Pacific island.

As to birds I've gradually whittled down all the unknowns in the species around our camp except one. This is my current species

"X" and when I get it labeled I'll have to go further afield, but with no days off as yet, I can't go far. My island list is now only 18 species--far less than I expected. There are no doubt plenty to be found if I knew where and could get there. No Audubon Society here to help.

Around our new tent among the young pines on a grassy hillside we are frequently "serenaded" by the raucous calls of the Brown-eared Bulbuls. These are the olive-grayish jay-like birds I couldn't place for so long; they are much darker than the more northern form pictured in the book I have so it wasn't till I stalked one really close and saw the crescentic brown ear patch that I recognized it as the same species. Like a Jay, they will sit quietly for a time, then startle you with a loud cha'yuck, cha'yuck, cha'yuck as they fly off. Other times they will call back and forth along the river bank cliffs with a monotonously repeated eee'cha, eee'chah, eee'chah ad infinitum, or vice versa chuh-ke'eet, chuh-ke'eet. They are by all means the most aggressive and conspicuous bird hereabouts.

The tree sparrows compare favorably in actions with Mr. Munro's quiescent English Sparrows of Hawaii. The white-eye here is very like yours, but not as common. Prettiest bird I've seen yet is still the little kingfisher which I believe I described for you before. (Not yet!) The only nest I have found are sparrows, white-eyes (1- empty) and the Red-bellied Rock Thrush. This bird is slate gray and the size of a mynah. The male has a dull red lower belly, the female being gray with tiny bars all over. Their nest was placed 40 feet up in a broken-off smoke stack of the nearby sugar mill ruins. When the young were about 4 days old I climbed the steel ladder to the top and could have touched them if I wanted to. Later on I saw some of them on the hill top near our tent-- typical thrush babies with spotted breasts and yellow bill.

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The bird walk to the ti-leaf slide on July 14th repaid those who took the steep and slippery trail by providing the best view of amakihi that many of us had seen. A number of amakihi fed quietly among the trees, staying in one place for an unusual length of time, so that we could study plumage, beak and habits far better than is common with this bird. Elepaio greeted us in their usual friendly fashion, and apapane regaled us with song, but refused to come into view. G.H.

SEPTEMBER ACTIVITIES. Bird walk, September 9th. Meet at Library of Hawaii at 8:30, or at Aiea Railway Station at 9:30, or at Wahiawa theatre at 10:00 for a trip to Poamoho trail. This was one of the best trails for birds before the war. We should be back in town by 5:00. Trail is apt to be muddy. ^{Sept. 24}
MEETING at the Library of Hawaii ^{at} 7:15, in the auditorium. Don Mitchell will bring his recordings of mainland birds. A business meeting will follow.

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