

Notes on the Bird Life of Midway Islands  
by George C. Munro

In the "Elepaio" of August, 1945, Vol. 6, No. 2, is an article entitled "A Trip to Midway Islands" by Dr. Harvey I. Fisher and Mr. Paul H. Baldwin. These scientists seem to be dubious about the future of the atoll as a bird reservation. Their reason for this is that the islands are likely to remain a permanent Naval Operating Base with a considerable population. They mentioned factors causing decrease "of the various species of birds". These are loss of "ground surface", "disturbance ... by man and his machines", "indiscriminate reduction of shearwaters and petrels" and "many other deleterious factors which are taking their toll". We shall be interested in their further opinions and conclusions as these all should be brought under consideration at the present time. They also mentioned the small number of two of the boobies at present there and that the blue-faced booby is nearing extinction at Midway; also the danger of allowing colonial nesting birds "to decrease to very low levels" on account of the "psychological interdependence" of some of these birds.

My trip which followed shortly after theirs was in the nature of a holiday, but it was one in which useful work was combined resulting in an optimism opposite to their opinion. I, of course, was influenced by my memories of the islands as I saw them 54 years ago. Mr. Palmer and I landed on Sand Island on the 12th of July 1891. We walked over the island and stayed overnight in a little house which had sheltered shipwrecked seamen. We saw a small colony of sooty tern on the southwest corner of the island; one little downy white tern chick on the door sill of the house; heard one or two tropic birds under the house and a shearwater wail outside. These were all the sea birds we saw or heard on Sand Island of Midway on July 12th, 1891. We had landed on islets of the French Frigate Shoal, Laysan and Lisiansky Islands; passed close to Nihoa, Necker and Gardner Islands. At every island were swarms of birds and only Sand Island of the Midway atoll was practically birdless. We saw few birds as we lay in the Pearl and Hermes lagoon but we were far from any island and there were many birds outside the reef as we were coming in. During the late eighteen eighties shipwrecked seamen had killed and eaten all the birds of Sand Island. There were considerable numbers of birds on Eastern Island of which I shall treat later on.

The castaways were taken off in 1888 and in 1891 the birds had not returned to Sand Island. In 1903, eight years after, birds had again increased and Japanese feather collectors were killing them. From accounts I have read, a large number of birds were killed by them at that time. Presumably this was stopped as the Cable Company started to erect its plant that year, and the birds made a fresh start. A number of men would be employed on the buildings and plant. The Cable Company started to operate the cable in 1907 and from one ac-



count I read there were 15 people employed on it and about the same number of servants and laborers. In the 1930s the Pan American Airways opened a hotel there and this added to the population. It can thus be seen that the birds multiplied greatly under conditions of human occupation. As the bird population grew so also did the trees which now stand over 70 feet high. I have always advised against planting trees on islands where albatrosses nested. On Laysan many birds were killed by newly erected buildings when the guano works started. The birds seemed unable to avoid them as they came swooping in to land. But on Midway the albatrosses have become adjusted to trees, buildings and even barbed wire entanglements.

About 1939 came rumors of war and defense work was started on the two islands. Airplane landings were urgently needed. Undoubtedly this was fatal to many birds which insisted on returning to old nest sites, but defense of the nation demanded it. Defense workers were unused to the strident cries of the tern and the moaning of the shearwaters and petrels. Working hard and doing overtime to rush the necessary constructions they needed sleep and no doubt often became exasperated with the noise and waged war on the birds. This was all very unfortunate but more or less unavoidable and now belongs to the past. We all hope it will not occur again and as these birds are still in large numbers, if properly protected in the future they will increase again probably beyond their former numbers.

I doubt if there need be misgivings as to "loss of ground surface" as there is a considerable area of made land on both islands from dredging operations which Commodore Morgan is having grassed. This is even now available to the birds which will no doubt spread out on to it as they need it, though so far the albatrosses stop at the old shore line. I found the birds very little disturbed by "man and his machines." The tern colonies which came under my direct notice did not rise on the wing unless someone walked right into the nesting place. I stood and studied them with the birds sitting at my feet. If they took wing when low flying airplanes passed they quickly returned to their eggs. One new colony across a path leading to the swimming beach rose on the wing with great clamor but returned as soon as the bathers had passed. Wherever there are sooty terns on a nesting island there is always a clamor day and night at some part of the island. The Rothschild expedition missed it at night only at Sand Island, the little colony was out of hearing. As to shearwaters and petrels, despite precautions, they may still be persecuted where they are close to sleeping quarters, or endanger plantations and buildings by undermining them. But I think there will always be space for numbers of them where they can do no harm. "Psychological interdependence" may apply to the petrels but I doubt if it does to the boobies and I would say certainly not to the brown booby. I have seen this bird on a number of islands but never in large numbers. On Niihau in 1939 there was a very small number nesting in a cliff entirely away from other birds. On Laysan in 1891 there were only two or three, on Lisiansky there were few and we had to shoot our specimens. On Eastern Island of Midway there was a colony of about half a dozen and again we had to use the gun to get specimens. This was about the only bird we had to shoot on the whole trip. I saw one on Eastern Island this time near the red-footed colony, under the Scaevola with a downy chick. It was unafraid and refused to leave its young. I wrote down the bright colors of its legs and bill as it stood there defying us. Though wild in nature the many times I have seen it, this one had become used to human presence and showed no fear. One of



the party tossed small sticks to a red-footed booby on its nest and it deftly caught them in its bill one after another. On July 16, 1891, the last day the expedition was on Eastern Island I enumerated the birds we had seen there. They were:

Black-footed albatross. A number of young birds on the beach but we could not get an old bird till just as we were leaving, when we secured two old males.

Laysan albatross. A few young on the beach nearly full fledged. We saw an old Laysan albatross feeding a young brown one.

Wedge-tailed shearwater. With egg.

Christmas Island shearwater. No mention of it in my notes but it is my impression that we saw it there.

Bonin Island petrel. Found one young one.

Bulwer's petrel. Very numerous, sitting on its egg under the grass or pairs sitting in hollows together.

Red-tailed tropic bird. Very numerous. We could hear its rasping cry overhead all day. Saw it chased by the frigate bird.

Red-footed booby. A few.

Brown booby. A colony of about half a dozen old birds, with eggs, and young nearly full grown.

Blue-faced booby. Not mentioned in notes but three boobies listed as seen. It was numerous at Lisiansky. Of course the castaways may have used all the boobies for food but I doubt if the brown and blue-faced boobies were ever numerous at Midway.

Frigate bird. Few. The only place we saw it chase the tropic bird.

Laysan rail. A pair were released by the sons of Captain Walker on July 13, 1891. We saw one on the 14th and one on the 16th. running about quite at home. All the rails of Midway, in later years were evidently descended from that pair, as shown by recent investigation.

Pacific golden plover. Mentioned as present.

Bristle-thighed curlew. Numerous.

Ruddy turnstone. In numbers at a small lagoon on the beach at one end of the island.

Gray-backed tern. Listed as present.

Sooty tern. In usual numbers with well grown young.

Noddy tern. Present.

Hawaiian tern. Present.



White tern. Very numerous, with eggs and young. Noted carrying several fish crosswise in its bill.

In one of my articles in the Star-Bulletin I state that some of the birds are benefited by the presence of man. I am quite sure that this is the case with the white tern. I might say that on few outlying islands have I seen it so scarce as on Sand Island in 1891, and on no island so numerous as on Sand Island in 1945 where its population grew in company with human inhabitants. Probably this is also the case with the tropic bird and the sooty tern. If the presence of men has discouraged the frigate bird on Sand Island that has certainly been to the advantage of the other birds. I did not see one frigate bird on Sand Island on this trip.

I have been asked what "can be done to protect the birds and build up their numbers" on this Navy Base. The best procedure in the absence of any bird society there I would say is for the Honolulu Audubon Society to write any new Commandant taking charge of the Operating Base and ask his assistance in protecting the birds. It might point out the dangers confronting the birds which have to be guarded against, rats, cats, dogs, etc. I found that procedure worked out well with the Navy here before and after the war started. Its officers have been ever cooperative. Admiral Nimitz has been keenly interested in the preservation of our sea birds in the sphere of his stupendous operations. He even found time to have me given information on what extent the battle of Midway affected the birds on the islands; that the terns suffered to some extent from the aerial bombardment but the albatrosses escaped injury. Also that Laysan Island and its birds have not been injured by the war. The Commercial Pacific Cable Company's personnel have always been careful of the birds. Cats that had gone wild were destroyed and cats further prohibited entrance to the island. This condition holds today, though unfortunately there are dogs, but these are under strict surveillance. It is hard to prohibit dogs where there are large numbers of lonely men. I feel no concern for the albatrosses, terns and tropic birds as long as rats are controlled, cats prohibited, men and dogs regulated. There is much in what Fisher and Baldwin say about the next few years being critical in the history of our sea birds and an immediate survey being advisable. A regular parole of the Reservation and a resident caretaker at Laysan as recommended by William Alanson Bryan in 1912 is I think the best solution if it can be brought about. There was a movement to inaugurate a Bird Club at Midway recently. If it takes shape and such organizations could be established at all the United States permanent Operating Bases in the Pacific a tremendous amount of information could be amassed. There is much to be learned of the life history of our sea birds. Fisher and Baldwin mention the abundance of certain birds on one island of Midway and not on the other and this is an interesting study. Also why they change islands as I am sure some of them do.

It is regrettable that Fisher and Baldwin did not find the rail and so did not continue their visit to Laysan to establish it there. The Commandant of the Base at Midway, Commodore Gail Morgan, was ready to transport them to Laysan if they had found rails to take there. They made a good informative count of the Midway birds and could have taken a rough estimate of the birds of Laysan on what would be a short visit. Mr. George Kaufmann's visit to Pearl and Hermes Reef mentioned by the scientists was evidently after the severe storm in 1930 or 31 which killed so many sea birds. He might easily have overlooked sur-



viving rails as the different searches may have overlooked survivors on Midway, brooding birds for instance would be inconspicuous. It may be but a forlorn hope that any remain at Laysan, Midway or Pearl and Hermes Reef but we can cling to it till further investigation shows its futility.

oOo

Notes on Birds of the South Pacific  
by Terence O. Clark, Lieut., USNR  
Continued from last issue.

Three birds were observed at Sangley Point, one Tern was common in Manila Bay, close to the mouth of the Pasig River, and three others were noted in a marshy spot near Nichols Field,--all in the Manila area. Five others were listed at Samar, but as before stated, I have only my notes on them. Identification waits on written authority.

On Los Negros and Manus Islands, south of the equator, I noted seven more extremely interesting species, three of them in the immediate camp area and the others on a jeep ride to Seeadler Harbor.

The yellow-bellied Sunbird (*Nectarinia jugularis*) was ever-present, from the time we stepped off the plane at 5:45 A.M. May 25th until we departed at eight o'clock the following morning. My notes on this feathered ray of sunshine read as follows:

"Black head and throat, long curved black bill, lemon yellow below, olive back. Small. Flies like a Goldfinch, chirps like a Canary, lispng song like Grasshopper Sparrow observed at Skokie Lagoons, Chicago. Feeds in flower bracts and on stems of papayas. Collecting cobwebs from eyebrows of Quonset hut, winding them around on bill. This last bird has white spots on black wing tips. Two sat facing toward each other on wire near B.O.Q. with heads and bills tilted at 45 degree angle, twittering noisily." I can add nothing to the field description except to say that this mite is four inches long.

A Beach Kingfisher, (*Halcyon s. saurophaga*-Gould) larger than our Saipan friend, worked up and down the lagoon front all day, making very little noise for one of his family about it, however. This bird, too, had a white head and underparts. The wings, back and tail were a brilliant blue. I saw two others along the shore of Manus Island during our subsequent drive.

The Quonsets of the squadron officers fronted on the shore-line, and while visiting with the commanding officer, a black streaked slate-gray Reef Heron flapped along the beach and lit on a pile of wave-washed rocks. This was my only view of the dark phase of this interesting bird. Later in the day a pure white heron flew to the same spot and remained perched for some time.

On our trip through the Manus jungle, speeding along on a perfect highway built by the inimitable Seabees we passed colonies of two distinct species.

The first I believe to be Bouganville Crows, (*Corvus meeki*-Rothschild). They were large noisy black birds, congregating in tall trees along the roadside, and their grackle-like chatter advertised their presence if they had not been visible.



The second I have put down as Whiskered Tree Swifts, (*Hemiprocne mystacea woodfordiana*-Hartert). They were slim-winged and lean appearing, -streamlined would be our current one-word description, and the first impression was two-colored, steel-blue and black. I did not note the white markings. They frequented moist areas, arched over by great trees and pendant vines, and were swirling in and out, apparently feeding on flying insects. Their grace in flight was reminiscent of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher when that personality was really showing off, and they were of like size.

Topping the crest of a small ridge planted in Coconut palms, we startled a beautifully colored Coconut Lory, (*Trichoglossus haematodus massena*-Bonaparte). This green bird, slightly larger than the similarly marked Fruit Dove, shows a dark patch below the beak, which is red, and a larger area of bright red on the throat and breast.

On the return trip I saw a pair of birds that I can't pretend to identify, but they are of sufficient interest to mention at this time. As we passed a sandy stream-bed, empty of all but small pools of water, I saw two pullet-like creatures clearly outlined against the sandy background. All that registered was the dark gray coloration and chicken-like posture before they disappeared into the thicket. Elimination was little help in this case, as they could be any of three species, -Incubator Birds, Bushhens, or Purple Swampheens. I do not believe they were the last named, as the legs were not elongated, nor the second, as the size was greater than nine inches. I believe them to be the first, *Megapodius freycinet ermita*-Hartlaub.

We stopped for over twenty-four hours in Kwajalein on the return, and although we toured that shell-wracked island in a jeep, I saw only one bird. This was a black Micronesian Starling, which by location should have been *Aplonis opacus angus*-Momyami. It flew dispiritedly from one blasted palm to another along the water front, and my guess is that it must have been a visitor from one of the other less punished islands on the atoll.

The boat trip to Ebeye revealed half a dozen seemingly pure white Terns, which I at first took to be Love-Terns, restlessly beating along the surface of the lagoon. Inspection through the boat's telescope, however, revealed a black band across the nape of the neck, extending from eye to eye, and a pale gray cast to the upper surface of the wings, which marked them as Black-Naped Terns, (*Sterna sumatrana*-Raffles). They apparently nested on one of the smaller island between Kwajalein and Ebeye, and one of the crew told me the natives ate them with great relish whenever they could take them.

We spent another hour just at noon at Johnson on May 26th, and the Frigate Birds and Wedgetailed Shearwaters were very active. I noted a few of the latter with lighter colored bellies, but the greater percentage were as dark, (or darker) below as above. Part of this effect seems to be a trick of the light, but I can't help but conclude that most of the Johnson birds are dark-bellied.

I also observed some distinctly smaller birds of similar or darker coloration flying with the Wedge-tails, and these I took to be Christmas Shearwaters, (*Puffinus nativitatis*-Streets).

Four white Terns came close to the barge on which I was standing, and on these birds with deeply forked tails, black eyes and bills, I



could detect none of the black collar that marked the Kwajalein species. I judge them to be the true *Gygis alba*-Sparrman, and have them so listed.

You can appreciate of course, that the circumstances of the trip, made with a definite task in view that had nothing to do with ornithology, prevented a more complete record than the foregoing. I do not submit any of these records as scientific data, but rather as a picture of what I observed casually and incidentally, in the hope that it might interest one who has spent as much time in the Pacific world as you have.

I do hope, deeply that our government, through one of its agencies will see fit to take advantage of the present opportunities to enrich our store of knowledge of the avifauna native to these and other places,- opportunities that if neglected now, may never present themselves again.

oOo

August Bird Walk. Our hike on Sunday August 9th took us several miles back into the hills above Aiea. Interesting crowd, lots of fun, perfect weather, and as many birds as we deserved. This seemed to be their day for songs, for we heard apapane and hill robins repeatedly, in addition to the elepaio, rice birds, doves, cardinals, etc. Several of the hill robins showed themselves briefly; and a pair of elepaio inspected us critically, decided we were safe, and then put on an acrobatic and singing performance especially for our benefit.

There were twelve on the hike. At lease we started with twelve, but lost two for a time. I caught one attractive girl explaining to a sailor new to the rock the wonders of shampoo giner, and telling him how he should use the suds from its blossom for shampooing his handsome beard. It seemed quite appropriate, with the war still trying to decide whether to quit, that we were served a Japanese confection by one of the Hawaiian hikers. James Greenwood, Lieut., USNR

oOo

Lorin Gill reports seeing a Shama thrush on Tantalus, noting clearly the while rump and white-edged tail. Its song, he says, is much richer and more varied than that of the robin. The bird apparently has taken up its abode close to his home, and seems quite fearless, coming into the open readily.

BIRD WALK FOR OCTOBER. To Tantalus, October 14. Meet at the corner of Punahou and Nehoa at 10:00 A.M.

HONOLULU AUDUBON SOCIETY.

President, Miss Grenville Hatch, 1548 Wilhelmina Rise, Honolulu 17; Vice President, Harold T. Cantlin; Secretary-Treasurer, Miss Blanche Anderson, 3668 Kawelolani Place, Honolulu 17; Editor, THE ELEPAIO, Miss Charlotta Hoskins, 3212 Loulu St., Honolulu 54.

Dues \$1.00 a year