

Notes on Midway Island Birds

By George C. Munro

In recent investigations on Midway Islands I have found that the albatross feeds on large cuttlefish with bodies up to 10 inches long and an inch thick. The disgorged bodies have the appearance of a policeman's baton as told by a good observer. In castings at nests in June, 1945 among what looked like pieces of black skin were pieces of cuttlefish bone of which I took specimens. They are more or less worn by stomach action but one shows it is a cross section. It is nearly $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches at its greatest width and nearly an inch thick. It had lost some of its original thickness so the cuttlefish that carried it must have been over an inch thick. This mollusk differs from the squid in having the cuttlefish bone or internal "calcareous plate". In some bird specimens taken in connection with "Survival Training" classes I found cuttlefish and cuttlefish bone. In a red-tailed tropic bird there was the body of a cuttlefish $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches long with arms detached and in a gray-backed tern there were pieces of cuttlefish bone. I now realize that what I took for light pumice in the stomachs of albatrosses in June, 1891, and in Bulwer's and Tristram's petrel in later years were really pieces of cuttlefish bone. I mentioned in my journal on Laysan on June 20, 1891: "On the dry surface of the lagoon there are lots of small pieces of pumice" evidently this was cuttlefish bone disgorged by birds. Floating on the lagoon they were left on the mud as the lagoon partially dried up in the summer months. In our specimens of young albatrosses in 1891 we found nothing but oil, pieces of coral and cuttlefish bone which I took for pumice picked up by the birds from the surface of the sea. I had seen pumice floating on the surface of a river in New Zealand before starting on the expedition and cuttlefish bone has much the appearance of pumice stone. Sometimes it takes one a long time to recognize his mistakes; my trip to Midway in June of this year certainly disillusioned me of some of them. In July 1891 on Eastern Island of Midway I saw a Laysan albatross feeding a black-footed chick and again on Sand Island in June, 1945. A very good friend of mine tells a curious tale about one of his pet black gooney chicks. They are out on his lawn and some under the shrubbery by the wall of his house. They come out when he calls them to feed. On June 25, 1945 he wrote me in regard to bird-banding; "these 25 black gooneys were banded on Sand Island, Midway Islands... The only bands placed on distinctive birds were 40-721802 which was placed on a black-footed juvenile hatched and raised closest to the Commander's residence, and on 40-721825 which was placed on a black juvenile raised by hand feeding and which is a pet and distinctly tame, showing none of the vicious disposition of the black-footed albatross. This bird was found in a starving condition early in February, was fed by hand on bone stripped fish and fish livers, on which it thrived till about the middle of April when a black adult gooney and a white adult gooney began to feed the bird, and have fed it continuously since, the hand feeding being reduced accordingly; but the bird still demands to be fed by hand. As you may remember this bird is blessed with the sobriquet of "Stupe" -

short for stupid. All the bird's life it has been in the habit of literally burying its head in the sand under itself if you startled it with noises or acted as if you were going to strike it. Other birds in the same situation will fight back viciously." I one day watched an old black gooney among a number of young ones. One young black gooney persistently followed it about with open bill squeaking its demand for food. The old bird would turn and seize it by the neck and seemed to bite viciously. The young bird would turn its head down to one side till the old one left it. Then up and follow it again, when the act was repeated. This continued for a considerable time until the old bird left. Part of the time the young bird was joined by as many as three others all demanding food, but they were not as persistent as the first one. This was evidently a starving bird. Stupe was a starved bird and had evidently been much punished by old birds from which it demanded food and so acquired the habit of hiding its head. I doubt if the old birds bite as hard as they appear to do or I would think the young bird's neck would be lacerated. The Laysan albatross seems to have a more kindly disposition than the black-footed. A kindly disposed person named Arthur Wagner has a number of black-footed orphans which he is raising. One night a Laysan bird came and visited each of them, seeming to talk to them. It came again for several nights and visited each bird in succession. Wagner calls to his charges and they come to be fed. They are jealous and will bite the one getting the food.

The albatrosses' system of feeding its young is peculiar. When the young sees its parent approach, it opens its bill widely and keeps up a querulous squeaking. It tries to rub its bill on the old one's. This goes on for some time till the old bird submits and is ready to regurgitate. Then it allows the young bird to place its bill across inside its own open bill. I watched them carefully from very close and could see the old bird disgorge nothing but squirts of oil which the young seemed able to catch with its bill in that strange position. One young bird with a deformed bill, that was hand fed to supplement its parent feeding, seemed unable to properly catch the squirts of oil and had its feathers saturated with it. It would seem that feeding with oil is practiced when the young are full grown, as that was all the food we found in young birds taken as specimens in 1891. However, on the French Frigate Shoal as before narrated an old bird disgorged a large fish which was promptly swallowed by a young bird when my companion held it to its bill.

In June 1945 the Laysan albatrosses were dancing in twos and threes but not in a spectacular way as they do earlier in the season. One when alone was going through some of the motions, opening its bill, bowing and whistling. It was one of three that performed together. I saw one scratching its neck with its claw; it supported itself with the bend of its wing against the ground while it scratched itself. They like to have their necks scratched. They do a considerable amount of rubbing each other's necks. Birds that fight the outstretched hand immediately become docile if the hand reaches the neck and begins to rub and scratch it.

The dredging of the lagoon built up an area of new land. It can easily be determined where the old shore line ended as there are no birds on the made land. It will be interesting to see when they spread out on to this territory.

In reporting the banded birds, age is divided into ad. for adults, imm. for immature and juv. for juvenile; full plumage, first plumage

if different and young birds at the nest. It is contemplated by residents of Midway to form a bird society of some kind. The birds are already protected but there is much to learn and record about them. If a society is formed and the albatrosses are examined when they arrive in November much interesting data will be accumulated. I have the numbers of two which were seen this year with bands evidently placed by Fred Hadden on young birds in 1937. I also obtained numbers of two tern banded by Donaghho in 1940 and 41. A good observer told me that when the Laysan albatross arrives at the nesting island its head is white and the black markings about the eyes develop after coming ashore. Another said that the reddish shade in the feathers of the red-tailed tropic bird fades out after the birds have been awhile ashore. The color keeps in skins as Rothschild when writing of the difference between the tropic bird here and near the coast of New Zealand said the color was more pronounced in the New Zealand skins after being a number of years in his collection: Of course they were not exposed to light and the open air.

I read recently an article in the "Atlantic Monthly Magazine" on "Birds of Midway" in which was the astonishing statement that the sooty tern "Never voluntarily allow themselves to alight on the ocean or even allow themselves to get wet." On June 10, 1891 my journal states "Noticed a large flock of black-backed tern fishing, they would alight on the water as thick as they could sit." True, no sea bird can risk getting thoroughly soaked with water. The albatross sits high in the water when swimming and can dive under the water from the surface but if it gets its feathers wet it is helpless. I have taken a young one from the water when only its head protruded but it was soaked and died after we took it aboard the schooner. The writer of the article said an experiment was tried with the tern and it drowned. Probably a young bird was used and its feathers were not in condition to shed the water. I found in banding red-tailed tropic birds on Howland Island that if the birds were tossed into the air after banding they fell to the ground with a heavy impact, yet this bird is one of the strongest fliers. It cannot stand on its feet yet it rises on the wing from a flat surface without trouble; it flaps along the ground using wings and feet to strike the ground. Some of these birds that dive from the air have a space between the flesh of the breast and the skin, connected at intervals with a membrane which is probably used as a cushion to break the impact when striking the water or landing on the ground with a flop as does the red-tailed tropic bird. Probably this is inflated when needed. As soon as I noticed that the birds could not take wing that way I had my assistant banders place the bird on the ground after banding. The tendency is to throw them into the air and birds can easily take wing when this is done but not so the red-tailed tropic bird. Another statement in the same article which I cannot refrain from referring to is that the white tern has "the same harsh unpleasant voices common to all terns." I have seen the white tern on a number of islands from Midway to Rose Island south of Samoa and I have never heard it make a harsh sound. Its greeting to strangers on its island is a gentle little croak, difficult to describe. In company with its own kind it uses an uh uh uh which I tried to take down while the bird was uttering it, a very gentle sound. I am sure the writer of the article attributed the harsh cries of other terns or tropic birds to the white tern. These harsh cries can be heard almost all the time on Sand Island in the sea bird nesting season.

The scarcity of the frigate bird on Midway on this occasion was very noticeable. On all islands I have visited where there were other

birds there were numbers of frigate birds soaring over the islands. I saw none on Sand Island and a few on Eastern. An immature specimen was taken for "Survival Training" and I saw another on the wing. There were some there in 1891 and I noted that it was the only place where I saw it chase the tropic birds. Is it too cold for them or do they dislike the human inhabitants? It is certainly favorable to the other birds. One resident told me he saw one kill a white tern but let it fall to the ground and did not eat it. I was told they sometimes rested in the ironwood trees but never nested on Sand Island.

I took particular notice of the way the tropic bird displays its red tail feathers. I stated in a former article that when we saw these birds perform at Nihoa Island in 1891 that it seemed as if they turned only the two long red feathers. This fallacy was caused by the shortness and inconspicuousness of the other tail feathers which are white. There are black streaked feathers on the bird's flank and its feet are black. These together gave the appearance of the tail in its normal position when the red feathers were pointing sideways or underneath the bird. A mistake I made in "Birds of Hawaii" is that the white tern stands by its egg when hatching. I found that it sits with the egg in front of it covered neatly by its breast feathers like an apron. It has just the appearance of lifting its apron and placing it over the egg. The one I saw do this was on top of a two inch wide road marker. It is a puzzle as to how it turns the egg on the precarious base on which it sometimes lays it. I saw sooty terns go through peculiar motions shaking their bodies. A resident bystander said they were turning their eggs. They really seemed as if they were trying to accomplish something. I saw only one brown booby and it was so tame it refused to leave its downy young. It was a beautiful bird with very bright coloring on its legs and bill.

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BIRD STUDY ABOARD A TRANSPORT TO THE WESTERN PACIFIC
By Howard L. Cogswell

On April 27, 1945, I said a silent Aloha to the island of Oahu which had been my home for eleven months; and as the old converted freighter which was transporting me westward across the Pacific eased through the mouth of Pearl Harbor I took one last look at three Golden Plovers on a sandbar just off the beach, lingering there before they too left the Hawaiian islands for others far across the ocean. Intending to make the most out of a change in the location of my navy duties I had prepared for a long session in oceanic bird study, and soon it began.

Toward late afternoon, while we were still within sight of Honolulu and Waikiki, the first pelagic birds began to appear around the ship and I posted myself advantageously on the fore-deck to identify and count every one that I could. From there on to our destination at Okinawa that was my chief occupation during the daytime hours, though later it was to grow dull and uninteresting when birds were not seen for long periods and consequently observing was frequently given up for a while. Near Oahu, though, there were plenty of birds to watch for and hardly a moment of the first two days was spent otherwise except for such necessities as eating, abandon ship drill, etc.

Our route took us straight south from Oahu to a point where a convoy was made up, thence to Eniwetok in the Marshall Islands passing close by, but not within sight of, Johnston Island on the way. From Eniwetok a zig-zag course westward led to Ulithi Atoll at the west end of the Carolines, and then a northwestward one to Okinawa. For 25 days we did not leave the ship. Following is a summary in chronological form of the birds seen and counted during that time:

April 27 - South of Oahu. Noddy and Sooty Terns and homing Red-footed Boobies were the most numerous, the counts being 52, 48, and 48 respectively. One flock of 40 Common Noddies (Anous stolidus) and 2 Sooty Terns (Sterna fuscata) was seen just before sundown and two flocks (## 20 and ## 25 each) of Sooty Terns a little earlier. These were all actively engaged in diving for fish. Others occurred in small groups or singly. While most of them did not allow the ship to bear upon them too closely, a single Common Noddy resting on a floating box held its position not over 30 feet away from our passing port-side. Nearly all the boobies (Sula sula rubripis -- all that I could determine at least) flew low over the waves on the heavy journey home. I suppose they were headed for Moku Manu off the northeast coast of Oahu via Makapuu Point, where I had watched them last January. The last one was seen at 1845 (6:45 P.M.) when we were at an estimated distance of 40 miles from land -- but at least 60 miles from Moku Manu which is quite a distance for them to travel in the 45 minutes of lessening daylight that were left.

The only other birds seen that first afternoon were shearwaters which I took to be Wedge-tailed Shearwaters (Puffinus pacificus) in the light bellied phase. The count was 11.

April 28 - From about 150 miles S.S.W. of Niihau at dawn to half-way between Niihau and Johnston Is. at dusk. The best birding of the trip considering both numbers of species and individuals.

Black-footed Albatross (Diomedea nigripes). Nearly always one to four following us; about 50% being white rumped birds and 50% dark rumped. Seen from dawn until dark, when two were still swinging on their pendulum course astern.

Laysan Albatross (Diomedea immutabilis). A single bird of this species criss-crossed over the waves in front of us at 1000. I did not have a close view of it, but through binoculars saw the dark wings and black and white head, tail, and underparts clearly. Although colonies of this species supposedly exist as close to Oahu as those of the Blackfooted, numerous inquiries I have made among servicemen coming and going from the Hawaiian area have revealed but one other man who noted the "white" albatrosses, whereas almost every one aboard ship cannot help but notice the Black-foot. This may be due, of course, to the Laysan not having the habit of following ships like the other species; but I wonder if some reduction in numbers is not also a probability.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater (Puffinus pacificus) - 14 counted. Three of these were with a flock of Sooty Terns, as were three of the ones seen on the 27th. The shearwaters foraged in their usual fashion just clearing the surface of the water, while the terns were diving all around them.

Identification of shearwaters and petrels from the high deck of a swiftly moving ship is frequently a matter of luck in having glasses ready at the appropriate moments for the best views of a gliding form which always seems to be going away from the bow or else zips past so fast one is almost sure to be too late in focusing on it. Despite the difficulties I did get a few "close-ups" of the shearwaters and noted their chief field marks: brown above varying in depth of shade but always very dark brown on the primaries; underparts white includ-

ing nearly a full half of the under surface of the wing along the coverts; throat and side of head to below the eye, brownish.

Sooty Storm-petrel (Loomelania Markhami - Oceanodroma m.) - 15 storm-petrels counted throughout the day and listed here include all those glimpses of brownish black birds a little smaller than the shearwater. At least 2 which came close by the side of the ship were seen in good light and tentatively identified as this species from the sooty brown coloration, somewhat lighter about the throat and face, after checking with descriptions given in Alexander's "Birds of the Ocean" and other books.

The flight of these large storm-petrels appears very much like the smaller shearwaters; i.e., fairly long periods of sailing on downcurved wings close to the surface, the wings showing a definite angle at the bend. They do perhaps flap oftener than the Wedge-tailed shearwater and the strokes are a little more airy and tern-like. Some petrels seen at a distance precluding identification had a more definitely erratic wing stroke than the others and may well have been a different species.

Hawaiian Storm-petrel (?) (Oceanodroma castro cryptoleucura). Two storm-petrels with white rumps and light wing coverts, one seen in mid-morning and one in afternoon, are considered most likely to be this species, though I saw them only from the side and could not be sure of the shape of the white rump patch to be positive they were not the other two possibilities: Leach's (more northern in range) or Wilson's (more southern in range -- in the Pacific).

Red-tailed Tropic-bird. (Phaethon rubricauda). 3 seen; at 0845, 1315, and 1500, respectively. The first one came directly over the bow of the ship, a thrilling sight in translucent white trimmed with a red spike on its tail, reminiscent of the one I saw nearly a year before some 800 miles northeast of Oahu, which was the first really tropical species I had ever seen.

Sooty Tern. 30, in flocks of 5, 1, 10, and 14, the last at 1600 some 250 miles from land (Niihau). All were fishing actively. The single bird was hovering some 40 feet above a school of leaping foot-long fish.

April 29 - From about 250 miles ENE of Johnston Island to nearing it at dusk, though probably not closer than 50 to 60 miles minimum. Casual observation all day, except from 1230 to 1600.

Black-footed Albatross. 15 (estimated), the first 2 at 0700, last one after sundown in evening -- the last one of the entire trip, latitude about 18° N.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater. 5, (2 at 0800, 3 in evening near Johnston).

Frigate-bird (Fregata minor palmerstoni). One male seen at 0700 swooping down after a flying fish. More than 200 miles from land (Johnston).

April 30 - From 150 to 350 miles (dawn to dusk) WSW of Johnston Island. Again no observation in early afternoon, the weather being quite hot and conducive to finding a shady spot for slumber.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater. 26 counted in A.M., 7 in late P.M., in groups of one to six individuals.

Booby (species ?) (Either Red-footed or Blue-faced) One seen at 0930 flying at fishing height around two other ships of our convoy. It had lots of black on the wings but I could not see the exact delineation of it nor the tail. This bird was an estimated 200 miles from land (Johnston Island).

To be continued

In a letter from the American Ornithologists Union, dated Nov. 1, 1945, Mr. George C. Munro was notified that he had been "elected a member of the Union, limited to the 200 outstanding ornithologists of North America. The feeling was expressed that this honor in your case was particularly merited and long overdue."

Mr. Munro has studied birds since childhood, both in New Zealand, the land of his birth, and in Hawaii. He collected for the Hon. Walter Rothschild's Tring Museum in 1890-92, and was associated with Dr. C. L. Perkins in study of Hawaiian birds. He has always been vitally interested in, and worked for the protection and conservation of bird life. He has long been connected with the Bishop Museum as an honorary associate in ornithology. He has recently published a book on Hawaiian birds, entitled "Birds of Hawaii." Members of our society need no reminders of his contributions to the ELEPAIO, or of his guidance and help in many ways.

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NOVEMBER BIRD WALK:

On November 11, 1945, shortly after 10:30 A. M., about fourteen persons started out from the Kuliuou bus terminal on what proved to be a very interesting bird walk. The group, headed by our President, Miss Grenville Hatch, proceeded down an abandoned stretch of the Kalaniana'ole Highway to one of the lower reaches of the Kaupu Pond. Going out on one of the dykes we saw near the upper end of the pond a night heron standing as motionless as the piece of driftwood near him. Looking closer we observed another night heron further on up the pond. Across the pond we saw a number of what appeared to be stilts but at that distance we couldn't be sure. Above we saw two Frigate birds sailing effortlessly on the updrafts of air. Seeing nothing further of interest but a couple of Mynah birds arguing with each other as they circled over us, we returned to the Bus Terminal, loaded into cars and drove down the Old Royal Road toward the Lunalilo Home. We stopped near the upper end of Kaupu Pond, left the cars by the road and skirting a freshly plowed field, made out way to the dyke crossing the upper end of the pond. In a low bushy tree near the dyke a Kentucky cardinal was seen for an instant before it flitted away. Continuing we started across the dyke only to stop several times to observe some night herons, several stilts, plover, and a coot. On the other side of the pond we ducked under and through a kiawe grove where barefooted Manning had to stop frequently to pick out the thorns. As we were standing in one of the clearings listening to the cry of a plover, two of them flew over us and sighting us, swerved sharply out of sight. Going on we finally emerged from the grove, left the mauka side of the pond and crossed a rather muddy trail to and around a stone fenced piggery, coming out again on the old Royal Road, where we had left the cars. At the upper end of the pond we were rewarded by a rather close-up view of several turnstones and a couple of plover feeding in the shallows.

When we returned to the cars to eat a light lunch a part of the group decided to leave us and call it a day. After our refreshments we headed up to Koko Head thinking perhaps we might see skylarks, but a large "Kapu - Military Reservation" sign changed our minds, so after a quick look-see over in Hanauma Bay we returned to Kaimuki where we parted to our several ways.

Robert Partridge

The recent election brought into office two members who have not previously held office - Mr. Gordon Pearsall, as president, and Mr. Francis Evans, as second vice-president. Mr. Pearsall before coming to Hawaii with the Department of Agriculture was associated with the Fish and Wildlife Service in Chicago, and had charge of educational work with the Traill Museum, near Chicago. He is interested in bird photography, as well as in birds. Mr. Evans brings us his extensive knowledge of local conditions, local geography, and local history. Members will remember his valuable work last year on the legislative committee. Miss Hatch will continue to work for the society as its first vice-president, and we are fortunate in retaining our very efficient secretary-treasurer, Miss Anderson. We hope to make this our best year yet!

Members are reminded that 1946 dues are now payable, and may be sent to the secretary at the address given below. Miss Anderson will be glad to check with any member who is not sure of his standing.

Our vice-president for 1945, Harold T. Cantlin, has returned to the mainland, bearing the good wishes and gratitude of the Society for the fine work he did for us during the two years that he was here. We shall miss him, and particularly we shall miss his leadership on our bird walks.

"The Hawaiian Mongoose - Friend or Foe", by Lewis Wayne Walker, in the November Natural History Magazine, pp. 396-400, is an interesting discussion of the part the mongoose plays here. The author observed the mongoose closely over a period of time, and came to the conclusion that he does little harm. The article is illustrated by fine photographs.

On December 13th, the hill robins were observed in the vicinity of Roosevelt High School. This is the second year that they have suddenly come down into the residential district for a short time. Last year their arrival was noted on November 3rd, and they remained for several weeks.

JANUARY ACTIVITIES:

Bird Walk, January 13th. Meet at the Library of Hawaii, at 8:30. (Place of walk to be decided. Call Miss Hatch, 76085 for further information, if desired.)

Meeting: January 21, at the Library of Hawaii auditorium, at 7:30. Major E. H. Bryan will speak on Hawaiian bird life.

HONOLULU AUDUBON SOCIETY.

President, Gordon Pearsall, Makiki Hotel, 1661 Piikoi St: 1st Vice-President, Miss Grenville Hatch, 1548 Wilhelmina Rise; 2d Vice-President, Francis Evans, 132 A Royal Circle; Secretary-Treasurer, Miss Blanche Anderson, 3669 Kawelolani Place, Honolulu 17, Advisors, George C. Munro, Major E. H. Bryan, Jr. Editor, THE ELEPAIO, Miss Charlotta Hoskins, 3212 Loulu St., Honolulu 54, Hawaii.

Dues \$1.00 a year.