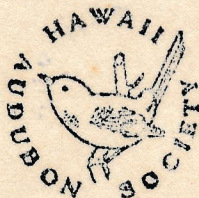


# THE ELEPAIO

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of Wildlife in Hawaii

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## NOTES ON THE LAYSAN RAIL By George C. Munro

In the "Condor" (Volume 49, pp 14-31) appeared a very good history of the Laysan rail (*Porzana palmeri*) by Paul H. Baldwin. Comments on this were made by Chapman Grant in the "Condor" (Volume 49, p. 130) in which he expressed the opinion that the Laysan rail could escape from the frigate bird by dodging. He also stated that the rail likely could not exist without drinking water. I believe that were there cover available, the rail could certainly dodge the frigate bird. But on the bare sand such as was apparently the case when Chapman Grant was on Laysan in 1923, the rail would have little chance with a half dozen yearling frigates after him.

His opinion that the Laysan rail could not exist without water I think is wrong. When the Rothschild expedition, of which I was a member, was on Laysan June 16 to 27, 1891, there was a well of sweetish water, but under primeval conditions this would be only a seepage and in dry spells probably would not exist at all.

On the 12th of July, 1891, we landed on Sand Island of Midway and stayed overnight. We found it unfruitful for collecting and rejoined the schooner next morning. My journal of July 13 says: "Freddie and the Kanakas took us over to Brook's Island" (now known as Eastern Island)... "moths abound... Freddie released a pair of rails and finches. I don't know if they will live without water." We saw one of the rails on the 14th and again on the 16th, we saw one "running about, quite at home." We did not see either of the Laysan finches (*Telespiza*) after they were released. On Eastern Island of Midway, while castaways obtained water by digging, we saw no surface water in the five days we were there. There was a small lagoon separated from the main lagoon by a sandbar, but even if it contained drinkable water it would not exist there all the time.

I have been interested in learning whether all the rails that existed on the two islands of the Midway atoll were descended from the single pair released by Freddie Walker, the second officer of the forty-ton schooner "Kaalokai" on July 13, 1891. They persisted there in numbers until 1944 when the last of the species was apparently exterminated by introduced rats. Baldwin states that: "The Laysan rail was discovered in 1828 and persisted for the following 116 years. No colonies were known to survive the year 1944." We did not take particular interest in Freddie Walker's introduction of Laysan birds to Midway at the time and I could not say with absolute certainty that there were only a pair of each species in his consignment. But the birds were within our sight on the schooner for several days from Laysan to Midway and my notes written at the time say, "A pair," so I think we can safely infer that there was only one pair. Palmer, who was in charge of the Rothschild expedition had aboard the schooner a number of both species which eventually reached Rothschild alive in England. They were left in charge of Dennis Cashman, the steward, when we were ashore at Midway.

When on a visit to Midway Islands, June 8 to 15th, Mr. A. F. Smith kindly searched the records for me. He found that while two lots of the Laysan finch were brought from Laysan to Midway by the Cable Company, no rails were brought as they were already there. They were brought from Eastern Island to Sand Island in 1910,



after the wild cats which evidently accounted for the first introduction of Telespiza to Sand Island, were killed off. The rail then thrived there until 1943. In that long spell of 46 years from 1891 till the late 1930s, the Laysan rail on Eastern Island of Midway must have gone for long periods without drinking water. There were no inhabitants on Eastern Island until defense works were started there in the late 1930s. Chapman Grant says that taps were left dripping for the birds. That could be only after human beings took up residence on the islands. My note that moths abound shows that the birds would get a considerable amount of moisture from the bodies of moths and caterpillars on Eastern Island, though from my notes they were not the large-bodied moths that were so common on Laysan when we were there.

The probability of the Laysan rail being extinct brings to mind several happenings which might have preserved the species, for instance: Had the rats been kept in control when they arrived on Midway or confined to Sand Island; had a storm not swept the Pearl and Hermes reef shortly after Captain Anderson took a consignment there; and had the eight that Dr. Wetmore brought from Midway to Laysan in 1923 survived the adverse conditions prevailing on Laysan at that time. (Chapman Grant says: "We found them all dead along the shores of the lagoon.") There were no succulent moths or caterpillars left there to sustain them. The wonderful well-vegetated island that I knew in 1891 had been devastated by rabbits. Of the five land birds which then were not uncommon, two and perhaps only one, now remain; a tragedy of neglect, surely a lesson for our future conduct. I found a note in the publication of the Board of Agriculture and Forestry of September and October 1924 entitled, "Rails from Midway." It said, "Through the kindness of the Superintendent of the Commercial Pacific Cable Company, a shipment of 18 rails arrived from Midway on the S. S. Dickenson on September 25 and were added to the four in the aviary... so that they may be liberated on the small islands free of mongooses, off the windward shore of Oahu." I have never found that they were released on any of these islands. If they had been released on Kaohikaipo, Mokumanu, or Kapapa, or possibly on Manana or Rabbit Island, they might have survived, as I have seen no signs of large rats on any of these. Had my efforts to bring the rail to the Waikiki Bird Park in 1940 not been foiled, the species might have been saved.

When Mr. John F. G. Stokes was investigating the Hawaiian rat on offshore islands, he was told by a boy that there used to be a bird on Kekepa Island that could not fly, but "jumped." Mr. Stokes did not see any there nor did two others who visited the island since. Possibly this was the Hawaiian rail or Laysan rail that had been released there.

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NAVY DIRECTIVE of interest to Hawaii Audubon Society members follows:

REF: 021730/192

ALNAV 192

2 September 1947

It is directed that insofar as practicable all training operations over or in Marshland, Bay Areas and other common habitat of wildfowl be curtailed or conducted in such a manner as to cause minimum disturbance of birds and interference with hunters during the hunting season. Low flying or firing over bedded waterfowl is especially to be avoided.

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STORAGE SPACE is needed for the Hawaii Audubon Society's files of ornithological magazines and books. If any member has room to accomodate this material, it will be much appreciated if he will call Miss Hatch or Mrs. Pedley.

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Fred Packard, who was stationed here in the Navy during the war, and who has written several fine articles for the "Elepaio," is now with the U.S. National Park Service. He is still keenly interested in conservation. He has sent recently, for



our inspection, a book by Devereux Butcher, Executive Secretary of the National Parks Association. The book is entitled: Exploring our National Parks and Monuments.

In this book are described and illustrated with splendid photographs, our national parks, reservations and monuments. Besides the information on the national policy and standards governing the parks and monuments there is a warning to intelligent citizens to be alert against exploitation of these areas. Less than one percent of the entire land area of the United States has been reserved from commercial exploitation. Even so, bills are being introduced constantly to open the parks to logging, mining, grazing, irrigation projects and other despoiling activities. Mr. Butcher points out that "it is the concern and responsibility of every intelligent citizen, for should there come a time when the standards are lowered anywhere in the system, then will begin the deterioration of the system to the common level of playgrounds and commercialized reservations. All will be lost of this proud American heritage except a name."

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A BOY SCOUTS OF AMERICA, HONOLULU COUNCIL, PAMPHLET with suggestions for the study of Birds and Astronomy by E. H. Bryan, Jr., has recently come into our hands for the first time. It contains excellent information on Bird Study in Hawaii for amateurs, telling why native birds are so rare; where to learn about Hawaiian birds; about sea birds; the Hawaiian Islands Bird reservation; marsh and fresh-water birds; shore and migratory birds; game birds, parakeets; birds of prey; introduced and native perching birds; native Hawaiian honey suckers; bird distribution; bird protection.

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#### ASSIGNMENT TO MIDWAY By H. Paul Porter

Shortly after seeing the reel of official Navy movies of the birds on Midway Islands which was shown at a recent meeting of the Society, I was very pleased when I was informed by my office that I was to take charge of a party to prosecute certain surveys at Midway. I arrived at Midway on 26 August 1947, unfortunately after the adult goonies had left the islands for maneuvers in the western Pacific. Some four or five youngsters, not yet having earned their wings, and apparently with little briefing, were all that were left. Although their bodies and wings appeared to be in full adult feather, their heads still looked like fright wigs (a device by which a string may be pulled, causing the hair to stand on end).

Futile, if energetic, efforts were made to glide, with a valiant flapping of wings and a spring-kneed walk, but I didn't get to see one take off. I had read much about the young goonies going without food until they were able to fly out in search of it. I was, therefore, quite surprised to find a young gooney biting off and swallowing pieces of a dead sooty tern that had been recently killed by a passing jeep. By the time I left the Islands on 25 September, all had disappeared. Whether they had given up the idea and died, or had flown out to meet their wandering kinsmen, I did not know. The gooney which I saw was, of course, the Laysan Albatrose (Diomedea Immutabilis Rothschild).

The bird represented by the greatest numbers was the sooty tern (Sterna fuscata Linnaeus). Our work necessitated the cutting of lines through dense Scaevola frutescens, and the surveymen were continually being "dive-bombed" by the excited and noisy terns. Many are inadvertently killed by vehicles, because they congregate in the roads and on the runways, and for some peculiar reason, will fly in front of passing cars, even they may have to turn around before taking off to do so. A regular "bird-patrol" is run by the Navy every few days with a truck and several men who are charged with collecting and disposing of the bodies of all dead birds that can be found. There were thousands of young birds in all stages of development -



too young to fly, learning to fly, and flying masterfully with the grace and agility of the adult.

Second in numbers was the red-tailed tropic bird (Phaethon rubricauda Boddaert), commonly called the "Bosun bird" because of its call which somewhat resembles the sound of the Bos'n's pipe. The bird is reputed to be able to fly backward. Whether this is actually true, I cannot say, because such flight may be the result of being blown backward by winds, but I have seen these birds slow to a stop in mid-air, their wings still moving, their tails and feet thrown forward under their bodies, and appear to fly backward. The tail consists of two slender red feathers, some fourteen inches in length, and seems to be used as an auxiliary rudder, for, in making a turn, the feathers are turned to one side or the other as a rudder would be used.

A few noddy terns were seen, although there was no evidence of nesting. Only two frigate birds (Fregata minor Brisson) were seen during my stay on Midway, although I was told that numbers of them were nesting on Eastern Island.

There were, of course, numbers of the loveable fairy or white tern, (Gygis alba Sparrman). Unfortunate and benighted are the people who have never seen these delightful creature. The sailors may curse the shearwater and the petrel because of their moaning at night, but they rise up and call the fairy tern blessed. Possessed, apparently of a kindly interest in whatever anyone is doing, anywhere, these little birds often come within three or four feet of the observer and watch him, while hovering in the air, with as much interest as they are being watched. The Assistant Superintendent of the Pacific Commercial Cable Company's station had found a young fairy tern, and had hand-fed it with fish which he netted every night. When I was there, the tern had learned to fly, but still came at call (supplemented by fish in a bowl) and seemed to be completely fearless.

Even the dusk and the night had its bird life. The wedged-tailed shearwater (Puffinus pacificus cuneatus Salvin) and the Bonin Island petrel (Pterodroma leucoptera hypoleuca Salvin), both crepuscular and nocturnal birds, came out in great numbers, and the weird moaning of the shearwaters which continued through the night had earned some resentment from personnel stationed on the Island.

Several times Bonin Island petrels flew into opened windows, apparently attracted by the light, and one night, while visiting at the Cable Station, the windows were subjected to a regular bombardment, some ten or twelve petrels hitting the glass. One night I saw a petrel sitting outside the window of the billiard room of the Officer's Club, and asking a friend to get my camera, I went outside to get the bird, intending to take his picture under the lights over the billiard table. When we returned to the room, complete with bird and camera, we saw two more sitting on the window sill inside the room. The picture was poor.

While there is quite a bit of interest among Midway personnel in the birds, not enough information about them is available. I have been told by a Marine officer on the Island that he wished that such information were made available to his men, carefully avoiding the "our little feathered friends" approach, and emphasizing the habits, ecology, and value to man. I wish so too.

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AN ARTICLE OF INTEREST to students of local birds is: Ecology and the Evolution of Some Hawaiian Birds, by Dean Amadon, in "Evolution" 1:63-68, 2 figs., 1947.

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## FIELD NOTES:

BLOND MYNAH BIRD. "About two weeks ago, as we were driving through the University campus, we spotted a strange looking bird among a group of mynahs.

"As usual, the group was in the middle of the road and refused to move. So, being obliging people, we stopped the car, and had a good look at the stranger. It was a mynah, we're sure, for the yellow beak and yellow ring around the eye were plainly to be seen, and he had all the cockiness of a mynah. But his feathers were white, with just odd spots of dark brown. There appeared to be more dark feathers on the bird's under-side but just then it flew off with the gang, and hasn't been seen since, to our knowledge. Are there albino mynah birds?"

E.S. and C.D.

KAHUKU BIRD WALK: "The group of bird walkers met as usual at the Library of Hawaii at eight-thirty on October 12. When we had all assembled, there were twenty-seven of us. At eight forty-five, we set out for Kahuku by way of the pali. Along the way Mrs. Pedley's car had a flat tire, which was quickly changed by the capable hands of several male bird walkers who were bringing up the rear.

"The day had promised to be hot at the Library, but at Kahuku there were numerous rain squalls. Upon reaching the former army airfield ewa of Kahuku pond we found plover and turnstones quite plentiful in the bogs on either side of the air-strip. Almost the first bird seen when we left the cars caused considerable discussion and interest. Larger than the plover and the tattler, the bird was at such a distance that only close observation with the most powerful binoculars in the group sufficed to bring the long, down-curved bill sharply into sight, so permitting the identification of the bristle-thighed curlew. It was a "first" for most of the group.

"After helping set up Miss Peppin's bird blind we started on our way. We saw a flock of about twenty-one ducks which we supposed to be pintails. During one of the frequent squalls we ate our lunch.

"On reaching the pond we saw about ten night herons idling in the shallow water. We walked along the railroad tracks which divide Kahuku pond and observed the herons from several different points.

"Upon reaching the sugar mill, the drivers went back to get the cars, in one of the cars left there for that purpose. Although the sun was out very little of the time, a few of the walkers got quite sunburned."

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Clifton Koterba

We are regretfully considering the advisability of increasing dues to \$2.00. This will be proposed at the November meeting, voted upon at the December meeting. We would welcome an expression of opinion from those members who are unable to attend. Please send your comments to Mrs. Pedley at 3770 Sierra Drive, Honolulu, T. H.

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## NOVEMBER ACTIVITIES:

BIRD WALK: November 9, to Tantalus. Meet at the Library of Hawaii at 8:30 a.m.  
MEETING: November 17, at 7:30 p.m., at the auditorium of the Library of Hawaii.  
Mr. Donald Mitchell will present recordings of bird songs.

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HAWAII AUDUBON SOCIETY: President, Miss Grenville Hatch, 1548 Wilhelmina Rise;  
Vice-Presidents, Mr. Francis Evans, 132-A Royal Circle, Mr. E.B. Hamilton, 528 17th Street, CHA-3; Sec'y-Treasurer, Mrs. Blanche A. Pedley, 3770 Sierra Drive;  
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