

## The complete story about the type specimen of Laysan Finch (*Telespiza cantans*)

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Laysan finch (*Telespiza cantans*), holotype specimen RMNH catalog  
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### ABSTRACT

The Laysan Finch *Telespiza cantans* was described by Scott Wilson in 1890, based on a caged bird he acquired in Honolulu. He described its range as Midway Island, which soon proved to have been mistaken for Laysan Island. Wilson was told that it had arrived in Honolulu about March 1888 on the schooner “*Mary Bohm*”. Following the discovery of the similar Nihoa Finch *Telespiza ultima* in 1915, Wilson’s error prompted examination of the provenance of the type specimen of Laysan Finch. George C. Munro surmised that Wilson’s finch may

have been collected on Nihoa, and thus confused with the Nihoa Finch. However, the large size of Wilson’s measurements of the specimen pointed towards the Laysan Finch, later confirmed when the missing type specimen was relocated in Naturalis, Leiden in the Netherlands. We add to this story that the name of the schooner was in fact the “*Mary C Bohm*”. Newspapers from that time corroborate the specifics of Wilson’s story but mention its arrival in Honolulu in summer 1886, two years earlier than Wilson reported. In view of this arrival date, we can also remove the final doubt about Wilson’s bird, namely about its age: it is an adult.

## The complete story about the type specimen of Laysan Finch (*Telespiza cantans*)

In contrast to all other newly described species from the Hawaiian Islands in the 1880s and 1890s, the type of Laysan Finch (*Telespiza cantans*) was not collected in the field, but was a caged bird purchased by Scott B. Wilson in Honolulu, O'ahu, Hawai'i, USA, in January 1889. Wilson transported the bird alive to England, and he formally described it as a new species in 1890 (Wilson 1890).

Wilson's description of the provenance of the bird is as follows:

“About March of the preceding year, a small schooner named the ‘*Mary Bohm*’ arrived in the Hawaiian Islands from Japan, off the coasts of which country it had been engaged in a fishing venture. Having met with many mishaps, the vessel put into port at Midway Island [...]. At Midway Island, which is uninhabited, Capt. Bohm and his companions found a species of Finch common among the scrubby bushes which cover its surface. It was so tame that it could be easily taken by the hand, and about sixty specimens were captured.”

After some time spent repairing the ship, Bohm and his crew continued to Ni'ihau, off Kaua'i, where Bohm presented several of the finches to the island's owner, Mr. Gay. After arrival in Honolulu, the remaining birds were placed in a cage, and although he saw several more live birds, Wilson only acquired one finch of the lot. He described the finch as *Telespiza cantans*, without giving it a vernacular name, stating clearly that Midway was



Laysan finch (*Telespiza cantans*), holotype specimen RMNH catalog number (90242) 23 November 2023, © Bret Mossman

its range. Wilson's text suggested that “March of the preceding year” referred to March 1888.

Wilson introduced a significant error in his narrative: no finches occurred on Midway at that time. *Telespiza cantans* originally occurs on Laysan, hence its vernacular name, Laysan Finch. According to multiple sources (Bryan 1912, Munro 1944, Ely & Clapp 1973), it was only introduced to Midway and to Pearl and Hermes Reef after 1890 or perhaps even later, thus after Wilson's publication of the original diagnosis of the species. As Wilson never visited the islands in the northwestern Hawaiian chain (including Nihoa, Laysan and Midway), his mistake may be forgiven, as he relied on what he was told. Furthermore, it was quickly corrected to Laysan in his standard work and in other descriptions of Hawaiian birds of that time (Wilson & Evans 1890-1899, Rothschild 1893-1900, Perkins 1903). However, with the discovery in 1915 of the Nihoa Finch *Telespiza ultima* on the island of Nihoa, some 1600 km southeast of Midway (Bryan 1916, 1917), the original error in type locality introduced doubt as to which species Wilson's finch really referred. It did not help that the type specimen had since been lost.

One of the doubters was George C. Munro, who had interviewed the same Mr. Gay from Ni'ihau in April 1892 about Wilson's finch and had written down notes in his diary (Munro 1941, 1944a). Reminiscing about 40 years after the event, Munro detailed that Gay had believed that Wilson's bird had been collected on Nihoa and differed from those of Laysan. Munro assumed that Gay was told so by the ship's crew. In hindsight, this is illogical,



Male Nihoa finch (*Telespiza ultima*). © Eric VanderWerf



as Nihoa is a very rugged island with a poor anchorage, and one would not wish to land on Nihoa with a ship in disrepair. Landing on Laysan is much easier. Both islands lie along a sailing route between Midway and Honolulu. Perkins (in Munro 1944b) presented another twist to the story, adding that a Mr. Jaeger from Honolulu had visited Nihoa sometime before 1889, where he captured by hand “a thick-billed bird”, and that Wilson may have obtained that bird from Mr. Jaeger. Jaeger and others indeed visited Nihoa,



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also on 22 July, 1885 (Clapp et al. 1977). However, the party stayed there for one morning only as a fire broke out, after which all had to evacuate (see the newspaper ‘Kō Hawai‘i Pae ‘Āina’ of 1 August 1885), leaving little time to collect as many as about 60 birds.

Fortunately, Wilson (1890) published measurements of body length, wing, tail, and tarsus of his specimen in inches, equivalent to 16.5 cm, 8.6 cm, 6.4 cm and 2.8 cm. With these dimensions, Wilson’s bird can be identified with certainty as a Laysan Finch, because the Nihoa Finch is a much smaller bird (Banks & Laybourne 1977). Any remaining doubt was dispelled when Olson & James (1986) reported their find of the holotype in the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie in Leiden (now Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden) in the Netherlands. The specimen had been purchased from Wilson in March 1894 (Jentink 1894, Dekker & Quaiser 2006). Contemporary measurements (on 5 September 1985) of the type confirmed it to be a Laysan Finch (Olson & James 1986). The bird now lacks its

original Wilson label but has both a RMNH label (with a unique collection label RMNH.AVES.90242) and a red label indicating its type status (plate 001). Having only Wilson’s 1890 drawing available, Banks & Laybourne (1977) determined the bird to be an immature male; Dekker & Quaiser (2006) subsequently identified the rediscovered type specimen as an adult female.

Perhaps another source of confusion was the uncertainty about the date or even month when Wilson’s finch was brought onshore in Honolulu. Details of this part of Wilson’s narrative have not previously been clarified, and while performing research on the discovery, description, and distribution of endemic Hawaiian songbirds, we set out to resolve this case. We searched the internet for references to the schooner *Mary Bohm* and her captain, attempting to verify the information with contemporary sources like newspaper clippings.

We first found that the schooner was in fact called the *Mary C. Bohm*, a small but important difference. Our search furthermore revealed that the many mishaps that Wilson mentioned were worth mentioning in the local newspapers at that time, notably in the Pacific Commercial Advertiser of 24 May 1886 (and not 1888 as Wilson alluded to), almost three years before Wilson’s own narrative



Male Laysan finch (*Telespiza cantans*), Laysan Island 4 January 2012. © Robby Kohley



Laysan finch (*Telespiza cantans*), holotype specimen RMNH catalog number (90242) 23 November 2023, © Bret Mossman

of acquiring his finch! The newspaper details the many mishaps, including calm weather in which could not be sailed, depleted water and food supplies, heavy weather while repairing the leaking ship on Midway resulting in more damage to the ship and a minor mutiny by the sailors during which captain Paul Bohm had to draw his revolver. The crew had to stay on Midway between November 1885 and January 1886, when repairs to the ship were completed. However, adverse weather prevented their departure from Midway until March 1886. The article furthermore details the crew's visit to Mr. Gay on Ni'ihau on 12 May 1886 where they remained for two more days. They finally arrived in Waimea, Kaua'i, on 17 May 1886, unable to reach Honolulu as originally planned due again to adverse weather [the newspaper clipping mentions 7 May, but this seems to be a mistake for 17 May]. The Honolulu Advertiser adds to this story that the schooner had left Kaua'i on 22 May and landed in Wai'anae, O'ahu, on 9 June, after which it sailed off mysteriously. It finally arrived in Honolulu in September 1886 (Hawaiian Gazette of 19 July 1898) after which it was sold and received a new name, Kaulilua (Hawaiian Gazette of 26 October 1886). Considering the many mishaps Wilson referred to, the 1885-1886 trip must have been the trip during which the finches were brought to Honolulu. The renaming of the ship in autumn 1886, after which the prior name ceased to exist, adds further proof to this.

Wilson's Laysan Finch thus lived for at least three years, assuming it was caught in 1886 between Midway and Ni'ihau. As Laysan Finch have been shown to acquire adult plumage in three years (Banks & Laybourne 1977), such an age may not

be unexpected. Nihoa Finch on the other hand reach their adult plumage in two years (Banks & Laybourne 1977), an important difference to consider both separate species. With this knowledge, the type specimen can be confidently aged as an adult, resolving the final uncertainty about the specimen.

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## Award from the Honolulu City Council By Susan Scott

On April 17th, city council member, Tyler Dos Santos-Tam, a bird lover who represents downtown Honolulu, invited Hawai‘i Audubon Society representatives to Honolulu Hale to receive an award for 85 years of dedication to wildlife conservation in Hawai‘i. Former HAS president and current recording secretary, Wendy Johnson, attended the ceremony with me, as did Wally the wood-carved kōlea (held here by Mr. Calvin Say). I brought Wally to represent all of Hawai‘i’s native birds.

The gathering included other awardees working to serve and advance the welfare, health, happiness, and safety of life on our island. As HAS board members, Wendy and I were proud to stand with the educators, cultural ambassadors, and military veterans who the council also honored for their efforts to make a difference.

The congratulatory certificate is on display in the HAS office.

\*\*\*END\*\*\*



*Above: HAS President Susan Scott and Recording Secretary Wendy Johnson accept an award from the Honolulu City Council for 85 years of dedication to wildlife conservation in Hawai‘i.*

## Manu O Kū Costume Debut By Susan Scott

Aloha Kea is a name several of us made up, but once you see the character it represents, you’ll get it—and remember it. Few Hawaiian words could be more descriptive of the seabird we see gracing our city than Aloha Kea or White Love.

I’m referring to the new mascot of the manu o Kū, also known as the White Tern, proclaimed in 2007 as Honolulu’s official city bird.

Aloha Kea had its debut at the 9th Annual Manu o Kū Festival at Iolani Palace grounds on April 27th. Kailua costume designer, Kathe James of Events in Apparel, created the adult-with-chick costume from photos sent her by HAS board member and MOK researcher, Rich Downs.

HAS commissioned this costume to use at schools and public events as we work to share the wonder



© Susan Scott

of these seabirds raising chicks in the city. Traffic noise, streetlights, tree trimming, high-rises... No problem for these adaptive birds. Nowhere else on the world do White Terns breed in the middle of a bustling metropolis like Honolulu's manu o Kū.

And they continue to flourish here. Rich and colleague Eric VanderWerf of Pacific Rim Conservation recently surveyed over 3,000 manu o Kū on O'ahu's south side [article in press.] That's up from just two White Terns on O'ahu in 1961.

To admire terns swooping throughout the city, just look up. To admire Aloha Kea in person, stay tuned to future HAS events.

*Left: An admirer pets Aloha Kea's chick. Craig Thomas and Wendy Kuntz helped Aloha Kea (KCC student Charlotte Bender) avoid walking into children and tables. Limited vision in the costume requires helpers.*

\*\*\*END\*\*\*

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Manu o Kū chick © Laura Doucette

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Wedge-tailed Shearwater colony (*Puffinus pacificus*) © Anna Vallery/USFWS, Pacific Islands

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## Events

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July 30 - August 1: Hawai'i Conservation Conference at the Hawai'i Convention Center

August: Wedge-Tailed Shearwater hatchling arrivals

August 6: Luncheon Kōlea presentation by Susan Scott, Hula Grill, Outrigger Waikiki Beach Resort

August 25: Welcome home Kōlea presentation by Susan Scott, Mid-Pacific Country Club, Kailua (members only)

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Manu o kū adult feeding a chick © Laura Doucette