‘ELEPAIO

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Scott Barchard Wilson’s visits to the Hawaiian archipelago, and his specimens from 1891-1892

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Abstract

The life and travels of collector Scott Barchard Wilson continue to attract attention. His visit in 1887-1888 to the Hawaiian archipelago resulted in a large specimen collection with many avian discoveries. Contrary to common belief, Wilson visited the archipelago only three times in total. Since 1887-1888, Wilson further visited the Hawaiian archipelago only in 1896 and 1907. This finding required an explanation for the specimens from 1891-1892 attributed to Wilson. We postulate based on several lines of evidence that these originate from Henry Charles Palmer, who also collected in the late 19th century. Although collecting for Lord Walter Rothschild, Palmer also kept a parallel private collection from which these may originate. Furthermore, based on similarities in metadata between the specimens of 1891-1892 and 1896, we postulate that the majority of specimens from 1896 were not collected by Wilson himself (despite being in the archipelago) but acquired by a secondary source, probably the Greenwell family. These findings have consequences for our knowledge about collection dates and localities of almost all Wilson’s specimens since 1888. The ability to distinguish between specimens collected personally by Wilson and those acquired from other sources is essential for the correct interpretation of collection dates and collection localities. In general, such information may furthermore contribute to knowledge about potential reasons for extinction.

Introduction

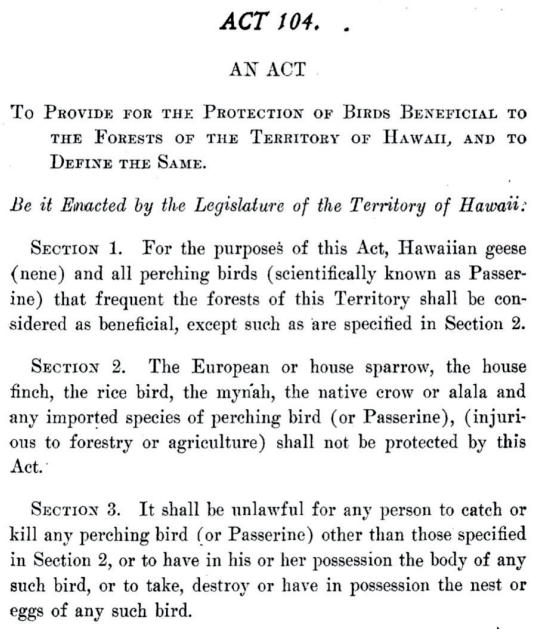
Scott Barchard Wilson (1864-1923) was the first of several private bird collectors to visit the Hawaiian archipelago in the late 19th century. His bird collections contain eleven still valid bird species new for science (see Jansen et al. 2026 for more detail). Unfortunately, during our research into the discovery, description, and distribution of all endemic Hawaiian songbirds, we often found incomplete or even erroneous data associated with collected specimens, including those of Wilson (Van der Vliet & Jansen 2025, Jansen et al. 2026). Correcting data is important as this gives specimens much more value in other research fields. We however found that data can only truly be corrected when detailed itineraries of collectors are known.

In recent years, we all wrote papers about the life or specimens collected by Wilson. Dibben-Young & Crocker (2015) presented much information concerning his life while Van der Vliet & Jansen (2024) added to this by detailing how he acquired the type specimen of Laysan Finch *Telespiza cantans*. Little did we know that some of our information proved to be inaccurate as well. To correct our earlier inaccuracies, we briefly note here the dates of Wilson’s three visits to the Hawaiian archipelago (see Jansen et al. 2026 for full documentation). This chronology is important for interpreting his specimen collection from 1891–1892. As such, it must be read in parallel to Jansen et al. (2026) who describe his life and travels in much more detail. Our methods and data collection are described in that paper as well.

Wilson's three trips to Hawai‘i

Both Olson & James (1994) and Dibben-Young & Crocker (2015) state that Wilson visited the Hawaiian

archipelago many times (especially since 1888) but we found no evidence for this. In fact, Wilson visited the Hawaiian Archipelago only three times, namely in 1887–1888, 1896, and 1907 (see Jansen et al. 2026 for more detail). Wilson's first visit (1887–1888) is the best known, thanks to the large collection of bird specimens, and eleven taxa new to science. Wilson's book *Aves Hawaiienses*, that appeared in several parts between 1890 and 1899, is testament to his collecting efforts during that trip. His second visit in 1896 was brief and involved little personal collecting, mostly nests and eggs of a few endemic songbird species. Wilson's final trip in 1907 has so far not been mentioned in the literature perhaps because it did not result in any collecting. The lack of collecting is perhaps less surprising than it seems because a ban on hunting specimens was imposed through Act 104, in effect from 25 April 1907 (Hawaiian Authority 1907). It protected Nēnē *Branta sandvicensis* plus the birds beneficial to the forests of the territory of Hawai'i. This included all native forest species, with the notable exception of the Hawaiian Crow *Corvus hawaiiensis*. Any introduced species were excluded from protection. With many species already being extinct or extremely rare, collecting of individuals of the remaining species was thus forbidden. If Wilson's intention was to do some more collecting, his timing to do so in 1907 was unfortunate.



ACT 104.

AN ACT

To Provide for the Protection of Birds Beneficial to the Forests of the Territory of Hawaii, and to Define the Same.

Be it Enacted by the Legislature of the Territory of Hawaii:

Section 1. For the purposes of this Act, Hawaiian geese (nene) and all perching birds (scientifically known as Passerine) that frequent the forests of this Territory shall be considered as beneficial, except such as are specified in Section 2.

Section 2. The European or house sparrow, the house finch, the rice bird, the myna, the native crow or alala and any imported species of perching bird (or Passerine), (injurious to forestry or agriculture) shall not be protected by this Act.

Section 3. It shall be unlawful for any person to catch or kill any perching bird (or Passerine) other than those specified in Section 2, or to have in his or her possession the body of any such bird, or to take, destroy or have in possession the nest or eggs of any such bird.

First three sections of Act 104 "for the protection of the birds beneficial to the forests of the territory of Hawaii" from 1907. Note the exclusion of Hawaiian Crow *Corvus hawaiiensis* in section 2.

Importance of these findings

Consequences for the 1891- and 1892-specimens

Many Hawaiian specimens labelled as collected by Wilson stem from other years than 1887-1888 and 1896. Leaving presumed mislabeled specimens aside, many specimens attributed to Wilson stem from 1891 (at least 20 songbirds in total) and 1892 (at least 54 songbirds) (see table 16 in Jansen et al. 2026). As Wilson did not visit the archipelago between 1888 and 1896, he must have acquired the specimens through alternative channels.

The associated specimen data of 1891 and 1892 show some interesting characteristics. First, by far the most specimens from both years stem from Hawai'i and Kaua'i, with only two from Maui (see table 16 in Jansen et al. 2026 for more detail). Secondly, for no specimen is a more precise collection locality available than the island. This is in stark contrast with the specimens from his first trip in 1887-1888, many of which have an exact locality attached, and often a field number or label. Thirdly, except for five from 1891, no specimens are precisely dated to the day. At best, it is known in which month they were collected. For the dated 1892-specimens we note a fourth anomaly: with four exceptions from September (a Hawai'i 'Ō'ō *Moho nobilis* in Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, France, and three Hawaiian Stilts *Himantopus knudseni* in University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge, England), all are from either February (8) or November (31). With Wilson evidently not being the collector, the central question becomes: who sent these specimens to him?

From Wilson's correspondence with Leonhard Hess Stejneger (1851-1943), we learn that Wilson had "a correspondent on Kauai" in February 1892 (Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington DC, USA, Leonhard Stejneger papers, letter dated 9 February 1892). It is therefore noteworthy that all 1892-specimens from February were collected on Kaua'i, especially many Kaua'i 'Elepaio *Chasiempis sclateri* (6 out of 8 dated specimens). Around that time, it was still uncertain how many 'elepaio species occurred in the Hawaiian archipelago (e.g. Stejneger 1887, Wilson 1891). This was later resolved

when it was realized that the different plumages referred to adult and young birds of the same species. While preparing for his *Aves Hawaiienses*, Wilson clearly felt the need to investigate this in detail, as evidenced from letters to Stejneger (Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington DC, USA, Leonhard Stejneger papers, letters dated between 12 October 1890 and 11 April 1892). Apparently, someone in Hawai'i responded to a request for more specimens of that species (group), resulting in the arrival of the February shipment in 1892. The later shipment from November 1892 also contained several *Chasiempis* specimens (4), albeit Hawai'i 'Elepaio *C. sandwichensis*. The 'elepaio were finally treated in Wilson's sixth installment of *Aves Hawaiienses* in July 1896 (Wilson & Evans 1890-1899: iiib).

Only a few persons could have been the correspondent on Kaua'i in 1891-1892. It must have been somebody who had collected extensively on Kaua'i and Hawai'i, and even already visited Maui. We are convinced that this correspondent was Henry Charles Palmer (1866-1920) who, with his assistant George Campbell Munro (1866-1963), collected birds on Kaua'i in December 1890-April 1891 and on Hawai'i and Maui in September 1891 into 1892, to augment the specimen collection of Lord Lionel Walter Rothschild (1868-1937). In a letter to Ernst Hartert (1859-1933) dated 24 April 1893, Palmer writes he already knew while collecting on Kaua'i that only one 'elepaio species was involved (Palmer correspondence in Natural History Museum, London, England) (hereafter NHMUK). Furthermore, from an entry in Munro's diaries (of which we used a copy stored in NHMUK; Towill 2001), we know that Palmer and Wilson had direct contact through letters, starting in early May 1891 but earlier through intermediaries. We also know from Munro's diaries that Palmer and Munro kept specimens for their private collections when sufficient specimens had been collected for Rothschild. As such, they had a private specimen supply which they were able to sell, exchange or gift away.

It is interesting that several 1891 specimens are precisely dated from 29 April 1891. It so happened that Palmer returned from Kaua'i to O'ahu on 26 April 1891 (Munro's diaries) to prepare for a trip to the Northwestern Islands (Walker 1909). It may well be that the date 29 April 1891 of the Wilson specimens in fact refers to the date Palmer packed those or even sent those to Wilson, after previous correspondence contact between the two through intermediaries. Unfortunately, we did not find actual correspondence between Wilson and Palmer.



Palila *Loxioides bailleui*, specimens 1925.2.16.95, 1925.2.16.96 and 1925.2.16.97, Natural History Museum, Tring, England (*Justin JFJ Jansen*). According to labels, specimens were collected by S.B. Wilson at Kona, Hawai'i, in June 1896. Note the lack of detail of basal data.

With all this in mind, we think that not only was Palmer the correspondent of Wilson but also the collector of the 1891- and 1892-specimens, perhaps together with Munro. Only the team of Palmer and Munro had been collecting on Kaua'i, Hawai'i and Maui between December 1890 and November 1892 (Rothschild 1893-1900). Except for September 1892, the dates correspond to months for which it is known that Palmer had sent off specimens to Rothschild and/or changed between islands (indicating a shipment of specimens during the change-over). His fellow collector Robert Cyril Layton Perkins (1866-1955) arrived later in the archipelago, in March 1892, and started collecting for his employer the Sandwich Islands Committee (de facto Alfred Newton 1829-1907; see Manning



Greater Koa-Finch *Rhodacanthis palmeri*, specimen 18157, National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool, England (*Justin JFJ Jansen*). According to label, collector is S.B. Wilson, and collection date is January 1893. However, Wilson was not in Hawai'i at that date.

1986) on O'ahu in March-May and on Hawai'i in June-October (but notably not yet on Kaua'i or Maui). We rule out Perkins as the sender of any 1892 specimens for two additional reasons. Most importantly, at least four specimens from Kaua'i in the November 1892 shipment point against Perkins as the sender of that shipment as he had not been collecting there yet (he would not do so until May 1894; Evenhuis 2007). Furthermore, having just started collecting, we think it is illogical that Perkins would already send specimens to Wilson rather than to his employer. Finally, it is unknown what happened with a few specimens of Kaua'i 'Ō'ō *Moho braccatus* collected by Francis Gay (1852-1928) for Wilson on 30 April 1891 (Munro's diaries). The few Wilson specimens of that species cannot be traced to that date or to Gay.

Implications for the 1896 specimens

Likewise, the associated data of Wilson's 1896 specimens show some interesting characteristics. There are 46 of them that are dated to the month only (table 17 in Jansen et al. 2026). For those with a known locality, it is always Kona, Hawai'i. These characteristics are quite similar to those of the 1891 and 1892 specimens. Remarkably, contrary to his 1887-1888 specimens, none of the 1896 specimens carries Wilson's field labels. Is it thus too far-fetched to think that Wilson did not collect these but acquired them during his stay there? If so, from whom may Wilson have acquired them? Palmer had left the archipelago already in 1893, never to return, so they cannot be from him. The locality of the specimens may provide an answer. In the Kona vicinity, Wilson met Perkins at the Greenwell Ranch in March, which was a productive collecting ground in those days. Perkins noted in a letter to Munro that the brothers William Henry (1869-1927) and Arthur Leonard (1871-1951) Greenwell had collected specimens for Wilson such as a Greater Koa-Finch *Rhodacanthis palmeri* and Kona Grosbeak *Chloridops kona* (Evenhuis 2007: 313). Neither species is, however, part of Wilson's 1896 series, although a few specimens of both are both without date and without locality. More importantly, Perkins recollected in a letter to Munro that Wilson did take specimens of both species back to England (Evenhuis 2007: 313). Perkins and Wilson travelled together to O'ahu and Kaua'i where Perkins collected further specimens. Of Wilson however, Perkins noted that he had apparently lost all interest in collecting (Evenhuis 2007: 327). Wilson's mood and behavior on Kaua'i may be an indication of his behavior on Hawai'i as well. That Wilson acquired specimens from somebody on Hawai'i may therefore be not too far-fetched! We thus postulate that the 1896 specimens originate from the Greenwell family although we cannot exclude that Perkins contributed specimens to this shipment as well. Future study of these specimens may reveal whether Perkins did so.

Consequences for the type specimen of the Laysan Finch

Our recent research also leads to a correction to our previous paper about the type specimen of Laysan Finch *Telespiza cantans* (Van der Vliet & Jansen 2024). Like Olson & James (1986), we erroneously concluded that Wilson acquired the specimen in 1889. However, Wilson left the Hawaiian archipelago already on 20 November 1888 (Jansen et al. 2026). In a letter to Newton dated 4 Jan 1889, Wilson writes "I have got home at last", so he presumably arrived in England in December 1888 or perhaps early January 1889 (Cambridge University Library, Alfred Newton papers Add.9839/1W/436). In a further letter to Newton dated 6 January 1889, Wilson mentions that he would take both his specimen of a



Hawaiian Crow *Corvus hawaiiensis*, specimen 31889, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, Germany (*Justin JFJ Jansen*). Specimen carries no original label. According to attached information, it was collected in June 1889. However, Wilson was not in Hawai'i at that date. In this case, we consider June 1889 a transcription error for June 1887, when Wilson collected two further specimens of this species on Hawai'i. Perhaps surprisingly, a 7 can be easily read as a 9.

Hawaiian Rail *Zapornia sandwichensis* and "a live bird which I obtained from an uninhabited ocean island several hundred miles from the Sandwich islands..." to their shared lunch (Cambridge University Library, Alfred Newton papers Add.9839/1W/437). This live bird concerns the Laysan Finch, of which Wilson's sister made sketches (that are unfortunately lost). It was presumably acquired by Wilson between 30 October and 20 November 1888, when he arrived in Honolulu after a collecting campaign on O'ahu. For more information about the type specimen of Laysan Finch, see Jansen et al (2026: 64-65).

Conclusions

The above examples explain for a good deal how easy it is to err in drawing conclusions by assuming that all data associated with specimens is correct. Our research aims to correct and adjust data and fill in missing data as much as possible by using independent data as much as possible. Our goal is to identify accurate metadata for historic specimens to improve and inform future studies. The above episode teaches us to do so in the most careful way, even if it seems to be a clearcut case.

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Welcoming Kōlea In Style

By Susan Scott

On September 19th, the Hawai'i Audubon Society held our annual "Welcome Home Kōlea Festival" at Magic Island on the Diamond Head (east) end of Ala Moana Beach Park. This was our third year celebrating the return of our Pacific Golden-Plovers. The turnout this year exceeded all expectations.



Hawai'i Audubon Society's booth at the festival with a brand-new customized tent. ©Susan Scott

What began in 2024 with two tables of kōlea information expanded to 8 tables in 2025. This year, the event was a full-blown bash. Approximately 500 plover lovers showed up to visit eight conservation organizations' exhibit tents, admire over 40 pieces of mixed media kōlea art, make their own kōlea creations, take selfies with Kōlea Nui and his pal Aloha Kea, and taste Kōlea Sparkling Hop Water. Everyone enjoyed music, visiting the displays, and dancing with giant birds. (Thank you to our robust volunteer costume wearers.)



BYUH student volunteers at the Kōlea Sparkling Hop Water tent. ©Leanna Jean Gonzaga



Auntie Pat Brown and friends perform their kōlea song to open the festival. ©Leanna Jean Gonzaga

The idea for a kōlea festival started with discussions at the springtime Manu o Kū festival sponsored annually by the Conservation Council for Hawai'i. Now, thanks to HAS's outstanding outreach and education manager, Elena Arinaga, the kōlea welcoming party has expanded to include our plover-loving partners. In addition, Elena used her social media skills to spread the word far and wide.

Partner organizations joining Hawai'i Audubon's board-member-staffed tables were:

- Hui Manu o Kū with Pacific Rim Conservation,
- Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum,
- Hawai'i Wildlife Center,
- Department of Land and Natural Resources,
- Department of Education,
- Livable Maunalua Hui,
- Kailua Beverage Company (donated 200 cans of Kōlea water),
- Artists including Alohapost HI and musicians Auntie Pat Brown and friends,
- Singer and songwriter, DeJaun Ikaika Hunter.

We're grateful to Elena, as well as all staff, volunteers and plover lovers who helped make this celebration a success. And, of course, we are all grateful to the remarkable Pacific Golden-Plovers that continue to grace our islands with their charming presence.



Kōlea pin craft activity led by Jaime Cunnane. ©Wendy Kuntz

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Founded in 1939, Hawai‘i Audubon Society is an independent nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Make a donation in any amount at https://hiaudubon.org/donate/.

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Mahalo for helping us inspire people to love and protect birds.



Join us on **Sunday, November 15** at the Bishop Museum's Atherton Hālau for a delicious meal by Da Spot and hear president Susan Scott's Society updates. Enjoy opening hula and oli by Hālau Mele and a special talk by Keith Swindle (HAS Executive Director) titled: "Protecting Paradise: How Predator Exclusion Fences Are Saving Native Birds in Hawai‘i." Get your tickets online at https://hiaudubon.org/annual-meeting/.



Hālau Mele sharing opening hula at the 2025 Annual Meeting.

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Christmas Bird Count (CBC)

The CBC is an annual bird census in which thousands of volunteers across the United States, Canada, Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Pacific Islands count every bird they see or hear in a designated area within a 24-hour period.

- **North Kona Circle (Hawai‘i Island)**: Saturday, December 19, 2026. Contact Lance Tanino at lance.tanino@gmail.com or 808-495-6545.
- **Volcano Circle (Hawai‘i Island)**: Saturday, January 2, 2027. Contact Alex Wang at axwang12@gmail.com.
- **Honolulu Circle (O‘ahu)**: Sunday, December 20, 2026. Contact Pete Donaldson at pdnldsn.bird@mac.com.
- **Waipi‘o Circle (O‘ahu)**: Sunday, January 3, 2027. Contact Dick May at rmayhi02@hotmail.com.

Big changes are coming to the CBC starting this year. There will be more options for submitting your count data. See the National Audubon Society CBC website for updates.

Christmas Bird Count 101 Webinar: November 17, 2026

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Volunteers at our *Celebrate The ʻAlae ʻUla* event at Keawāwa Wetland on Saturday, October 10, 2026. Hosted by Livable Maunalua Hui. ©Luka Zavas