

2-1-1952

Birds of Laysan Island

Homer R

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

R, H. "Birds of Laysan Island." *The Palimpsest* 33 (1952), 53-64.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol33/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Birds on Laysan Island

[The following list of Laysan Island birds, with notes on their distribution, habits, nests, and eggs, was prepared by the writer in accordance with the agreement made with the Biological Survey. The author also furnished them with a set of bird skins and photographs. The Chicago Museum of Natural History requested a set of skins in return for releasing Mr. Corwin from a painting contract. The two institutions agreed that they would not use the bird skins to make an exhibit such as the Iowa Museum had planned. A similar agreement was made with the members of the party. Although over forty years have passed, these agreements have never been violated.]

Sooty-backed Tern.

Upon our arrival at Laysan we did not observe many sooty-backed terns. There was a small colony of about 500 birds on the southwest part of the island and another of about the same size on the extreme east. We found great piles of bones near the former which led us to believe their numbers had been much reduced by the plume hunters. About May 6 thousands appeared on the east side of the island and about a week later others came to the southwest. As the southwest rookery grew, it extended toward the north. On June 1 we measured the rookeries, and two days later we went over the same ground again. We found that in two days the rookeries on the west side had increased in area 3,600 square yards. The final estimate of the number of sooty terns was made June 4 — 333,900 for both rookeries. This species outnumbered any other on the island.

Gray-backed Tern.

On the rocks at the south end of the island there was a small colony of gray-backed terns. Its close proximity to the sooty tern rookery might mislead the casual observer as to the number of birds of this species. As soon as the birds were disturbed, the sooty terns flew about with the gray-backs, giving the impression that there were thousands of the latter. The unfortunate gray-back made a desirable skin for millinery purposes; hence his demise. There were other small rookeries on the east side; about 50,000 of these birds were nesting.

Noddy.

Noddies were nesting in small colonies on nearly all parts of the island, especially on the northwest point, and during the last week of May fresh eggs were found. There were 5,500 noddies.

Hawaiian Tern.

This little understudy of the noddy was found in all stages. It numbered only about 3,000.

White Tern or Love Bird.

During our first week on Laysan we saw only four white terns. This little bird was one of the first to disappear at the hands of the poachers. About the time the sooty terns arrived in abundance, we noticed a number of white terns. On May 15 we discovered several pairs nesting on the rocks at the south end; later others were found on different parts of the island, in all, about 75.

Laysan Albatross.

Along the shores of the lagoon and on a small area at the south end of the island this remarkable and interesting bird had taken its last stand. About one-sixth of the original colony seen by Nutting in 1902 was left. All along the car track and on the main rookery, where the birds were formerly so abundant, only piles of bones remained. About all of the old main rookery had been annihilated; only now and then a pair of birds with young could be seen. Along the shores of the lagoon they were still to be found in large numbers, and to one who had never seen such masses of birds, it was a wonderful sight. They amused themselves with a strange proceeding, which at times seemed to be done more from a sense of duty than for pleasure. The performance was varied, but usually began as follows: one bird approached another with an indescribable squeaking sound, bowing all the time. If the other bird felt like performing, which was usually the case, he bowed in return. They crossed bills very rapidly several times. Then one bird turned its head and lifted one wing in such a manner that the primaries pointed directly out at the side. In the meantime, the other bird kept up a loud noise that sounded somewhat like the neighing of a horse. The bird taking the lead then walked around his partner, stepping high like a Negro cakewalker. This part of the procedure was usually closed by one or both

birds pointing their beaks straight up in the air, rising on their toes, puffing out their breasts, and uttering a long-drawn groan. The same thing was repeated many times with slight variations. There were comparatively few young albatrosses. This bird totaled about 180,000.

Black-footed Albatross.

Along the beaches of the north, east, and south sides of the island the black-footed albatross had taken almost complete possession. An occasional pair could be found nesting with the white species, but they were usually found by themselves. The black-footed albatross is somewhat larger than the white species, and is a superior aviator. They followed our ship all the way from San Francisco to the Hawaiian Islands. They have a performance similar to that of the former species but much more elaborate, and they go through the figures slowly and gracefully. Instead of lifting one wing, they raise both. The notes uttered during the performance are much softer, ending with a sound like the stroke of a bell under water or deep within the bird's stomach. They are very neighborly with the other species. We often saw them visiting, and on one or two occasions they tried to perform with them, but the rapid pace set by the white bird was rather too much for his more deliberate cousin. The total number was about 85,000.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater.

This bird was found on nearly every part of Laysan, with the exception of the beaches and the hard shore of the central lagoon. It did not fly about much during the day, but sat in the mouth of its burrow dozing in the sun. At times a dozen or more congregated, apparently for the purpose of quarreling. Their cat-like squalls soon made the quarreling. They numbered about 100,000.

Christmas-Island Shearwater.

This is a common bird on Laysan. We found it nesting under the bushes and in shallow burrows. Its eggs were fresh during the first two weeks of May. Its retiring habits and unattractive plumage had protected it from the poachers. It numbered about 75,000.

White-Breasted or Bonin Island Petrel.

In the daytime this bird was not conspicuous, but it was abundant in the evening. It was a fearless, dove-like creature, quite amenable to petting and stroking. The young of this species were nearly fledged. They were to be seen in the mouths of the deep burrows which completely honeycomb the higher ground of the island. They numbered 160,000.

Bulwer's Petrel.

In cracks and crannies of the rocks on the south end of the island one was sure of finding these

birds, usually a pair in the same opening. We found them scattered about wherever there were pieces of phosphate rock or coral under which to crawl. While we were after some specimens of coral rock, we were much surprised to find one of these quiet little birds sitting in the debris that had fallen from the under side as we applied the sledge hammer from above. The pieces had dropped in such a manner that, notwithstanding the falling of a piece weighing 75 pounds or more, the bird was unharmed and apparently not alarmed. Under the bird we found a fresh egg. Although we had previously seen many of these birds, we had not found any eggs. Further search disclosed that the birds on the south end of the island had eggs, all of which were fresh. In some nests we found both birds sitting side by side. They numbered 1,000.

Sooty Petrel.

This is not a common bird on Laysan. Near the south end of the lagoon a number of the young were found, all dead or dying. They were fully fledged, retaining only traces of down. A diligent search procured but two adults.

Red-Tailed Tropic Bird.

During the first three weeks of our stay on the island we saw very few of these birds. They were wild and very hard to catch. Later, however, we saw plenty of them; when they were nesting we experienced no trouble in catching them in our

hands. They had by far the most beautiful plumage of any of the birds found there. Their rose-tinted satin bodies, bright coral red beaks, and elongated central tail feathers made them striking birds indeed. The poachers had killed many of them, but they still numbered about 300.

Blue-faced Booby.

A small colony of these birds was nesting on a sandy beach on the east coast. By actual count, fifty-four birds were there during the first week in May. Large downy young were in the nests, usually only one, but in some cases two. A few eggs were found, but all were well incubated. On June 5 we were somewhat surprised to find about twenty pairs of these birds nesting on the interior slope of the east side of the island in close proximity to the man-o'-war bird rookery. Why they should choose such an environment was hard to understand. Nearly all of the nests contained two fresh eggs. Not far from this spot we saw a man-o'-war bird pursuing a booby just returned from fishing, with a crop full of fish. At first it seemed as though the booby would outfly its pursuer, but its load was too heavy. The man-o'-war bird overtook the booby, seized it by the tail, raised itself in the air, and turned it completely over. Being thus rudely overturned, the booby lost control and quickly disgorged the contents of its crop. The man-o'-war bird actually caught the fish as it came from the booby's mouth.

Red-footed Booby.

This bird is not very abundant, being confined to a small area on the north side of the island. There were about 125 in all.

Man-o'-war Bird.

On the inner eastern slope of the island these birds were found nesting in colonies in the tops of low bushes which, if placed together, would have covered about six acres. As it was, however, they appeared to cover many times that amount of space. Here, sitting quietly on each nest, was its owner, holding down his claim. When one bird left the nest, the mate immediately took its place, for if a nest was left unguarded, the birds that seemed to be off duty swooped down, apparently passing nearly over it, and with a quick movement of the beak picked up a stick and carried it away. Thus, stick by stick, the nest was completely removed. If there happened to be a young bird or an egg in the nest, it was destroyed and eaten by the winged cannibals. One forgot the shortcomings of these birds when he saw them sailing on motionless wing far above him. They make use of the hot air currents arising from the island and sail about with very little effort. They numbered 12,500.

Laysan Teal.

These birds were not seen for the first few days of our stay. Then we found feathers and other parts of those that the marauders had dressed for

food. Later, however, we saw them in small flocks, six being the most seen at one time. Some teals seemed to be nesting in the grass near the small fresh-water pond on the south end of the island, but we were unable to find any nests. The man-o'-war birds persistently pursued them, but they did not to my knowledge kill or harm any of them. They, however, kill young teals. Presumably the plumage hunters killed them for food, and thus nearly exterminated them.

Laysan Rail.

This was one of the most interesting birds on the island. Notwithstanding its inability to fly, it has no trouble in evading its pursuers. It ran and dodged from one grass tussock to another, down a petrel hole and out again before one could locate it. One of the most laughable things imaginable is a man pursuing one of these bits of bird life, net in hand, continually dropping waist-deep down among the burrowing petrels. It was with much difficulty that we secured the specimens we needed for our collection. They were everywhere fairly abundant on all parts of the island except on the beaches. They even visited our kitchen. Their favorite nesting place was among the mats of juncus along the margin of the lagoon. We found many nests but no eggs. On June 4 we discovered two coal-black chicks with yellow beaks that gave vent to much noise. There were about 2,000.

Wandering Tattler.

Very few of these birds were seen on Laysan during our stay. Occasionally they appeared on the reef or among the large rocks on the beach, but they were very wild. One only was taken.

Bristle-thighed Curlew.

Just before sunset and early in the morning these birds would come up around our camp uttering their peculiar complaining notes. They roosted on the roofs of the old low buildings at night, sometimes as many as twenty in a flock. They numbered about 250.

Pacific Golden Plover.

The golden plover is only a migrant on Laysan. About 2,000 were present at the time of our visit.

Turnstone.

In the shallow water of the lagoon and about the fresh-water pond, large flocks of plover and turnstones were to be seen. Here they spent most of their time feeding on the small flies which blackened shore and water. The specimens we prepared for our collection were exceedingly fat. The turnstones numbered about 2,500.

Miller Bird.

With the exception of the Laysan teal, the miller bird is the least abundant of the indigenous birds. We saw a few of them around the old buildings and others about the island, but princi-

pally in the tall grass along the west shore of the lagoon, where a few nests containing eggs and young birds were found. A pair made a nest not far from our sleeping quarters. The birds seemed not to mind our presence, working away at the nest when we were within two feet of them. After the nest was completed, the female bird died while laying an egg. We saved the skin and also the egg. In a few days the male bird returned with a new mate; much to our surprise, the birds took down the old nest and built a new one a few feet away. It seemed strange that this bird should not be more common, as it was reported in 1902 to be the most abundant of the island birds. Presumably the poachers caught the miller bird, but we have no proof of it, as no skins or other parts were found. Its numbers were kept in check by the finches — at least we saw the latter eating the eggs of this species. Undoubtedly, however, this had been the practice for many years, and did not seem to make any appreciable difference in the numbers.

Laysan Honey-eater.

This bird is not common on Laysan. Four of this species roosted on an old rope which hung across the corner in one of the sheds. Here each night we would see them huddled closely together. Occasionally one would flit into our workroom in quest of millers. They were to be seen about the island in the tall tussocks of grass where we found

a few nests, all of which contained young birds or well-incubated eggs. There were probably 300.

Laysan Finch.

One of the last birds to disappear from the island will be the Laysan finch. With its omnivorous habits and its saucy, fearless manner it easily adapts itself to conditions as it finds them. It is a fine songster and makes a good cage bird. Laysan Island is a fine place for them, but should anyone be rash enough to introduce them to a civilized community they would rival the English sparrow. They were everywhere abundant about the island, particularly near the tern rookeries. When we passed through the rookeries they would follow, stealing the eggs left exposed by the terns we had frightened away. They also eat other birds' eggs, not excepting their own species. Our cook experienced much difficulty in keeping them from the kitchen. At last he was obliged to put up a net at the door to keep them out. They also visited our storeroom, pecking holes in our rice bag and making away with quite a quantity. At meal time they were at our feet pecking at the crumbs on the floor. It was not an uncommon thing to see them on the table. They were nesting during the month of May, and we found many nests with fresh eggs. We estimated the total number to be about 2,700.