

The Cruise of the Itasca

By HENRY E. DOUGHERTY

OUT YONDER ACROSS the horizon, in the general direction of Asia, are some islands that, for all the haphazard publicity given them, have remained a mystery all these years in the lay mind. And since these islands are a part of the Territory of Hawaii, they are of peculiar interest to Hawaii.

I sat in the cozy quarters of Commander John S. Baylis recently aboard the coast guard cutter *Itasca* and listened to reminiscences of his cruise to Midway Island and other islands in June, 1934. That swing around the circuit totalled nearly 5,000 miles.

The purpose of this cruise was to examine each intervening island to see if there were any stranded seamen, and to investigate the presence of poachers in the bird reservations. Also, to learn if there was any alien sampan activity in the vicinity of the islands, to enforce the law and to render assistance, if needed.

Before sailing, Commander Baylis prepared a paper giving a history of the islands to be visited. It follows:

Niho (Bird Island) was discovered in 1789 by Captain Douglas of the *Iphigenia*, the existence of this island was previously unknown to the natives of the Hawaiian Islands. It is located 116 miles west-northwest of Niihau, and is a barren, rocky island averaging less than one-third of a mile in width, and three-quarters of a mile in length. It has elevations on the east and west sides, the highest of which, Miller's Peak (903 feet), is on the eastern end.

Necker Island was discovered by La Perouse in 1786 and annexed to Hawaii in 1895. It is a small, rocky island with very little soil. There are four peaks, the highest of which is 300 feet. All sides of the island are steep, upon which the surf breaks heavily. A few rough, stone idols have been found on this island, together with evidence of habitation by some ancient race.

French Frigate Shoal was discovered by La Perouse shortly after Necker Island, and like the latter annexed by the Hawaiian government in 1895. It is an incomplete atoll, the western end of which is under water. The shoal is extensive and dangerous, and several wrecks have occurred on this reef, among which were the *Daniel Wood*

and *South Seaman*, in 1859. The *Rebecca* was lost by mistaking the rocky ridge on the principal island for a ship.

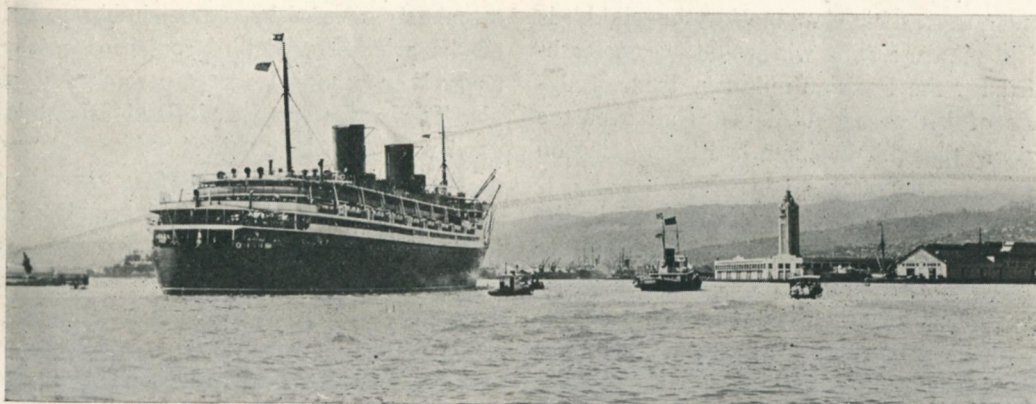
Gardner Island was discovered by the whaler *Maro*, Captain Allen, in 1820. It is an inaccessible rock about 170 feet high and 200 yards in diameter, with a smaller rock close to its southwestern extreme from which a reef extends.

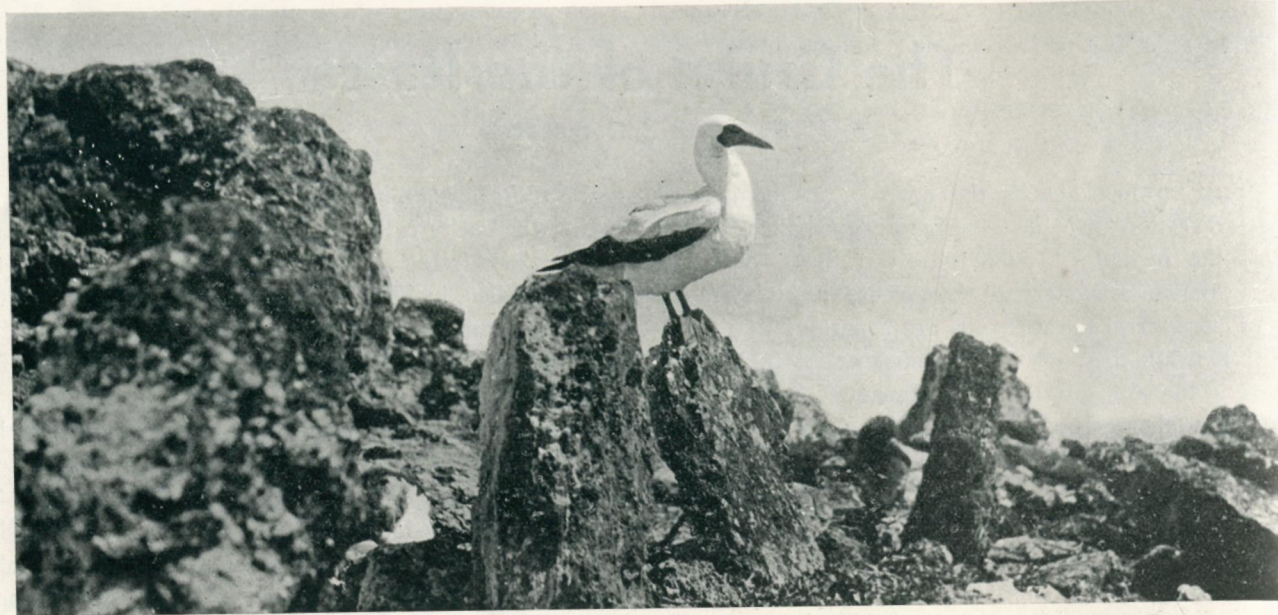
Laysan Island is a small island about two miles long, one and a half miles wide, and 55 feet high, covered with shrubs, with a lagoon half a mile long in its center. Two cocoanut trees are located on the western side of the island. Turtles, seal, fowl and fish are abundant, and wild rabbits are plentiful. The revenue cutter *Thetis*, Captain Jacobs, seized about thirty Japanese bird poachers here in 1910, with a large load of feathers. In 1915 three Europeans were living on the island.

Lisiansky Island is located 117 miles westward of Laysan Island. This island was discovered by Captain Lisiansky of the Russian ship *Neva* in 1805. It is a small, low coral island, about 3 miles in circumference, 42 feet high, and overgrown with bushes.

Pearl and Hermes Reef lies 145 miles northwest of Lisiansky Island, and is an extensive atoll about 40 miles in circumference (16 miles long, east and west, and nine miles wide), on which are scattered twelve small, low islets, in the form of a crescent open to the westward. This atoll was discovered in 1882 by the two whalers, the *Pearl* and *Hermes* which were wrecked near the eastern end, within ten miles of each other on the same night.

Midway Islands are two small islands, Sand Island and Eastern Island, lying within a circular coral reef, 18 miles in circumference in latitude 28° 10' N. and longitude 177° 24' W. They were discovered in 1859 by an American, Captain Brooks of the Bark *Gambia*, sailing under the Hawaiian flag. He hoisted the American flag and took possession in the name of the United States government but they remained unoccupied until the Navy Department sent the U. S. S. *Lackawanna* in 1867 to make a survey for the purpose of ascertaining whether a coal depot could be established for the convenience of the Pacific mail ships.





The Booby Bird.

Sometime later a coal shed was erected on Sand Island and a cargo of coal landed. One man was left in charge but the solitude proved too much for him and he left at the first opportunity when a schooner called seeking fresh water. An enterprising sailorman is reported to have loaded his schooner with this coal. He took it to San Francisco where he sold it and said he brought it from New Castle, New South Wales. In 1900 another very thorough survey was made by the U. S. S. *Iroquois*.

Sand Island, where the cable station is established, is roughly one and three-fourths miles long by three-fourths miles, and until recent years was a heap of dazzling white sand with bunches of coarse shrubbery here and there which formed dunes, the highest dune being 43 feet above sea level. Early in 1903 plans were made for the landing of the Commercial Pacific cable. The Midway group had been previously set aside by executive order of President Roosevelt as a naval reservation and placed under the jurisdiction of the Commandant of the 14th Naval District. The cable superintendent received one dollar per annum as custodian of the reservation. In April, 1903, the employees of the cable company arrived in a chartered steamer and commenced erecting temporary quarters, etc., and made preparations for the landing of the cable. At that time there was a Japanese schooner in the lagoon with a large crew of men engaged in slaughtering the wild birds for their beautiful plumage. The wings and breast feathers were intended for the Parisian millinery trade. Judging by the heaps of bodies and bird bones all over the island it was evident that this business had been going on for years.

A month later the U. S. S. *Iroquois* assisted in the landing of the shore ends of the cables in June. On July 4, 1903, communication east and west was established and Midway was ever afterwards in constant touch with the world. In 1904 all the materials for permanent buildings and a large force of workmen arrived and the present

beautiful cable station was completed within a year. A guard of marines comprising twenty men, an officer and a doctor was sent to preserve law and order during the building operations but the marines were retained on the island until 1908. These men were relieved every 6 months.

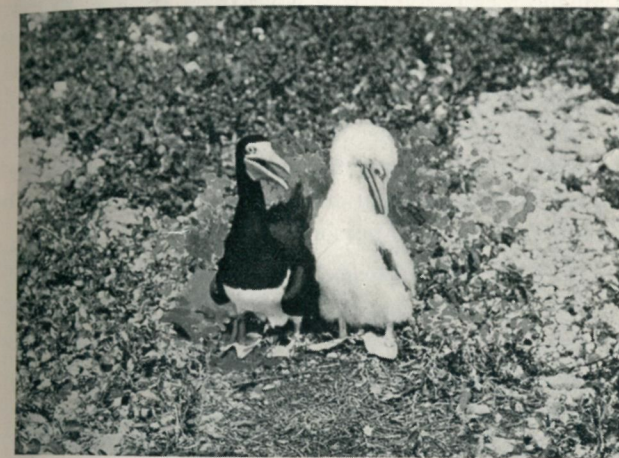
Since 1908 only employees of the Commercial Pacific Cable Company have lived on the island, the others being laborers and Chinese house servants. The cable company sends their ship, the S. S. *Dickinson*, to Midway four times a year with mail, supplies and staff reliefs. Operators are expected to remain one year at the station but may be relieved at the end of that period upon application. Quarters are provided for two married families, the superintendent and assistant superintendent. The staff are provided with the best food and have every comfort. There is much opportunity for recreation. Tennis courts, billiard room and library are provided by the company. There is no finer swimming beach in the world and fishing of all kinds can be indulged in. During the earlier years before the introduction of sand binding grasses and other vegetation, conditions sometimes became very disagreeable during high winds but the cable company, by the transportation of soil and suitable shrubs and trees, transformed the island to its present comfortable conditions.

Eastern Island is similar in size but has always been completely covered by coarse shrubbery. It is probably one of the greatest wild bird rookeries of the world. It has never been occupied except possibly by shipwrecked people. The water supply of Sand Island is abundant and good water can be obtained a few feet under the surface of the sand but the inhabitants prefer to use rain water for drinking purposes, an ample supply of which is always in storage.

A number of wrecks have occurred at Midway and crews have been marooned there as long as 14 months. In 1886 the Hawaiian schooner *General Siegel* was lost and her crew lived in a shack until the captain and mate

MARCH, 1935

mysteriously disappeared on Eastern Island where they had gone along with a sailor named Jorgenson. Jorgenson returned to Sand Island and could not give a clear account of what had happened. His shipmates decided that he had probably murdered the other two and they determined to secretly provision a small boat and leave Midway. They left Jorgenson to his fate and in some miraculous manner reached the Marshall Islands in the tiny craft. In February, 1887, the bark *Wandering Minstrel* arrived at Midway and found Jorgenson alone there. Soon afterwards the *Wandering Minstrel* was driven ashore and the captain with his wife and two children were forced to remain on the island for 14 months. The mate of the *Wandering Minstrel* with Jorgenson of the *General Siegel* and a Chinese boy provisioned a boat and sailed for the Marshall Islands and reached there after much hardship. When Captain Walker, his family and the remainder of the crew



were finally taken to Honolulu by a schooner, Robert Louis Stevenson happened to be there and from a journal Mrs. Walker had kept on the island, obtained the material for his book "The Wrecker." In this book his description of the heavy shrubbery and general characteristics of Eastern Island is very accurate.

Some of the cable staff imported two donkeys from Honolulu in 1905. They were turned loose on Eastern Island and in a few years there was a herd of twenty or more. They seemed able to sustain themselves for a good many years but now their numbers are diminishing quite rapidly. They soon found that they could obtain drinking water by digging in the sand with their fore foot close to the high-water mark and waiting until the depression filled up from underneath with fresh water. In 1909 two common yellow canaries were brought to San Island and were bred in a cage. After a dozen or more young birds were reared they were liberated and soon accustomed themselves to their new surroundings. Hundreds of these beautiful song birds can be seen at any time around the cable station and all over the island. They have no enemies—there being no cats, rats or mice on the island. There are also Laysan Island finches and wingless birds which prove useful in keeping the vegetation free from destructive insects.

The difficulties from drifting sand were overcome

when a coarse species of grass was introduced from the beach near Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. It is known as Marram grass and was said to be suggested first by Past Assistant Surgeon James Miller, U.S.N., who died and was buried on the island 28 years ago. The graves of shipwrecked sailors and employees of the cable company who have died on the island are located just west of the cable station and are always kept in good order by the cable staff.

Midway probably has one of the best climates in the world. In summer the constant northeast trade winds prevent a high temperature while in the winter months open fires in the living quarters may be enjoyed.

Kure or Ocean Island is an atoll lying 56 miles westward of the Midway Islands, which it closely resembles both in formation and appearance. It consists of Green Island (one and a half miles long by three-fourths mile wide) and westward two small islets joined to it by sand-spits; the whole is surrounded by a reef.

BIRD COMPANIONS

Continuing his story, in which he described the life on the islands, Commander Baylis said:

The bird that was our most constant companion during this voyage is the Albatross, known to sailors as the "Goney." We saw two species of the Albatross following the *Itasca* on our voyage to Midway Island, the black-footed and white (Laysan) Albatross. This bird is rarely seen in the North Atlantic Ocean, but frequents all other seas, and is the largest of the sea birds. According to Mr. Morrison, who was on board the *Itasca* as our guest, the Albatross for days at a time will follow any ship for food



cast overboard unless they see the word "Glasgow" on her stern. Being wise birds, they evidently have learned by experience of the thrifty and frugal character of the Scotch. The appetite of the Albatross is rapacious, its diet consisting of fish or floating garbage. It does not dive under the surface seeking food.

Sailors are fond of the Albatross, and have a strong prejudice against killing them, because of the superstition that these birds are the souls of drowned seamen.

The Albatross is web-footed and very awkward when walking on land, but on the wing, or afloat, it is one of the most graceful of sea birds. Its long pointed wings are extremely powerful and it has an uncanny way of circling in the air and skimming the surface of the water without any apparent effort or wing motion. The tail is short and

somewhat round. The feathers of the body form so thick a coat that it will withstand both water and severe cold, long continued. It is difficult for us to understand just how the Albatross rides out the long, fierce gales in mid-ocean and keeps from being beaten down into the sea. There is no bird more awe-inspiring. Owing to the extreme length of the wings, the number of flight feathers is greater than on the wings of any other bird. Besides those common in the North Pacific, there are several species of Albatross, the largest of which is the "Wandering" or "Cape Horn" Albatross of the southern ocean. Its wings from tip to tip are over twelve feet, and its length is over five feet. It is white and the most handsome and famous species of the family.

On Midway Island, French Frigate Shoal and Laysan Island thousands and thousands of the North Pacific Albatross, or "Goneys" arrive from Alaska and the Arctic



regions with the first high winds in October and nest close together on the open sands. At Laysan Island there are acres and acres of living Albatross stretching away as far as the camera can include them, till the sands are white with them. According to Mr. Morrison they arrive to breed almost on exact scheduled time, so much so, in fact, that every year sweepstakes are made up among the cable operators on the island in connection with this event. This occurs around the 20th of October. They build their nests on the sand and the female lays only one egg. Ten weeks later the young bird is hatched. They remain on the island until they young are fully grown and able to take care of themselves when they migrate northward, usually about the middle of July. It is said that the White Albatross will not touch garbage, but the Black Albatross will eat garbage, as well as fish.

MAN OF WAR HAWK

The attention of all sailors has often been arrested by the flight far aloft of a big, dark colored bird with long, sharp pointed wings and a long tail that is deeply forked. This is the Frigate Bird, or as the sailors call it, "Man O' War Hawk." The bill of the frigate bird is longer than the head, strong, hooked at the point and sharp. In proportion to their size, their wings are longer than any other bird and have an extent of seven feet or more. Their flight

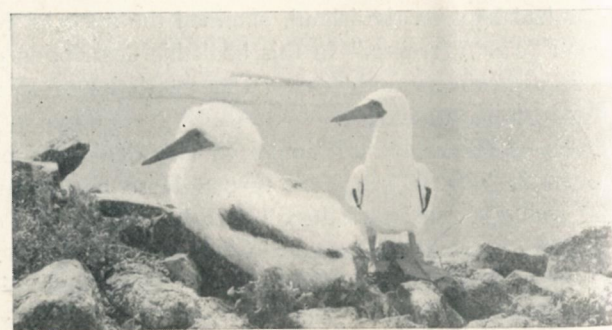
is so powerful that they are to be found more than 1,000 miles from shore. On the land they move with great difficulty and they rarely alight on the water. The frigate bird pursues terns, gulls and gannets, which have secured a fish and by beating them with wings and beak, forces them to drop the fish, then seizes the prey before it reaches the water. Its usual breeding place is the low shrubbery of outlying islands. Their nests are rough platforms of sticks. They lay but one chalky-white egg. The male bird has a red pouch under the throat which it distends like a balloon. The species is found throughout the tropics and many are seen on Midway Island. A second species (*Fregata minor*) ranges about the Indian and South Pacific Oceans.

GANNET BIRD

The gannet, or "booby," is larger than the sea gull, but smaller than the albatross. They are characterized by having all the toes connected by a web but are able to roost in bushes of the island and rear their young in branches off the ground. They have large powerful bills and feed upon fish, frequenting the sea coasts of various parts of the world. They lay one large chalky-white egg. Several species of "boobies" are to be seen on Midway Island. This bird will dive from a great height into the sea for its food. It is the dive bomber of the bird family.

TROPIC BIRD or BOATSWAIN BIRD

A sea bird related to the pelican, but quite unlike him, is one of the most beautiful of sea birds. It breeds extensively on Midway Island and is always to be found there. The two middle feathers of the tail are very long and narrow, giving the birds the names of "Boatswain Bird" or "Marlin Spike" among sailors. It has beautiful pinkish white feathers and two long scarlet tail feathers.



TERN or SEA SWALLOW

These gull-like birds are distinguished by the long, slender and straight bill and by the narrow nostrils at the base of the beak. The wings are long and pointed and the tail is forked. They come to Midway from the south to breed in the spring, and remain until the young are fully grown in mid-summer. Its average length is fifteen inches, the long forked tail constituting a considerable element in this measurement. The color is black on the head and neck and ashy gray on the upper parts generally. The under part is white, the legs, feet and bill being red. The tern seen on Midway Island and vicinity are known as Sooty Tern, due to the peculiar coloring of the upper parts of the body. When they arrive at Midway they do not land

at once but circle for several days in the air accompanied by a great noise, gradually coming down and finally landing in colonies. Soon after landing the ground is covered with large eggs. A small species of terns—always found at Midway Islands, which never migrate—is the little White Tern or Love Bird. They are small, white birds, slightly larger than a sparrow and have beautiful white plumage with long black bills. They travel in pairs on the ground at all times.

OTHER SPECIES

Petrel or Moaning Bird.—These sea birds, smaller than the gannet and about the size of the tern, may be noticed fluttering over the creast of the seas. They breed in very large numbers on the Midway Islands. They burrow into the sand and hatch out their young in underground tunnels. It is quite usual for a person walking to step into these subterranean nests and sink to the knees. At night they come out and fly around and their doeful cry is then heard. Due to this cry they are sometimes referred to as the "Moaning Bird."

Land Birds.—Besides the above sea birds many migratory land birds frequent the Midway group. Curley and golden plover are present in large numbers. Sanderlings and turnstones can always be seen searching for food

close to the water's edge. None of these breed at Midway. No nests have ever been found. Occasionally wild ducks and geese are found on the island after a hard blow, indicating that they have been forced out of their course. After resting they depart.

Wingless Birds.—These small dark brown birds with longish beak and red eyes cannot fly. They have only small rudimentary wings, but can make rapid progress on the ground and are graceful in walking. They are very numerous on Midway Island.

In 1909 Mr. Morrison bought a pair of common yellow canaries from one of the Chinese crew of the Pacific Mail steamer *Siberia*. They were put in a breeding cage at Midway and after a dozen or more young ones were hatched out, they were liberated along with two imported full grown canaries of a different strain. They gradually multiplied and at the present time there are probably 800 to 1,000 of them flying about the shrubbery and trees planted on the island by Mr. Morrison many years ago.

These canaries are very tame and will feed and bathe on the verandas of the cable station building with persons standing within a yard of them. They are beautiful songsters and are heard all over the island, especially during the mating season.



Here's art for you—a rare combination of beach and palms. And the sands are black—the black sands of Kalapana, island of Hawaii.—Hawaii Tourist Bureau Photo.