

# Christmas odyssey to Hawaii

By Lynn Moseley

With a loud squawk, a tiny, brilliant vermilion and black bird hurtled past us through the mists of the mountainous slopes. An *iwi*! Finally, we had spotted our first native Hawaiian bird.

The sighting of this incredible species, complete with long, salmon-colored bill, marked one of the highlights of nine days in Hawaii that my husband, Phil, and I spent over Christmas break. Former graduate school colleagues now on the faculty of Linfield College in Oregon and the University of Puget Sound had invited me to give a lecture on Hawaiian seabirds to their month-long winter term course, "Marine Biology of Hawaii."

In return for my contribution, Phil and I were provided with free accommodations on the island of Maui in a luxury condominium (complete with sauna, jacuzzi, swimming pool), which we shared with our hosts.

Our Hawaiian adventure actually began on the island of Oahu. We arrived in Honolulu on December 31 to spend four days with another friend from graduate school days who works as a post-doc on a project

investigating dolphin communication.

The research, directed by Louis Herman of the University of Hawaii's Psychology Department, is similar to previous attempts to teach sign language to chimpanzees. The dolphins are being taught commands using simple verbs and nouns either by sign language or computer-generated sounds.

Of course, the dolphins cannot themselves produce hand signals, but they are being taught to mimic the computer sounds, the first step in two-way communication. To date they can understand two and three word sentences such as "Ball Fetch" and "Ball Fetch Gate" (meaning fetch the ball to the gate).

The experimental design used in the project has shown clearly that the dolphins understand the importance of syntax in the sentences they learn. They respond differently to "Ball Fetch Hoop" and "Hoop Fetch Ball."

For the first four days of our stay, we shared the Kewalo Basin Marine Mammal Lab with two lovely female dolphins, Phoenix and Akeakamai (Ha-

waiian for "Lover of Wisdom"). We spent a number of hours playing with the dolphins, who were housed in a large, deep concrete pool. It was quite an experience when, the first time I gave the proper hand signal, one of the dolphins swam up to me and offered a pectoral fin to shake!

Actually, the dolphins were extremely sociable and obviously enjoyed human contact. They loved being stroked, rubbed under the chin and having their tails gently pulled.

Five hours of jet lag notwithstanding, Phil and I stayed up until midnight on December 31 to witness what must be one of the world's grandest New Year's Eve celebrations. From the observation tower of the lab, which overlooked the lights of Waikiki and Diamond Head under a full moon, we watched and listened as the City of Honolulu literally exploded!

Imagine the sound of several million firecrackers ignited in waves and echoing off the mountain slopes. For at least fifteen minutes, conversation was nearly impossible!

The next few days were considerably calmer (and quieter) as we explored Oahu to the extent that the island's fine bus system permitted. For fifty cents, one can ride the bus literally around the island.

We enjoyed visiting the Bishop Museum, which houses a collection of artifacts from the various cultures that have populated the islands; Sea Life Park, with its excellent collection of tropical fish and fine seabird sanctuary (we had our first view of six oceanic bird species here); the sights and sounds of Waikiki; and the Honolulu Zoo, where we barely missed meeting Gail Wine, a Guilford graduate and close friend of Pete and Lucretia Moore.

We found the life style on Oahu to be very relaxed (even businessmen wear "aloha shirts" to work!), heavily influenced by oriental cultures, and blessed with a lovely climate. We were surprised to learn that the yearly average temperature range is less than 14 degrees, and during our stay the daily highs and lows were about 79 and 70 degrees re-



Photo by Cathy Tillman

The *iwi*, one of Hawaii's most brilliant native honeycreepers, can only be spotted after a hearty trek into the Hawaiian bush.

spectively.

Honolulu, with its 300,000 inhabitants, is in every way a major city, although cleaner and greener than most on the mainland. We were impressed with the racial variety, and found Caucasians to be in the minority outside of touristy Waikiki.

We were disappointed to learn of the devastation of native plants and wildlife that has resulted from excessive development and the introduction of foreign species. The problem is so severe that today on Oahu, no native species of plants or birds are found below an elevation of 1500 feet.

The fragile island ecosystems are diminishing rapidly, with native species unable to compete with those introduced. The most common birds of Honolulu are the house sparrow, the pigeon, and the common mynah, all of which were introduced within the last 115 years.

Since we certainly didn't travel almost 6000 miles just to see pigeons, we looked forward to our visit to Maui. Known as the Valley Isle, Maui is a figure-eight-shaped island formed by the union of two originally separate volcanoes.

The valley between the two craters is planted extensively in sugar cane and pineapple, the first and third most important cash crops in Hawaii (the second is marijuana, locally known as "Maui Wowee").

Although Maui has its share of resort hotels and condominiums, it's no Waikiki, and is noted especially for two features. The first is the picturesque town of Lahaina (remember Michener's *Hawaii*?), famed as the home port of the Pacific whaling fleet in the 1800's. The restaurants and shops convey a nineteenth century whaling atmosphere, and an active restoration process continues the theme.

Current interest in whales is maintained by the annual migration of humpback whales from the North Pacific to the warm waters off the islands to mate and give birth. Whale watching is a popular activity during January and February.

At 10,000 feet, before daylight, with a wind-chill factor of about 15 degrees, Maui was no tropical paradise! But the chan-

ging colors, the lights and shadows in the crater provided a stunning spectacle well worth the effort and the cold.

After daybreak, we hiked the trail at beautiful Hosmer's Grove (elevation 7,000 feet). It was there on the trail, overlooking a valley of red-flowered *Ohia* trees, that we located several species of 29 native birds, members of the family *Drepanididae*, or honeycreepers.

Known only by their Hawaiian names [*iwi*, *apapane*], these birds are descendants of a single ancestral species that colonized the islands several million years ago. Just as Darwin's finches diversified on the Galapagos Islands, the honeycreepers underwent adaptive radiation in Hawaii to become over twenty distinct species.

Our stay of Maui ended on an adventurous note, with the arrival of a two-day winter storm (the worst since 1918) which caused flash floods, damage in the harbors, and loss of power to the entire island.

The road to the airport was closed, and only some fast talking by our group enabled us to get around the police barricade and slowly pick our way over the wave-washed highway. It was an exhilarating end to our Hawaiian odyssey.

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Tom Diez will be narrator for two Audubon films being presented January 30 at the Centenary United Methodist Church at 8 p.m.

## Audubon films featured Wednesday

The T. Gilbert Pearson Chapter of the National Audubon Society will present the following films in association with the Piedmont Bird Club, Jan. 30, 8 p.m. at the Centenary United Methodist Church, 2300 W. Friendly Ave.

### Northwest Adventures

A film to pack your backpack by, Tom Diez's *Northwest Adventures* is a 40 minute capsule of wildlife, wilderness, camping, fishing and exploring in the wilds of the great Northwest.

The tour takes one first through the bush country of British Columbia, Alberta and the Yukon, a remote land of spectacular scenery, home of

the majestic moose and elk and territory of the black bear.

From there it's due north from the mountains of southern Alaska to the wild islands of the Bering Sea, through the wilderness of a great and pristine state, through Alaska's mountains, tundras, glaciers and streams with all of their mammals, birds, fish -- and outdoorsmen.

Dall sheep, caribou, grizzly bear and the delightful sea otter are some of the wildlife featured, and there is an amusing sequence on the Alaskan brown bears seeming somewhat less than awesome as they fish -- or try to -- the wealth of a salmon run.

### Adventures in Penn's Woods

Truly one of the more beautiful and interesting states, Pennsylvania is the setting for this program. Areas visited include Pymatuning Lake and Swamp, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and Pennsylvania's Grand Canyon.

Explore the mountains, forests, marshes and streams to enjoy the many forms of wildlife which live in the Keystone State. Featured are stories on live-trapping beaver in the swamps, ravens which nest on the rugged cliffs of Fulton County, trout fishing, and a remarkable story about a man and a herd of deer in the mountains of Potter County.