ISLAND TREASURES

SINCE I was a small boy in rural North Carolina I have been fascinated with things Hawaiian. Perhaps it has something to do with my performance as a ukulele player in a Hawaiian number in the Charlotte Boys' Choir show. I really cannot say, but like my interest in birds, this unexplainable fascination has been there as long as I can remember. The two came together in the summer of 1961 when I ran across a copy of Roger Tory Peterson's new edition of *A Field Guide to Western Birds* in a Charlotte supermarket. I remember it as if it were yesterday. There, in the back of the book, was a section devoted to the birds of Hawaii, birds that had previously been unknown to me. I spent the rest of the day eagerly reading and rereading the Hawaii section. It was almost a conversion experience. I was thrilled to learn that several birds believed extinct had just been rediscovered by Frank Richardson and John Bowles in the Alakai Swamp on Kauai. I knew that day that eventually I would go to Hawaii to search for those birds.

My opportunity came a dozen years later when I met Phil Bruner as a fellow Louisiana State University graduate student. Phil had grown up in Hawaii, and his wife Andrea was from Tahiti. On the basis of a year's field work in French Polynesia, he had written a small guide to the birds there. He wanted to expand it and add color illustrations, and I was in the right place at the right time. We agreed to collaborate with Delwyn Berrett, Phil's mentor in Hawaii and another LSU graduate, on a new field guide to cover the entire tropical Pacific. In 1974 I spent a month with Phil in Hawaii; in some ways it was the most important month of my life. When I returned to LSU, I immediately began work on the field guide plates. The closer I looked at the specimens that were my models, the more I began to question the prevailing classification of some Hawaiian birds. The idea of reevaluating their relationships as a dissertation topic appealed both to me and to Dr. George Lowery, my major professor. The beauty of it was that I could work on it and the field guide simultaneously and could use my art work as a means of financing the field work.

In July, 1975, I finally made it into the Alakai Swamp. By then the akialoa, one of the birds Richardson and Bowles had rediscovered, had disappeared (the last sighting of it was by Phil Bruner in 1969), but other fabled species were still present: the yellow and green ou, two native thrushes called puaiohi and kamao, and the golden-voiced Kauai oo. I had long considered the Kauai oo the Holy Grail of Hawaiian birds, and I will always cherish the memory of hearing its ringing voice break the dawn silence as I lay in my tent on the first day in the Alakai. Other expeditions followed, and Hawaii gradually became my second home. I received my degree in 1979 and published the field guide in 1987. The circle was complete when, in his 1990 edition of the western field guide, Peterson deleted his Hawaii section and recommended the use of our guide instead. To me, it was the ornithological equivalent of a papal benediction. Our pride is tinged with sadness, however, because very probably the last Kauai oo died in 1989.

Although drawing and painting birds had been a childhood hobby, it was as an adult that I began seriously to develop my skills. At LSU, it became a useful skill for illustrating scientific works such as Lowery's *Mammals of Louisiana,* which contained my first published illustrations. Then followed a commission from the Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts for a series of portraits of Hawaiian forest birds. The idea was to produce photo-realistic depictions of birds that might never be well photographed. This style is displayed in "Island Treasures." In the 1980s I mostly painted field guide plates, which are my first love. I still consider myself primarily an illustrator rather than an artist, but the distinction is becoming less and less clear to me. Even something as utilitarian as a field guide plate carries esthetic considerations; I believe good design makes a subtle contribution to the usefulness of an illustration.

"Island Treasures" shows a male and female (upper) common amakihi (*Hemignathus virens*) feeding among the flowers of kokio (*Kokia drynarioides*). The birds belong to the group known as Hawaiian honeycreepers (Drepanidinae), a diverse array of species that evolved in the islands from a single finchlike colonizer. Many of the more specialized honeycreepers are now endangered or extinct, but this one, a dietary generalist, is still abundant in places. Kokio is a native tree that belongs to the hibiscus family (Malvaceae), a plant group that, like the honeycreepers, has undergone "adaptive radiation" in Hawaii. This one has the usually flat corolla partly rolled into a curved tube, a characteristic of many Hawaiian plants of several families. Probably curved corollas evolved to fit the curved bills of several native nectar-feeding birds, which served as pollinators. Kokio once grew in the lowland dry forests of North Kona on the island of Hawaii, but grazing by introduced cattle and pigs has reduced it to fewer than 20 individuals in the wild. Although the tree survives under cultivation, the fact that its habitat is virtually extinct is shameful testimony to the ravages of human beings in the Hawaiian Islands.

—H. Douglas Pratt

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