

The Isle of Boobies

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Photographs by the Author



DOUTBLESS every lover of birds who has fallen under the spell of such charming books as Kearton's *Island of Penguins* or Lockley's *Shearwaters* has, like myself, formed the wish that he might make a long sojourn on some remote islet where sea fowl nest. With few exceptions, it is only on small, isolated islands that one finds fairly large birds breeding in great numbers in nests built on or near the ground, where they are easily approached and studied. Extensive land areas support so many predatory creatures that birds must conceal their nests singly in the woods and fields, or, if they breed in

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Sitting on its "nest" in the sharp-edged rock, a downy young booby intently eyes the camera.

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colonies, place these in high tree-tops, on forbidding cliffs, or in other situations difficult of access.

But my bird-watching long ago led me into the tropical mountains, where there is a far greater variety of birds than can be met on any islet, although their nests, hidden away amid the tall forests and dense thickets, are not easily found. Only twice have I had the good fortune to land upon the island homes of sea birds, and each time for a few hours only. Yet each visit was a memorable occasion, for on such an islet the enthusiast may crowd into a morning more bird-watching and more bird photography than falls to his share during any week in localities less densely populated by feathered creatures.

In March, standing upon the high northwestern point of Columbus Island off the northern coast of Panama, our negro guide pointed out Swan Cay, a high, dark mass rising above the blue waters of the Caribbean, and told us that the boobies had begun to lay their eggs upon it. But it was my first year in Central America, there were innumerable other things to occupy my attention, and it was the beginning of June before I could realize my long-standing desire to visit a breeding place of sea fowl.

At seven o'clock in the morning our launch left Bocas del Toro and turned westward along the northern or outer side of Columbus Island. As we rounded Norte Point, the isolated limestone mass of Swan Cay, rearing its head 180 feet above the sea, loomed before us like a grim, towering castle. Soon we

The whole surface of the Cay, save only vertical expanses of naked rock, was covered with luxuriant tropical vegetation. Downy white young boobies appear on the vine-clad rocks in the foreground.



could discern a smaller islet close beside it; and as our vessel drew nearer a third diminutive islet lifted its head above the horizon between the first two. Finally, as we chugged still nearer, it became evident that these three unequal islands were all parts of the same ragged mass of rock, joined together by low isthmuses, which, until then, had been concealed below the horizon. We dropped anchor in the lee of the Cay and went ashore in the skiff, which we pulled up on one of the few bits of sandy beach between the rocky walls that rose from the water's edge. As we stepped ashore, the air above us was filled with white-bellied boobies, *Sula leucogastra*, in mature and juvenal plumage, frigate birds, red-bellied tropic birds and gray-breasted martins, circling about in wonderment over this invasion of their island domain.

I began my exploration of the islet by climbing laboriously up to the top of the main pinnacle for a general survey. Among the lush vegetation clinging to the steep slopes was a big, shrubby nettle that blocked my way and stung my hands as I brushed past it. Reaching the flat, table-like summit, I found that it supported a scrap of lofty forest, so like that on the neighboring mainland that large pigeons nested here; and leaf-cutting ants traveled their well-worn trails, waving irregular pieces of green leaf like parasols above their backs. Through gaps in the high canopy of foliage, I caught occasional glimpses of the frigate birds, boobies and tropic birds that circled over the island. A few young boobies sat in their nests at the top of the seaward face of this high mass, but by far the greater number of them were to be found on the two lower, treeless rock masses that I overlooked. So I scrambled down again to visit the heart of the colony.

The coral limestone that formed these humps had weathered most irregularly, leaving sharp, angular projections with roughly pitted surfaces. The deep fissures in the rock were so completely screened by a great profusion of fleshy *Cissus* vines, which everywhere covered the surface, that I fell into several before I was aware of their presence. Rock crabs, of colors too varied to describe, in patterns of bewildering intricacy, scrambled over the cliffs among the nesting birds; and hermit crabs scuttled along in their borrowed shells. Crested basilisk

The boobies' white eggs lay in shallow depressions in the fractured and pitted limestone, or in a small circle of ground bare of vegetation. Rarely a few sticks had been placed around the "nest".



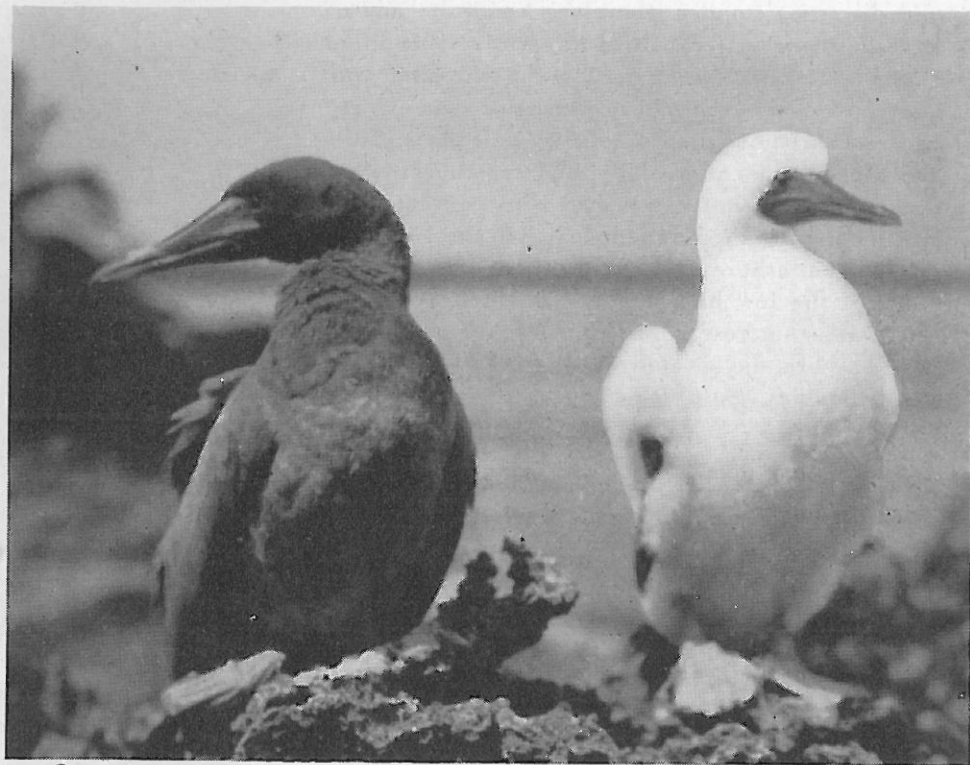
The first sign of the approaching maturity of the downy white nestling booby is the appearance of dark gray feathers on the shoulders, wings and tail.

lizards, whose long toes on the hind-feet enable them to run swiftly over the surface of the water in bipedal fashion, were abundant on the open parts of the islet. Coconut palms grew in the soil that had collected at the base of the principal rock mass, some of them rooted twenty feet above the sea; and these interested the boat crew while I gave attention to the birds.

The boobies nested in little, soil-filled depressions



Young boobies in neighboring nests differ greatly in color, but it is all a matter of age. The bird at the left is covered with dark feathers and almost ready to fly; the downy white youngster at the right is just beginning to acquire feathers. Usually nestlings fought if pushed too close together, but these two have apparently decided to ignore each other's existence.



in the rock, or merely on a level part of its surface. The nests were for the most part to be distinguished from the surrounding area chiefly by the absence of vegetation from the narrow circle where the parent birds sat. In some instances, a few sticks had been placed around the spot where the eggs were laid, but never enough of them to make anything that even by courtesy might be called a nest. Now, on the first of June, a single booby, who held a stick in its bill as I approached, incubated its solitary white egg, which rested on the bare earth. Another booby stood over two newly hatched young, and in its intentness in gazing at me stepped on them with broad, webbed feet, but apparently did them no harm. This was the only bird with two nestlings—although this species is said generally to lay two eggs in a set—and these were the only very young nestlings that I saw. At their tender age prolonged exposure to the sun might have been fatal, and their parent bravely stood its ground to shade them, while all the other adults circled around overhead or plunged arrow-like into the sea for fish, leaving their offspring unguarded. Since male and female boobies are much alike in appearance, I could not tell the sex of this devoted parent.

The half-grown boobies were covered with soft, thick, pure white down, which continued to cover them until they were nearly fullgrown. The bare skin at the base of their bills, in front of and below the eyes, was of a leaden color, and their feet were dirty yellow. Nestlings somewhat older had sprouted wing and tail plumes, which were dark gray and contrasted strongly with the white down that continued to clothe the body. Still older nestlings, who had acquired their plumage, were gray almost everywhere; but the gray was of a lighter shade on the lower breast and belly. White and dark gray nestlings in adjacent "nests" sparred at each other when they were driven too close together by my approach. Many of the dark gray young birds were already on the wing and circled

above the island in company with the adults, from which they differed chiefly in that their bellies were gray, while those of their parents were white.

Upon my approach to a nestling booby, it uttered loud, hoarse cries of alarm, and at the same time backed with spread wings to the farther side of the bare circle of ground that represented its nest. As I drew nearer, its cry grew louder, until, with bill opened to its utmost stretch, it delivered a continuous *ah-h-h-h*. It did not restrict itself to vain cries, but made vigorous attempts to defend itself, flapping its widespread wings and delivering spirited blows with its bill. It would attempt to bite my hand, my shoe, or anything else I presented to it. When one of the nestlings, in backing away from me, came too near another, it was greeted with pecks and bites, which is repaid in kind. This made me feel less like an intruder, for I perceived that I was treated exactly as another booby.

The red-billed tropic birds, *Phaëthon aethereus*, nested on ledges, and particularly in sheltered niches in the rocky cliffs. Many of the young were nearly fledged, and when taken in hand uttered deafening screams, at the same time attempting to inflict bites that it was wise to avoid, and struggling desperately to free themselves. "Feathered bulldogs," the British vice-consul, with whom I afterwards spoke at Bocas del Toro, called them. Before I was aware of what they were about, the boatmen had taken many young tropic birds from their nests and carried them to the landing place, where they created a deafening uproar. I commanded the men to return the fledglings to their homes. They were accordingly dispersed; but I was by no means sure that each (Continued on page 386)

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was taken to the niche whence it came, and regretted that I had become so deeply interested in the birds that I failed to keep a closer watch over the activities of my companions. It is unfortunate that, with the most innocent intentions, men so often upset the lives of their weaker neighbors!

I found one full-grown tropic bird sitting in a miniature cavern in a rocky outcrop. As I approached, it hissed and retreated deeper into the cavity of the rock. When I placed a hand beneath it, to learn by feeling whether it covered eggs or young, it made no attempt to strike, but continued its hissing expirations. When I attempted to lift it gently, it moved toward the mouth of the crevice and uttered a low cry. Then it disgorged three fish of moderate size that it had recently eaten, and flew off, leaving an empty nest.

I had wished to pass a night on the Cay, but had been informed that I should find no place to camp. Actually, I could have slept very well in the woods on top of the pinnacle, if I had only made arrangements to do so. Reluctantly, I tore myself away from the boobies and the tropic birds, and all the fascinating life of a coral islet. To one who finds delight in birds, a visit to a breeding colony of sea birds is one of the most satisfying of experiences.