



EX LIBRIS

by Sheldon Dingle

AVES HAWAIIENSES The Birds of the Sandwich Islands

A little investigation will prove to you that the aviculturists with the best collection of birds also have collections of plants and books. This phenomenon might make a good study for a doctoral dissertation in psychology but most of us don't care why birds, plants and books go together so well. We just enjoy the combination.

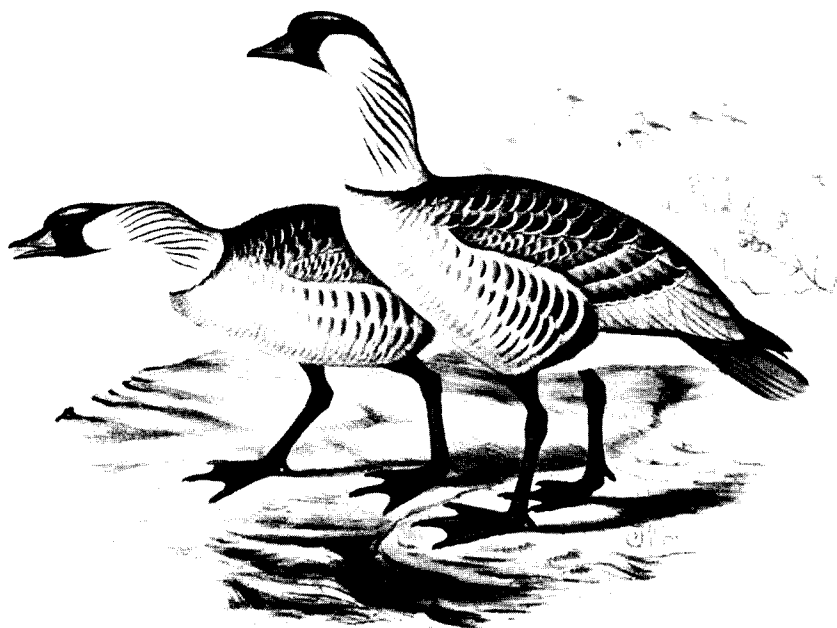
Another very happy union is that of birds within the covers of books. In the book trade in the field of natural history, bird books are by far the best sellers with humming birds being the most popular subject. After birds, flowers come next, and the animal kingdom in general makes a bad third.

Many of the older bird books contain beautifully hand colored plates. These books are especially sought after by the "book breakers" who remove the plates, frame them, and offer them for sale. I love the framed prints and have several Goulds adorning my walls but I still consider it a

crime of the highest order to destroy a book for any reason.

Just a couple of years ago a very fine old tome was happily snatched out of the hands of a would-be book breaker and shortly thereafter deposited in my own modest library. It happens that a diligent antiquarian book dealer keeps his eyes open for books that I want or that he thinks I want. One Sunday morning while at a large high-classed swap meet in the Rose Bowl, my man watched a fellow hauling an old book from one art dealer to another. The fellow was trying to sell the book for the color plates it contained. The book man way-laid the fellow, examined the volume, and instantly paid the price. He showed up on my doorstep late that very night and said he had something that I couldn't live without. He was right.

I paid his price, ushered him out and went directly to my catalogues to determine that actual market value of my



The Nene Goose (Branta sandvicensis), according to Wilson in 1886, "is clearly doomed to extinction before many years are past." Mr. Wilson was almost right. There were fewer than fifty of these birds alive in the late 1940's. Fortunately, careful conservation and captive breeding have increased the Nene population to about 750 in the wild and 1,250 in captivity.

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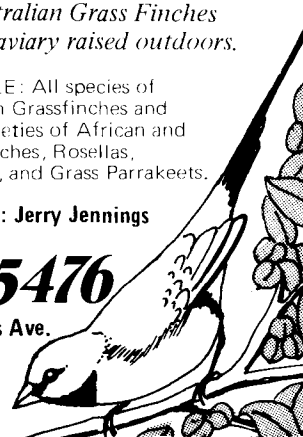
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newest. You probably know that in Europe there are several huge dealers who specialize in natural history books. They scour the world and gather all the pertinent books they can find. They publish catalogues listing all of their books, giving brief descriptions and prices.

After much searching, my book was finally found listed in a 1971 catalogue from London. In 1971 when a pound was a pound and a dollar was a dollar the book was listed at 800 pounds. Oh joy! Ecstasy! In addition to having a fine addition to my library, I had also made a very good bargain. So I couldn't pay my bills for a few months — nothing important was repossessed.

The main thing is that I have the book and the book breakers were thwarted. The old volume in question is called *Aves Hawaiienses, The Birds of the Sandwich Islands* by Scott B. Wilson, F.Z.S. and A.H. Evans, M.A., F.Z.S. It was funded

by private subscription and was published in eight separate issues from 1890 to 1899. The eight issues were finally bound together into the excellent old tome at hand.

The end result is a rather large book measuring 13 inches high by 11 inches wide and 2½ inches thick. It is quarter-bound with the boards and end-papers marbled in the typical Victorian style. The lettering and ornamentation on the spine is in gilt. The leaves are trimmed and gilt on the top only.

The text of the book is organized in a standard way beginning with a table of contents, a list of the plates, the preface, and the introduction. The remainder of the volume is devoted to the various species of birds found in the islands. The preface and introduction are written in a rather grand (if not stuffy) style typical of the scientists of the 19th century. There are many references to, at that time, well known authorities. The only name the average reader

will recognize is that of Captain Cook who discovered and named the islands.

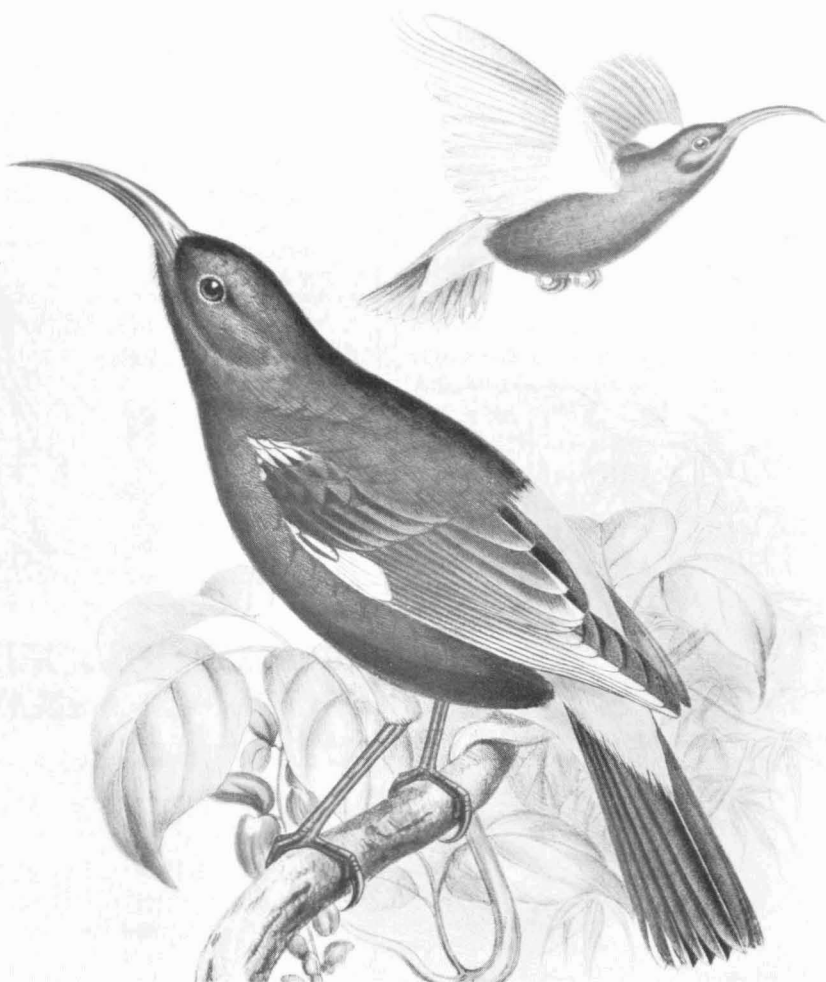
Much more interesting is the text associated with the individual species of birds. It becomes first person singular as the author describes his adventures collecting the bird specimens. In one case he says;

The O-O is esteemed a great delicacy by the natives, and used formerly to be eaten by them, fried in its own fat. I can vouch personally for its excellence, as one day, after bringing in a fine specimen from a collecting-expedition, I placed it carefully on a shelf to await my convenience; but at dinner the Chinese cook, Ah Lung, set down in front of me a small dish, containing my lovely prize! On remonstrances being addressed to him in no measured terms, he only smiled and said "Me thinkee all same Kolea (Plover)." However my host, Mr. Spencer, and I tasted it, and found it excellent.

The author tells other such anecdotes and adventures that are at times quite lively and interesting to most of the people who might read the book. On the other hand, much of the text deals with who first described a certain bird, how that person made a mistake in assigning a Latin name to the new species, which museum has a few specimens, which side of what mountain on which island the bird was seen by whom, etc., etc., etc. No doubt this information is valuable and very engaging to a few scientists and historians but most of us find it a bit tedious. The average reader will soon forego the text and get on to the beautiful color plates.

The color plates, of course, make the book. There are sixty-seven plates of which one is a map of the Sandwich Islands, and three are drawings of avian anatomy. The remaining sixty-three plates depict the various birds addressed in the text. Each plate is a separate page and is of very heavy paper. The birds are done in full color and are life size with the exception of two rather large hawks which are reduced to three-quarters size. Most of the birds have a small symbol near them to denote their sex. The plates were engraved, printed with some color and then finished by hand. The hand labor makes the plates unique and costly. Any bird or botanical book that has hand-colored plates is a rare find.

My inadequate command of the language makes it impossible to describe the beautiful birds and it has been said that one picture is worth a thousand words so I recommend, gentle reader, that you leave off reading and turn your attention to these accompanying pictures of some of the plates found in *Aves Hawaiienses*.



Of this species (*Drepanis pacifica*) the author was able to obtain only two specimens that had been collected about thirty years earlier. He felt that the bird was probably extinct but the natives said that it had merely migrated to the mountains. The natives used the deep yellow feathers found on the bird's rump and vent to make beautiful golden capes.

Color plate, page 35—It is easy to see why the (*Himatione sanguinea*) is commonly called the Crimson Creeper. Its principal food is flower honey and small insects it gleans as it creeps from flower to flower. The plate shows an adult male and two immature birds. When mature, both sexes have the rich crimson color with the female being only a slightly lighter shade.

