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STUBBORN GOONEY BIRDS BAFFLE BIOLOGISTS

The gooney birds of Midway may be stubborn and adverse to changing their habits, but they are not as looney as they have been portrayed.

This is the considered opinion of two Fish and Wildlife biologists who spent a month on Midway investigating hazards to military aircraft by the gooneys, that nest on this central Pacific atoll.

The gooneys, have been much maligned, states the report of Philip A. DuMont of Washington and Johnson A. Neff of the Service's Denver research laboratory.

The Fish and Wildlife experts were assigned to make the gooney bird study at the request of the Military Air Transport Service and to make recommendations for correcting hazards caused by the gooneys.

While the birds may do a few crazy things, such as sitting on a light bulb instead of an egg, the report declares that they do not perch on the wings of aircraft, nor do they fly out to meet planes and ride back on the wings.

Gooney birds, with their 7-pound bodies padded with feathers an inch thick, do not break windshields, either. Plane windshields, the report points out, can withstand the strike of a 15-pound bird at 100 m.p.h.

Actually, there is no record of a gooney bird causing a plane to crash or to be wrecked on Midway. In 1954, up to July, however, gooney birds, with their wingspread of seven feet, were credited with 10 plane strikes. Resulting damage required the replacement of propellers, wing flaps, and the repairing of leading edges of wings or stabilizers. Some of the repairs involving propeller changes amounted to thousands of dollars.

DuMont and Neff reached Midway on November 6 to start their investigations at the time the black-footed and Laysan albatrosses (gooney birds) were returning from their summer wanderings over the north Pacific to start their nesting. In the month they spent on Sand and Eastern Islands--the two islands of the Midway atoll--the biologists conducted experiments involving smoke, noise, audio receptiveness, and egg removal.

To their bafflement, the gooneys paid but little attention to such "discouragers" as daylight flares, smoke from a burning truck tire, and noise caused by the firing of mortars, bazookas, and rifles, or of plane operations. Intent on brooding their eggs, the gooney birds continued to sit right through all the noise. Some even slept.

Later, ultrahigh frequency tests were used in attempts to move the birds from the vicinity of the runways. Again their response was negative. No apparent reception on the part of either black-footed or Laysan albatrosses were registered above 3,000 cycles. "No birds left the area," was the terse entry made in the biologists' records.

On the brighter side of the ledger, DuMont and Neff reported that they were encouraged by the results of egg destruction and hope that after more detailed study, this will prove to be a practical measure of control.

In conducting this study, an area near the pistol and skeet range was set up with nests marked with numbered stakes, and 109 nests were placed under observation. Eggs from 106 nests were removed and destroyed. In the other three, a second egg was added by the biologists and the birds sat on both eggs throughout the experiment. For an average of four days following egg destruction, the birds continued to sit. After that, nest desertion was practically 100 percent complete.

At Frigate Point on November 23 about 130 black-footed albatrosses were marked with yellow enamel and 76 eggs removed. On December 4, 61 more eggs were destroyed. Bird numbers continued about the same. None of the marked birds was noted more than 100 yards from the original nesting area on the later date.

Subsequent counts disclosed only 53 marked birds on December 13, 41 on January 16 and 34 on January 29. Nine marked birds had moved about 200 yards. One bird had moved nearly a mile northeast to the bazooka range and was in the act of "dancing." "We are encouraged to believe that old and well-established nesting groups such as this one at Frigate Point might be broken up and partially scattered," the report states. Studies of these marked birds will be continued by Navy personnel on Sand Island.

Several birds were dissected and upon examination the biologists concluded that laying a second egg was most unlikely, or at least would be long delayed.

The Service biologists estimated the albatross populations on Midway atoll were only about one-fourth of the count made in December 1946 by Dr. Harvey I. Fisher of the University of Illinois. At that time Dr. Fisher estimated that there were 145,000 Laysan albatrosses and 69,000 black-footed albatrosses on both islands. The count and estimate made by DuMont and Neff was 57,300 birds.

A total of 172 black-footed and 77 Laysan albatrosses banded previously by others, and reexamined by the Service biologists, indicated that these birds return year after year to the same spot. Many had been banded at least 10 years ago and seven found at Gooneyville Lodge carried bands with a 16-year old date. Not a single banded bird was observed on Eastern Island which suggests that the birds do not move from one island to the other. About 400 other gooneys are now wearing new bands, 75 of them on Eastern Island.

Contrary to previously expressed beliefs, DuMont and Neff found that damage to aircraft is not caused particularly by birds nesting along the runways but rather by birds in the air below 200 feet.

No efforts were made by the Service biologists to destroy the albatrosses nor did they recommend such a program. In fact, they encountered a surprisingly strong sentiment on the part of Navy personnel on Sand Island in defense of "their gooney birds."

The entertainment provided by the gooneys for seamen and their families has a high rating as a morale-building factor. The dance performed by the gooneys, both before and after courtship, always draws a large audience. The precision of this dance, engaged in by two or more birds, might be compared to a minuet. It includes much bowing, with spread wings, bill rattling, and neck stretching, accompanied by a calf-like "ahhhing." This dancing goes on throughout the day and continues long after the young are hatched. On an island only two miles square, situated in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, Navy personnel appreciate the excellent shows put on by the birds.

As an aid in preventing damage to aircraft, DuMont and Neff endorsed certain operating hours and procedures for pilots to use. Also, continued adherence to the practice followed by most planes in using a "short-field takeoff will materially reduce the risk to aircraft using Midway. The short run and rapid climb with flaps lowered quickly take a plane above the 200-foot danger zone.

The Service biologists concluded their report with a statement that they considered their study had been worthwhile, particularly in that it had exploded a lot of misinformation and had reduced the problem to certain basic facts.

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