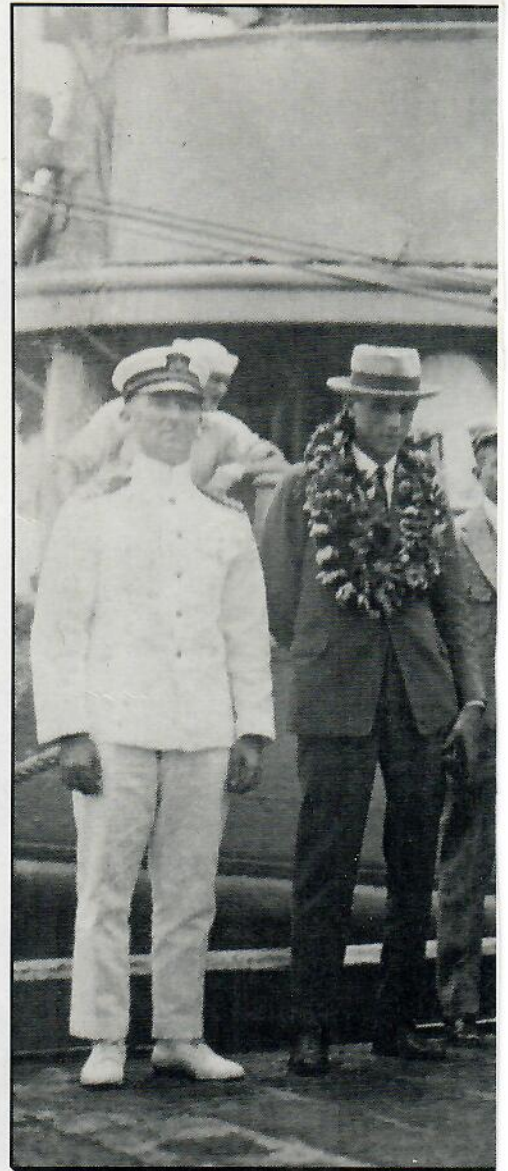
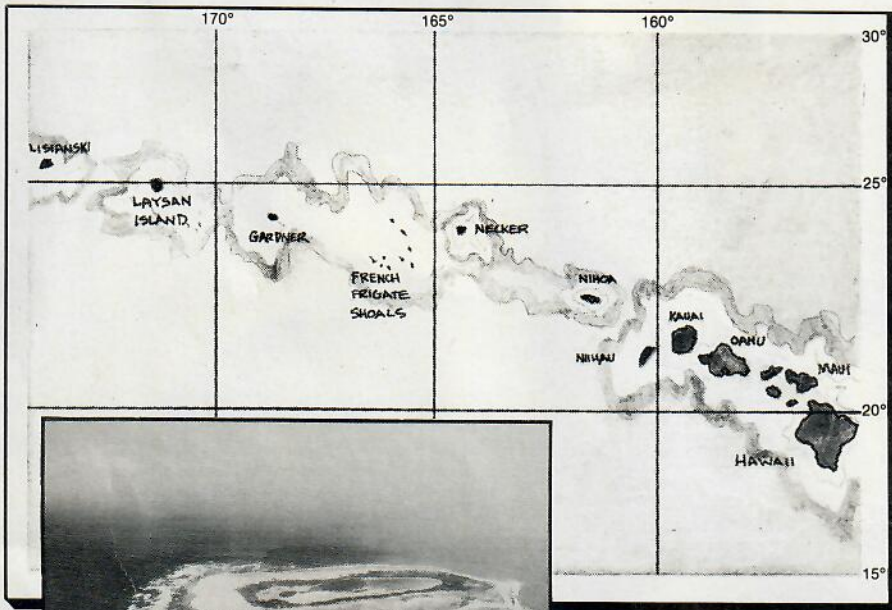


The Life, Death and Rebirth *of an* ISLAND

By Victor Lipman

Laysan Island, in the northwestern reaches of the Hawaiian archipelago, has undergone some strange and radical changes in the last 100 years



On May, 1, 1857, Capt. John Paty of the schooner *Manuokawai* landed at Laysan Island to annex it to the Hawaiian kingdom. He found a small island, about 2 miles long, covered with beach grass, shrubbery and a few palm trees, with a lagoon in the middle. But the main thing he noticed was birds: The island was "literally covered" with them. "The birds were so tame and plentiful," Paty wrote, "that it was difficult to walk about the island without stepping upon them."

Sixty-six years later, on April 8, 1923, the Tanager Expedition landed at Laysan Island. The expedition was made up mostly of scientists and naturalists who surveyed the island and examined its wildlife. They found a much different island from the one Capt. Paty had visited.

Opposite page, top: A map showing the location of Laysan Island. The nearest land, Lisiansky Island, is 115 miles away.

Opposite page, inset: An aerial view of Laysan today. Note that the vegetation has returned.

Opposite page, bottom: In 1923 Laysan was a virtual desert. In the distance is the camp of the Tanager Expedition, and two palm trees.

Below: Members of the Tanager Expedition pose in front of the USS Tanager. The man third from the right is Max Schlemmer.



There was still a lagoon in the middle, but there were far fewer birds. And the vegetation was gone. The once-green island had become a desert.

Today, on the surface, Laysan Island looks much as it did more than 100 years ago. It has grass once again and abundant birdlife. But the island is not quite the same as it was either. Gone forever from Laysan are three species of birds—the Laysan rail, the Laysan millerbird and the Laysan honeycreeper—that were found nowhere else in the world. Gone also are several species of plants that were found only on Laysan.

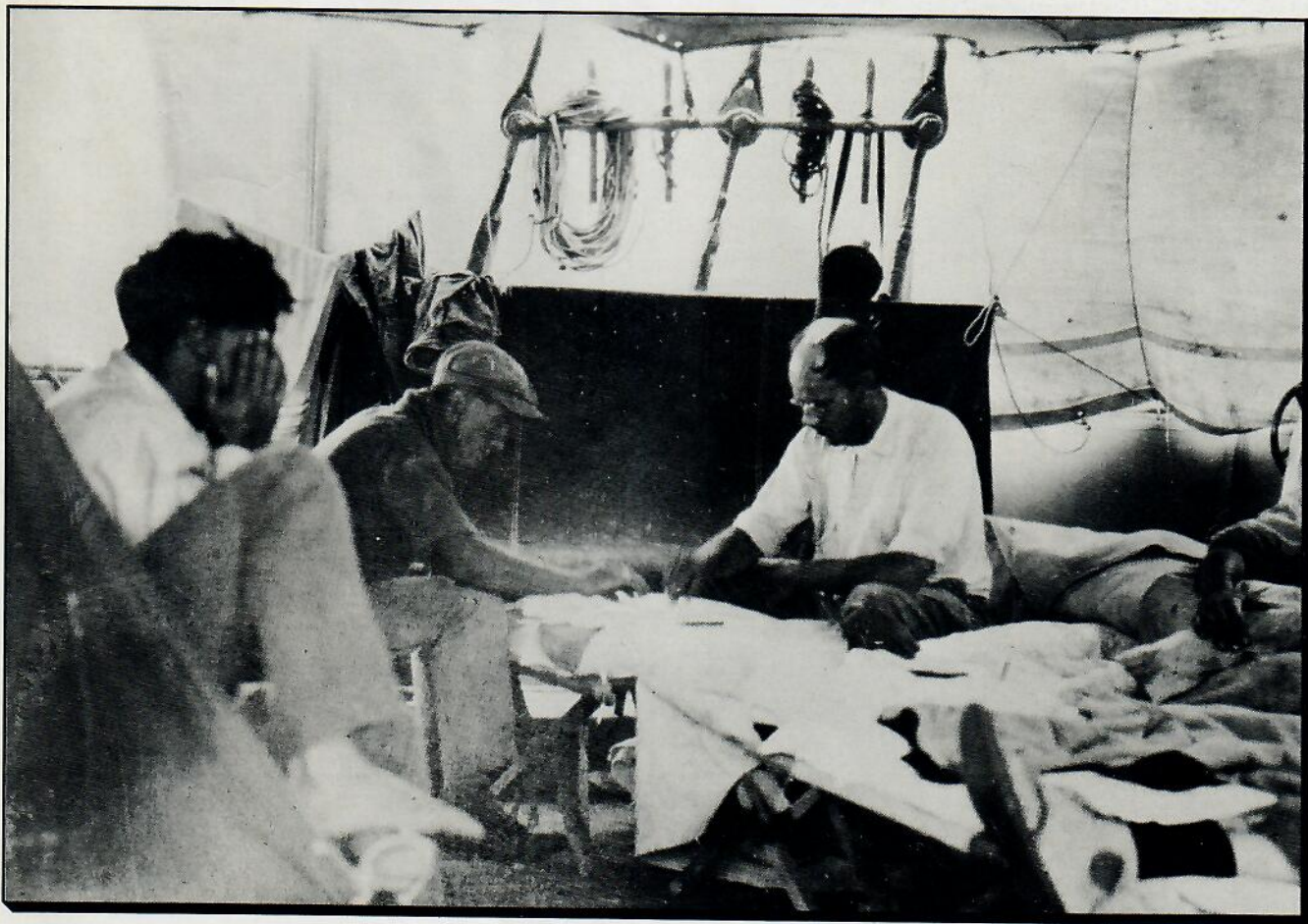
Located in the northwestern reaches of the Hawaiian archipelago, Laysan Island is near nothing in particular. Gardner Pinnacles lies 202 miles to the east and Lisiansky Island is 115 miles west; Honolulu is 709 miles to the southeast. No humans live on Laysan now, just as no humans lived on it for most of its thousands of

years of existence. But for about 25 years—from 1890 to 1915—it was inhabited, and what happened during those years makes an unusual story involving guano mining, feather poaching, murder and rabbits. Oddly enough, it was the rabbits that nearly brought about the ruin of the island.

It's generally believed that Laysan Island was discovered early in the 19th century by an American ship, but details are unavailable. The earliest recorded visit took place in 1828 by the Russian ship *Moller*. Unaware that the island had already been discovered and called Laysan, the Russian captain named the island "Moller." It is unclear where the name Laysan comes from.

The story of Laysan Island, at least insofar as its story concerns man, and not just the ceaseless and unchanging rhythms of the natural world, is a classic example of the fragility of the

As a young man of 20, Eric Schlemmer (center) returned to Laysan Island as an assistant on the Tanager Expedition.



“... The caretaker was found dead. He was still seated at the table where he had been working on his journal...”

BORN ON LAYSAN ISLAND

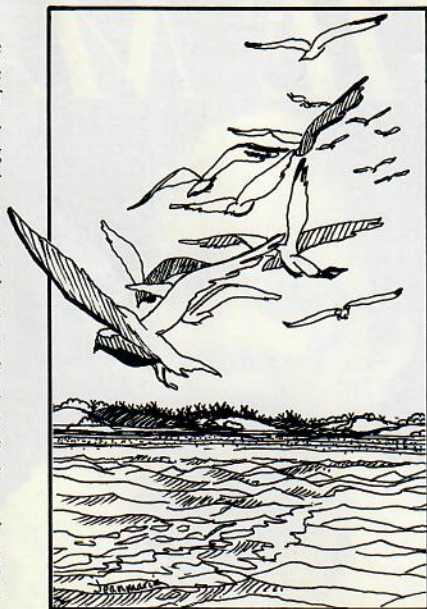
Eric Schlemmer may well be the only person in the world whose middle name is Laysan. The son of Max Schlemmer (the owner of Laysan's turn-of-the-century guano mining operation), Eric Laysan Schlemmer was born on Laysan Island in 1903. Today, at 81, he lives in Honolulu.

Eric spent his first five years on Laysan with his mother, father, brother and sisters, plus the Japanese laborers who worked mining the guano. He has fond memories of the 1.4-square-mile island. "During the day we'd run around a lot and play, and go swimming down at the beach," he says. "It was right in front of the house."

Despite Laysan's isolation (the nearest island, Lisiansky, uninhabited, is 115 miles to the west), Schlemmer remembers that it was not a lonely place to grow up. "When you live in a place like that," he says, "there's so much life around you that there's always something attracting your eye or ear. My mother used to tell me that when I was a youngster I'd go out and pet the gooney birds and they would never bite me. If somebody else would get near them, they'd chase him away."

Eric's father, Max, is probably best known as the man who introduced rabbits to Laysan Island, which caused the destruction of the vegetation there. Although some environmentalists have judged Max Schlemmer harshly, since the end-result of the rabbit introduction was the extinction of three bird species—the Laysan rail, Laysan millerbird and Laysan honeycreeper—Eric maintains that his father was not totally to blame. "Dad had to leave the island [in 1909] when Teddy Roosevelt put the islands under bird reservation," he says. "The lease was broken so we had to move out in a hurry. The thing is, if we didn't have to move out so fast we could have had control of the rabbits."

Unfortunately, Max Schlemmer's plans for Laysan Island rarely worked out the way he intended them to. He had taken a liking to Laysan the first time he visited it. He worked as a manager and then owner of the guano company, but his plans to turn the island into a coconut plantation after guano supplies were depleted never bore fruit. In 1910 he was tried (and acquitted) for allowing feather poachers to use the island. Eventually he gave up trying to live on Laysan and



"When I was a youngster," recalls Eric Schlemmer, "I'd go out and pet the gooney birds and they would never bite me."

became a custodian for American Factors in Honolulu.

Although Max Schlemmer died nearly 50 years ago, a painting of him as a handsome young man still hangs in his son's den. In it Max is wearing a policeman's uniform and his gaze is direct, calm and authoritative. With respect to Laysan Island he was something of a visionary—but his vision never seemed to come into perfectly clear focus.

Eric, who ended up working many years as a superintendent for Hawaiian Electric, returned to Laysan with wildlife researchers in 1971—the first time in 48 years he had been there. He noticed that although greenery had indeed returned to Laysan, the vegetation was quite different from what it had been before the island was stripped bare by rabbits. "The foliage is not the same," Schlemmer says. "I'm afraid they've got all kinds of rubbish out there now. They have some burrs that get on the young birds and get all over their down, and they sometimes have a hard time walking."

Still, despite his father's mixed experiences on Laysan, and despite the changes that have come to it, Eric Schlemmer's memories of the island have not been diminished by the years. "It was a wonderful place to grow up," he says. "If I'd never left the island, I'd have been satisfied all my life, I guess."
—V.L.

environment and the disastrous consequences that man—even unintentionally—can have upon it. The chain of events that eventually would almost ruin Laysan Island were set in motion innocently in 1890 when an Englishman named George Freeth convinced the Honolulu firm of Hackfeld and Co. (a forerunner of Amfac) to finance a guano mining operation on Laysan. Guano, the accumulated bird droppings of centuries, was valued as fertilizer. The company was named the North Pacific Phosphate and Fertilizer Co.

When some of the members of the company visited Laysan in July 1890 to examine the guano deposits, one of the people in the party, a Mr. A.B. Lyons, made some observations of the trip. Approaching Laysan from the ocean, Lyons noted, "there rests over the land perpetually a cloud of sea fowl, and these you can see at a glance hold undisputed possession of the island..."

"The soil of the island consists of a peculiar kind of white sand, made up partly of fragments of sea shells, but largely of bits of egg shells and the bones of sea birds. A rough calculation puts the bird population of the island at about 800,000; it may reach 1,000,000. They have not yet learned to fear man excessively, and are in fact no more shy than barn door fowl, so that it is very easy to study their habits."

In short, Laysan Island was an ornithologist's dream. Birds were everywhere: in the sky, on the ground—their bones were even mingled with the sand.

According to the *Atoll Research Bulletin, The Natural History of Laysan Island*, written by Charles Ely and Roger Clapp and published by the Smithsonian Institution, the guano mining operation proceeded like this: "Laborers mined the guano, consisting mostly of a hard, conglomerated, phosphate of lime, with picks, crowbars, shovels, and sledges. This material was placed on cars on a narrow gauge railway and pulled by mules to storage sheds where the guano was kept until a ship arrived."

In return for the rights to mine Laysan Island's guano, the North Pacific Phosphate and Fertilizer Co. agreed to pay a royalty of 50 cents per ton to the Hawaiian government. In April 1891 the first shipment of

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Laysan Island

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guano, 80 tons that sold for \$15 a ton, was removed from the island. In 1894 the company's name was changed to the Pacific Guano and Fertilizer Co. And in 1896 a man named Max Schlemmer became superintendent of operations on Laysan. This is an important name: For years to come Max Schlemmer (see page 89) would be virtually synonymous with events of Laysan Island.

Another name associated with Laysan Island is Kosten. (Actually, the exact spelling of the name is unknown, but Kosten is thought to be a close approximation.) Kosten was a caretaker of Laysan Island. Since guano was shipped from Laysan only during spring and summer, each winter a caretaker was left on the island to watch over the company's facilities. It must have been a strange, solitary way to spend six or seven months. At any rate, when the island was revisited in the spring of 1904, Kosten the caretaker was found dead. He was still seated at the table where he had been working on his journal.

Labor unrest in the guano mining era was felt on Laysan Island, just as it was on Hawaii's plantations. Probably the most noteworthy incident took place in August 1900, when a confrontation between labor and management resulted in a shooting that left two workers dead and three injured.

A newspaper account of the incident in the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* gave a markedly sensational version of events. Its headline was "Laysan Island's Story of Blood." The article began this way: "War has been declared, waged, and ended on Laysan Island... four against forty—those were the odds, four white men fighting desperately against forty infuriated Japanese. And the white men conquered."

Without going into the reasons for the confrontation, the article depicted the Japanese laborers as "determined to annihilate all the white people and run things to suit themselves." It said the Japanese were armed with "knives, clubs, stones, and cutlasses made of hoop iron sharpened." It said they charged the white men, who then fired into the crowd: "Though they moved quickly, Capt. Spencer's trig-

ger fingers moved quicker. Eight times his revolver spoke to the point. Pistols in the hands of the other white men also had something to say." After the shooting, both sides retreated to their quarters. The next day the Japanese laborers were rounded up at gunpoint, put aboard a ship and taken to Honolulu.

This newspaper article probably says more about race relations at the turn of the century than it does about actual events on Laysan Island. Eventually, Capt. Spencer, the guano mine manager, was tried in Honolulu for murder. After a 10-day trial with much conflicting testimony, all charges against him were dropped.

It may never be known what really happened that day on Laysan Island. It seems the Japanese laborers were making demands for more food and higher pay, and the situation possibly was aggravated by the fact that the interpreter—the only person who spoke both English and Japanese—had recently been demoted from luna to common laborer. There was a confrontation; some workers did press forward (it is unclear whether they were armed); shots were fired, men were killed. Regardless of who was to blame, the incident comprises an obscure chapter in the history of Hawaii's labor and race relations.

By 1904 most of the guano on Laysan Island was gone, and the Pacific Guano and Fertilizer Co. sold everything on the island "excepting houses" to Max Schlemmer for \$1,750. Schlemmer hoped to continue to live on Laysan, plant a thousand coconut trees a year and make a coconut plantation out of the island. Meanwhile, a little guano mining was still being done.

It was around this time that Schlemmer brought rabbits to Laysan. The rabbits were mainly a food source for Schlemmer, his family and his workers. There had never been rabbits on the island before, and they encountered no natural enemies. There is also speculation that Schlemmer, who was something of an entrepreneur, planned to can or smoke the rabbits and sell them in Honolulu.

Whatever the reasons for introducing the rabbits, the results were disastrous. As time went on, the rabbits began to run freely over the island, multiplying rapidly and consuming vegetation. As Rob Shallen-



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berger, a refuge manager for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, explains, the pattern is not an uncommon one. "Rabbits have been introduced all over the world," he says, "that same species. And every time they are, there's always some idea about the potential for the commercial value of it. But with virtually every introduction the rabbits tend to explode, eat themselves out of house and home and kill themselves off."

On Laysan Island, the rabbits didn't kill themselves off quickly. They continued to eat the grass and shrubbery for around 20 years. By then they had almost transformed Laysan into a new and different island.

As the rabbits were slowly eating their way into oblivion, events involving humans on Laysan were taking place as well. In December 1908 Max Schlemmer entered into an agreement with a Japanese man named Genkichi Yamanouchi to remove and sell phosphate, guano and "products of whatever nature" from Laysan Island. By now the island's guano deposits were nearly gone, and the hoped-for coconut plantation had not materialized either. So the "products of whatever nature" were birds' feathers, a highly marketable item in the millinery trade—the women's hat business. In return for allowing the Japanese to use the island, Schlemmer would receive \$150 a month in gold.

Unfortunately for Schlemmer, an executive order from President Theodore Roosevelt on Feb. 3, 1909, had set aside much of the Leeward Islands as a protected bird reserve. Thus the Japanese feather gatherers were feather poachers. When rumors filtered back to Honolulu that poachers were raiding the northwestern Hawaiian islands, a U.S. ship was sent to the area.

In January 1910 investigators arrived at Laysan to find 15 Japanese on the island and many dead birds on the beaches. The old guano mining buildings were being used as storehouses for more than 2 tons of feathers and 300,000 birds' wings—materials worth around \$130,000.

The Japanese were arrested and returned to Honolulu. Max Schlemmer was charged with poaching on a federal bird reservation and with two counts of illegally importing contract laborers. One of the Japanese was

also charged. Eventually, however, Schlemmer was tried and found not guilty, and the feather gatherers were given free passage back to Japan.

Max Schlemmer and Laysan Island were still not through with each other; one final adventure remained. This one took place five years later and *The Natural History of Laysan Island* recounts the story this way: "Despite his earlier financial and legal difficulties over Laysan, Max Schlemmer had by no means

"... In January 1910 investigators arrived at Laysan to find 15 Japanese on the island and many dead birds on the beaches..."

given up his desire to live there. Early in 1915 he applied for a position as permanent warden of the Hawaiian Islands Reservation, stipulating that he wished to reside on Laysan with his two sons, a daughter, and two assistants."

No such job was ever created for him, but Schlemmer ended up going to Laysan anyway in July 1915 with his son Eric, then 12, and a young sailor named Harold Brandt. Life passed uneventfully on Laysan until one September afternoon when a schooner was sighted nearby. It turned out that the boat, with a captain and crew of nine, was on its way to San Francisco but had been damaged on a reef. Schlemmer generously offered the stranded crew the use of his yacht *Helene* to sail to Midway—leaving himself and the two boys on the island with no way to get off it.

A month passed with no sign of any return vessel. Schlemmer's diary reflects their plight: "Nov. 4—This day we had great hopes of seeing the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Thetis* arrive but all in vain. We have a pretty hard time of it and we have to live on water and flour only for the last two weeks.* This is pretty tough on the boys, but as for myself, I keep up good courage and hope for the best."

*Eric Schlemmer recalls that they also ate fish and rabbits.

"Dec. 1—It is becoming very hard on the boys' nerves as they are not used to this kind of living we have had here for the past three months. It takes all I can do to keep up their courage. I told them, however, not to be discouraged and that they should pray to God...so they said their prayers."

A day later a ship came for them. It turned out *Helene* had been wrecked at Midway in a storm, so the U.S.S. *Nereus* had been sent by the Department of Agriculture. Five days later Schlemmer and the boys were back in Honolulu. But even this trip was not without incident. This was 1915—wartime—and Max Schlemmer, who had been born in Germany, was accused by authorities of being a German spy and using Laysan Island for espionage purposes. It was an unfounded accusation but it hurt Schlemmer, who was proud of being an American. "That damn near broke his heart," recalls his son Eric. "He never wanted to go back to the sea again after that."

Between 1915 and 1923 times were quiet on Laysan. There was no more guano mining, no more dreams of coconut plantations, no more attempts to live there; the island lay as isolated and forgotten as it had been for nearly all of its existence. But now the rabbits were running wild; and it was during these years that their destructiveness reached its height.

The Tanager Expedition arrived at Laysan in April 1923 and found two coconut trees and three bushes near the old guano mining houses, but otherwise the island was a sandy wasteland. Sea birds, such as terns, boobies and shearwaters, were still around, but for three of Laysan's five rare land bird species, it was too late. Sometime between 1915 and 1923 the Laysan millerbird, a friendly, fearless bird that relied on "millers"—a type of moth—for food, had become extinct. And members of the Tanager Expedition found only two Laysan rails, a flightless bird that had once been plentiful on the island, and three Laysan honeycreepers.

A sandstorm finished them.

From April 23 to 27, during a harsh four-day gale that sent sand swirling across the island, the last three Laysan honeycreepers passed out of existence. It was perhaps the only time in history that man has


been present to document precisely the time and place of an extinction. The two Laysan rails also died in the storm, but the species was not yet extinct, since it had earlier been introduced to Midway. Unfortunately, rats were later introduced to Midway, which resulted in the Laysan rail's extinction in 1944. Laysan's two other endemic bird species, the Laysan teal and the Laysan finch, have survived to this day.

Before leaving Laysan, the members of the Tanager Expedition killed the remaining rabbits with poison, rifles and stones. In a sense, the siege of Laysan Island was over.

In the years that followed, vegetation returned to Laysan. The island was visited once in a while by survey parties and wildlife researchers, but it was protected by federal law and the days of commercial ventures there were over. Today the island has no buildings on it, just the remnants of railroad tracks that used to carry the cars of guano, and a few crosses to mark old graves. And the island is green once again.

Has Laysan Island recovered? "Recovered," says Rob Shallenberger of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, "is not the correct word for it. It's certainly fully vegetated. But the rats almost certainly caused the extinction of some endemic plants that were found only on Laysan. So what you've got now is different from what you had before."

Sea birds abound there now. The island's estimated breeding population is just under a million pairs, or two million birds. Yet the three lost bird species can never return. Would they probably still survive if rabbits had not been introduced? "Absolutely," Shallenberger says. "There's no reason to expect the habitat would have changed. It was clearly a habitat-related problem. There have never been any other rodents or predators on the island. The extinct species were tied to the vegetation, either for nectar, for insects, for cover or for nest sites and so on."

Guano mining. Feather poaching. Murder. Rabbits. Extinctions. A lovely tropical island becomes denuded and then recovers. Sort of. If there's a moral to the strange story of Laysan Island, maybe it's this: In the face of all sorts of unforeseen obstacles, life endures, but we often lose a few things along the way. 

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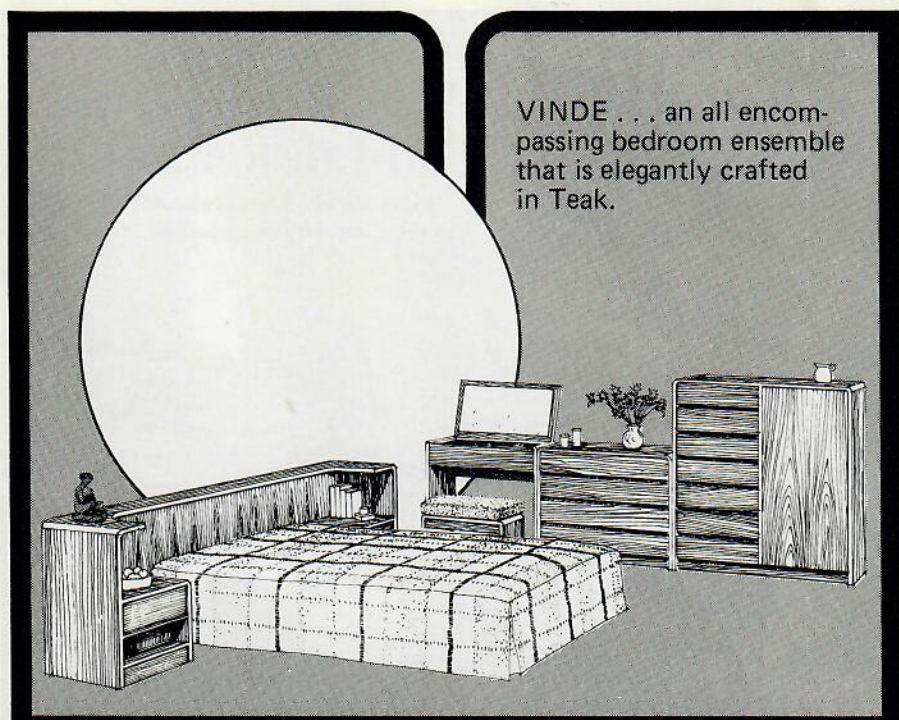
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