

Elephant Seal, Eagle Come from Far Away

*Unique Visitors Arrive by Air, by Sea*

By Helen Altonn  
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Two unique creatures recently turned up in the Hawaiian Island chain — one traveling at least 3,500 miles by sea and another arriving by air, possibly from the Siberia region.

They are an elephant seal, discovered on Midway, and a sea eagle which apparently was blown onto Kure Atoll by a storm.

Hawaii has native monk seals but the elephant seal is the first identified in the Hawaiian Islands since 1825, said George H. Balazs, University of Hawaii research biologist.

A golden eagle was spotted flying over Kauai in 1967 and was reported still soaring there in 1976. But no sea eagles have been sighted in Hawaii until now.

BALAZS IS AN authority on turtles and has been conducting a three-year survey of the turtle population in Hawaiian waters, including the remote Leeward chain.

He happened to be on Midway last month for his research project and was told a seal had come up on the beach.

He said it's very rare to see any seal on the Navy-occupied island, but this one stayed 10 days.

It was thought at first to be a monk seal, but Balazs saw that it was an immigrant elephant seal when Gary Means, honorary game warden on Midway, took him to look at it.

Balazs said an early sailing explorer reported seeing "sea elephants and sea leopards" at Pearl and Hermes Reef and Kure Island in the last century "but most people thought it was a mistake or misidentification . . . .

"WITH THIS report (of the Midway seal) I wonder if he did make a mistake?" Balazs said.

He said elephant seals don't get their name because of their size, although males can get up to a couple tons. The name comes from their upper nose, which gets very long and curls over, he explained.

"But the female doesn't get near that big and doesn't have that nose," Balazs said.

The Midway seal was a northern species, which breed in the Channel Islands off California and at Guada-

lupe off Baja, Calif.

She was a young female and appeared in good shape, although she had some superficial wounds, Balazs said. "She was sleeping on the beach most of the time there. She seemed to be exhausted and was getting a long sleep."

HE SAID THE seal had a tag with numbers on it and he called John Naughton, biologist with the National Marine Fisheries Service in Honolulu, in hopes of finding out where it had originated.

Naughton checked with the Northwest Fisheries Center in Seattle and learned the seal had been tagged by the center's biologists at San Miguel Island in February 1977.

Their reaction was, "Oh, wow!" Naughton said.

"The only strays they have gotten from tag returns have been off the Aleutians . . . . But this was a young female (on Midway) — maybe they are more adventuresome," he said.

He said elephant seals at one time may have ranged throughout the Pacific. "They were very docile and could have been exterminated rapidly."

ELEPHANT SEALS were slaughtered for oil in the 1800s and their population fell to as few as 20 animals.

But Naughton said the population has been growing under federal protection and the animals may be ranging to their original islands.

"It would be extremely interesting if it (the Midway seal) gets back to its rookery (at San Miguel). It would be an indication she knew what she was doing, and wasn't just lost," he said.

Just before leaving for Midway, Balazs received a call from the commander of the Coast Guard Loran Station on Kure with the startling information that "an eagle took up residency there in early February."

So he went on to Kure from Midway to get a look at it and continue his work on turtles.

HE CAME HOME and went to the books to try and identify the eagle. He believes it's an immature Steller's sea eagle, which breeds on the coastal area of the Bering and Okhotsk Seas and in Kamchatka in Siberia, and is distinguished by a yellow bill.

He said the Kure visitor has a prominent yellow beak and yellow, featherless legs.

He said it was probably blown off track during a storm because Coast Guard officials said it was soggy and beat up when it landed on Kure.

But he said it appears to have recovered nicely from its harrowing journey — and is feasting on gooney birds (black-footed and Laysan albatrosses).

"IT'S ALMOST like an eagle paradise for him," Balazs commented. He said thousands of gooneys are on Kure now breeding and raising their young.

"If the eagle stays alive during the next six months or so, somebody ought to think seriously about what's going on," he said, questioning the effects of the eagle's diet on the gooney bird population.

Kure Atoll is part of the City-County of Honolulu and technically under the jurisdiction of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources.

Balazs reported the eagle to Ron Walker, state wildlife chief, and will provide him with information and photographs so he can try to identify it positively.

Adding to the excitement of the elephant seal and eagle, Balazs cap-

tured six green turtles on Midway and nine on Kure, and in each batch was a turtle which had been tagged in his research to monitor their travels and growth rate.

"I was very fortunate," he said.

His research is funded by the state marine affairs coordinator and the National Sea Grant Program.



**HAWAII'S NEW RESIDENT**—A sea eagle has comfortably settled on Kure Atoll, dining on the gooney birds. —Photos by George Balazs.



**VISITOR FROM AFAR**—An elephant seal snoozes on the beach at Midway after wandering from its colony at San Miguel Island off California.

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