

## A STELLER'S SEA EAGLE AT KURE AND MIDWAY: FIRST HAWAII RECORD

by

George H. Balazs and C. John Ralph

We report here the first observation of the Steller's Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) in the Hawaiian Archipelago. The only eagle previously recorded in Hawaii is a Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) still present on Kauai after being first reported by G. Swedberg (Ching 1967). The Steller's Sea Eagle is an Asiatic bird rarely reported in Alaska, and then only in the Aleutian area (AOU 1957, Murie 1959). It breeds in coastal Siberia south to North Korea. In the winter, it has been recorded (Brown and Amadon 1968) as far west as Peking, China, and south to the Ryu Kyu Islands, just south of Japan's main islands, and at the same latitude as Kure. This record is thus equal to the southernmost record of the species known to us.

On February 14, 1978, one of us (GHB) was informed by LTJG Bailey, Commanding Officer of the U. S. Coast Guard Loran Station at Kure Atoll (28°25'N, 178°20'W), that an exhausted eagle with water-soaked feathers had taken up residence on Green Island at Kure early in the month, after a period of strong northerly winds and heavy rain.

On February 17, GHB made a one-day visit to Kure in conjunction with field studies of Hawaiian green turtles (*Chelonia mydas*). At that time, he observed the eagle as close as 50 m while it was roosting on the beach and again in a large *Messerschmidia* tree. The bird was too wary to allow a closer approach. The remains of a freshly consumed adult Black-footed Albatross (*Diomedea nigripes*) and an adult Laysan Albatross (*D. immutabilis*) (both banded) were nearby. Coast Guard personnel had seen the eagle attack and subsequently eat an unidentified albatross. This, not surprisingly, is the first record of the species eating albatross, although the species is well known to eat birds as large as geese (Brown and Amadon 1968).

Between February 24 and March 2, while GHB was again at Kure, the eagle was observed daily. During this period it perched in a number of widely separated locations, including the *Casuarina* trees by the Coast Guard quarters, the cleared areas of the antenna field, the emergent coral rock a short distance off the island's south point,

and the eastern end of the runway, where freshwater pools frequently collect after rainshowers. During the afternoon of March 1, it perched on top of a 21 m high radar reflector near the west beach. Between 1000-1500 h of the same day a monk seal pup was born in this area; possibly the event served as an attractant to the eagle.

On one occasion the eagle was observed being moderately harassed by four frigatebirds (*Fregata minor*) while flying.

Although it was not possible to approach the eagle closely on foot, several close-up photographs (Figs. 1 and 2) were obtained using a 250 mm lens from a pick-up truck.



Fig. 1. Steller's Sea Eagle on the runway at Kure Atoll, Hawaii, February 1978.

Photo by George H. Balazs

On March 21, 1978, an eagle of similar appearance was reported by Gary Means on Sand Island at Midway, approximately 115 km east-southeast of Kure. This coincided with the absence of any further observations of the eagle at Kure. Nancy Butowski-Casey reported that the bird moved periodically between Midway's inhabited Sand Island and the uninhabited Eastern Island. Occasional sightings at Midway continued until the middle of May, when the bird apparently disappeared.

The bird (Figs. 1 and 2) had a very large, light-colored bill, dark brown head and back, a mottled lightish, wedge-shaped tail, and a distinctively patterned (Brown and Amadon 1968) underwing. The Steller's Sea Eagle is distinguishable from: (1) the young Bald Eagle (*H. leucocephalus*), which has a rounded tail and largely lacks the patterned underwing; (2) and the young



Fig. 2. Steller's Sea Eagle in flight, with Black-footed Albatross above. Kure Atoll, Hawaii, February 1978.

Photo by George H. Balazs

White-tailed Sea Eagle (also known as the Gray Sea Eagle) (*H. albicilla*), which has a smaller bill, a mottled, light brown head and breast, and lacks the underwing pattern. Roger Clapp and Roxy Laybourne, U. S. National Museum, confirmed the identification from the photographs (Figs. 1 and 2).

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University of Hawaii  
Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology  
P. O. Box 1346  
Kaneohe, Hawaii 96744

USDA, Forest Service  
Institute of Pacific Islands  
Forestry  
1151 Punchbowl Street  
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

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The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands -- April 10  
Speaker: George Balazs

George is well-known in Hawaii for his work on the ecology and conservation of marine turtles. He has visited the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands many times observing and photographing the animals living there. His photographs appear on this year's Dillingham Tide Calendar.

Hawaii's Native Land Invertebrates -- April 24  
Speaker: William P. Mull

Mr. Mull is an accomplished naturalist and nature photographer. His lecture will include the evolution and ecology of Hawaii's native land snails, spiders and insects illustrated with live color photos.

Reptiles and Amphibians of the Hawaiian Islands--May 8

Speaker: Sean McKeown

Sean is Supervising Herpetologist at the Honolulu Zoo, and author of Hawaiian Reptiles and Amphibians which will be available March 1979. He will discuss the natural history of terrestrial, freshwater and marine reptiles and amphibians of Hawaii and his photographic techniques.