

Turtles and Seals

Find a Home



gious structures had been destroyed by bombs.

Emory said he learned the Navy was bombing the island during World War II and advised the naval command at Pearl Harbor that the island was covered with ancient ruins.

Balazs found a 250-pound bomb on one section of the island and two more bombs on the northwest cape

with birds perched on them.

Balazs would like to go to Lisianski, which he believes may be another important island for turtles, and to other remote islands in the leeward area.

But, he said, there is no transportation into the eight units of the wildlife refuge except for French Frigate Shoals where a Coast Guard navigation station is located.

By Helen Altonn
Star-Bulletin Writer

To most people, it's just "a damn old rock."

But, after seven days and nights on Necker Island, George H. Balazs says, "To me, it's like a great cathedral."

Balazs shared the precipitous islet with Hawaiian monk seals, green turtles, hundreds of thousands of native seabirds and shrines of ancient Polynesians.

"It was a beautiful experience," he said, describing his adventure.

BALAZS IS A research biologist at the University of Hawaii's Institute of Marine Biology and the endangered Hawaiian green turtle is his special interest. He recently was appointed a member of the Marine Turtle Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

He is in his second year of a three-year study to survey the turtle population in Hawaiian waters, including remote areas of the Leeward chain. He also hopes to learn more about their movements, growth and eating habits.

His research is funded by the State Marine Affairs Coordinator and the National Sea Grant Program.

Gary Naftel, captain of the Easy Rider, was doing fisheries research in the Necker area and dropped Balazs there with a week's supplies on Aug. 19.

NECKER, A narrow fishhook of volcanic rock, is 393 miles northwest of Hawaii in the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Technically, it is part of the City and County of Honolulu. The rocky island comprises 41 acres and the highest spot there is 275 feet.

The islet is protected from human contact by hazardous landing conditions, and by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which gave Balazs a permit to work there.

Balazs spent three days in a cave shelter on a bluff but changed camp after puncturing his mattress.

"It was rough sleeping on the lava rock," he said.

He made three trips along the peak of the island, setting up observation stations, but said, "It's pretty precipitous. There are not many places to hike. I wore out a pair of boots."

HE SAID THAT, wherever he went on the island, he saw turtles

coming in to feed on the seaweed.

"I never saw such lush stands of limu," he said.

Balazs saw "a fair number" of Hawaiian monk seals with young pups born on the island.

"This was new information for Necker," he said. "We hadn't thought of it as a pupping area."

The seals and turtles "team up" on Necker, snoozing together on the ledges, Balazs said. "I'm really amazed at how they are able to live in harmony in a limited area on the rock ledge."

HE ALSO WAS surprised to see the turtles "hauling out on the lava rock and sleeping." On other islands, they bask on coral sand, or crawl under ledges underwater, Balazs said.

The turtles arrived at about 10 or 11 at night and left about 7 or 8 in the morning, he said.

He caught six small turtles with a scoop net to tag and measure them to follow their movements—"if they're moving"—and monitor their growth. He also used a probe sampler to obtain stomach contents to find out what they're feeding on.

There was a "definite change-over" of turtles, Balazs said. "I never caught the same small turtle twice." And, based on his observations, he estimates a minimum of 50 turtles using the nearshore waters.

NECKER SITS on a 650-square-mile bank, with the greatest depth 125 feet, Balazs said.

"It's conceivable the turtles are using the entire bank and the island itself as part of their total cycle," he said.

Necker is about 75 miles from the turtle breeding grounds at French Frigate Shoals so Balazs believes it is an important island for them.

"I feel the adults are probably fairly resident to the island," he said.

He found the birds and animals far tamer at Necker than at other islands where they have acquired fear of man.

KENNETH P. EMORY, senior archaeologist at the Bishop Museum, was "shocked" when he saw a slide show of Balazs' trip to Necker.

Emory spent five days on Necker in 1924 and recorded 34 marae (shrines) built by ancient Polynesians. He thought they were still there, undisturbed, but Balazs' pictures showed a number of the reli-

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Seabirds flock around a marae (shrine) built on Necker Island by ancient Polynesian travelers while George Balazs, left, keeps watch from an observation post on a steep cliff.-Photos by George Balazs.

