

Remembering Joan Aidem

SHE WAS A FORCE OF ENERGY AND A FRIEND OF THE CONSERVANCY

“She was truly the mother of avian paleontology in the Hawaiian Islands,” said Storrs Olson, an avian paleontologist and long-time friend.

Joan Aidem, who passed away last August, a day before her 97th birthday, was a force of energy and a friend of The Nature Conservancy. As a longtime volunteer with our Moloka'i program, she freely lent her expertise and her '67 Ford F100 for Conservancy field work.

Aidem enjoyed journeying along Moloka'i's northwest coast and for years led hikes through our Mo'omomi Preserve, one of the last intact native sand dune ecosystems in the main Hawaiian Islands.

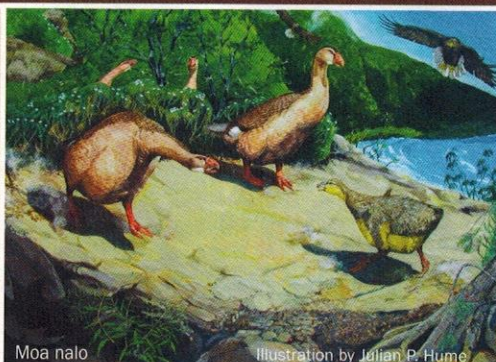
Together with Dr. Richard Langer, she started monitoring turtle nests at Mo'omomi in 1986, an effort that developed and shaped the Conservancy's turtle monitoring program into what it is today. She continued actively monitoring turtles at the preserve into her early nineties.

Paul Breese, a friend and colleague who became director of The Honolulu Zoo and was chief of wildlife at the State Division of Forestry and Wildlife, remembered Aidem as “one of the very best field observers I've ever known.”

Those powers of observation led to what Aidem is best known for—her discovery of the skeleton of an ancient flightless goose-like duck at Mo'omomi in 1971. During one of her coastal excursions, she came across a fossilized bird beak eroding out of a layer of cemented sand.

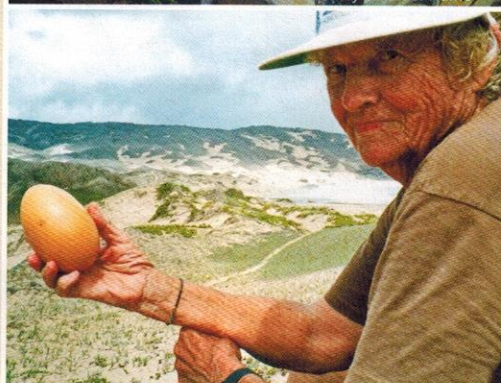
Suspecting the fossil represented something new and significant, she took it to Alan Ziegler, a zoologist at the Bishop Museum. Ziegler was so astonished by the find that he immediately returned with Aidem to successfully remove the nearly complete skeleton that went with the beak, dating from the last interglacial period of the Pleistocene, some 80,000 years ago.

“When they examined the species closely, scientists found that, compared to a nēnē goose, it was a monster,” recalled Dr. Sam 'Ōhu Gon, the Conservancy's Hawai'i senior scientist and cultural advisor. “It had particularly powerful legs, but with tiny wing bones,



Moa nalo

Illustration by Julian P. Hume



Joan Aidem with moa nalo egg replica

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and a strongly ridged beak lined with what looked like teeth! These turned out to be bony, tooth-like projections of the jaw, quite unlike any other species of goose in Hawai'i.”

The bones wound up in the Smithsonian Institution and were given the Latin name *Thambetochen chauliodous*, meaning “astounding goose with prominent teeth.” The species was given the Hawaiian name *moa nalo*, which translates roughly as “vanished fowl,” a reference to the idea that Hawaiians probably would have eaten such a large flightless bird, Gon said.

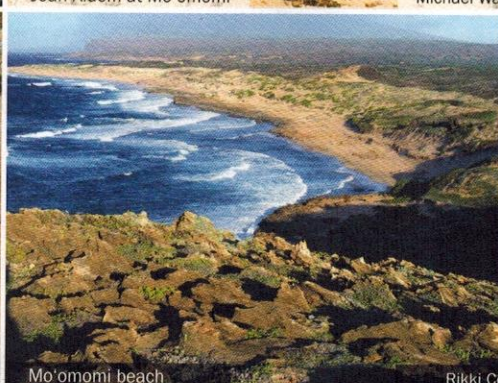
The find astounded the scientific community, not only because of the duck's physical eccentricity, but also because some had thought the volcanic islands too young geologically to have a fossil record. Aidem's find inspired many more fossil discoveries. Indeed, the roster of more than 40 uniquely Hawaiian species of birds described by Western ornithologists between 1781 and 1974 more than doubled between the early 1970s and the early '90s.

Alone or alongside avian paleontologists Storrs Olson and Helen James, Aidem collected fossils upon which six other species of birds from Moloka'i were based—a flightless ibis, a long-legged raptor, a rail, two species of creepers, a long-legged owl, and on the island of Kaua'i,



Joan Aidem at Mo'omomi

Michael Wa



Mo'omomi beach

Rikki Co



Joan receiving award for her turtle monitoring work

another species of long-legged owl. To honor her pioneering work, a genus of extinct Hawaiian gapers was named for her: *Aidemedina*.

Born in London in 1920 as Joan Burrows, Aidem moved to California with her family at the age of eight. At San Diego State University, she met her first husband, Charles “Chuck” Shaw, with whom she had three children: Mike, Kirstie (“Boo”) and Thomas. She later married Louis Aidem, a social worker for the Hawai'i State Office of Public Welfare.

Aidem, who first came to Moloka'i in 1961, is remembered by friends as an indomitable spirit who was fiercely independent to the end. Wrote Storrs Olson, “Joan's personality was no-nonsense and she could not be flattered in any way. She was a dear, dear friend and will be sorely missed. Hawaiian science will be forever deeply in her debt.”