

CACHE





The birds of
Fern Island

THE HERALD JOURNAL

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CACHE

Lure of the tropics

Every day The Herald Journal gets an incredible volume of mail. We get news releases from all over the world, trade publications, legal notices, letters to the editor, sports information, recipes, bills, payments, books, public relations packages promoting just about every event or product you can imagine and more than our share of just-plain junk mail.

On the editorial side, I seem to end up with the largest proportion of the mail. Along with the title of Cache editor, I inherited the position of business editor, as well as a couple of other titles.

Some days it's a toss-up between business and sports as to who gets the most mail, but business mail usually seems to win out. Because of local-interest and space considerations, I end up throwing out at least 75 percent of the mail I get. I look at it all, but most of it ends up in the garbage, because we rarely use stuff from the Pakistan Embassy or Hong Kong Government Information Services.

I also get the mail addressed to the "Travel Editor." Unfortunately, that's not one of my titles, though I wish it were.

The travel mail advertises cruises and resorts, though no one has yet sent any offers of free travel or free lodgings at some posh watering hole. Policy and ethical considerations would not allow me to accept anything like that, but the temptation would be great.

For the past few years, I've had this urge to visit the Caribbean or the South Pacific. There are hundreds of places all over the world I'd like to see, but for some reason the lure of the tropics has been strong.

That's why I'd like to be a travel editor. What a job! Spending a week in some far-off place, or cruising on an ocean liner to the Orient, taking a few notes and maybe a few photographs and writing a story about it — and getting paid for the effort.

Palm-fringed, tropical isles with empty, volcanic beaches, blue-green lagoons, waterfalls and long, lazy days have long been the stuff of fantasy. Lately they've captured my imagination.



5 LOOKING BACK

By A.J. Simmonds

Last week, with much fanfare and media attention, Utah State University began its centennial celebration by opening the cornerstone of Old Main. Simmonds participated in that event and reflects on the contents of the cornerstone — and how they can serve to reflect the times.

6 HOLLYWOOD

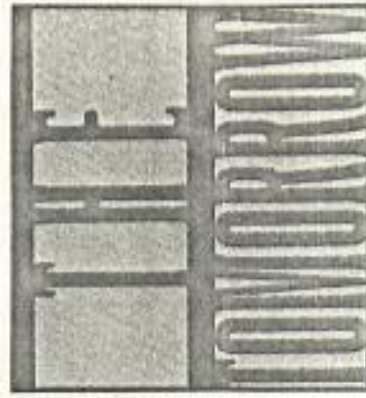
By Monika Guttman

Actor James Woods has had a reputation as a maverick in the Hollywood community, frequently speaking out against the Hollywood establishment. But Woods still has been able to land roles in critically acclaimed films. This week he appears in a TV-movie based on the story of an American POW in North Vietnam.

9 BOOK REVIEW

By Ronald Jenkins

While many people are just getting used to the omnipresent computer, scientists, researchers and thinkers already are working on the next technological advances. "The Tomorrow Makers" by Grant Fjermedal is a look into the future as envisioned by these individuals.



12 THE MINI PAGE

By Betty Debnam

One page especially for young readers.

This week's Cache has something for other people stricken with incurable wanderlust — articles that cover the extremes of faraway places.

Staff writer Cindy Yurth several years ago worked as a shuttle bus driver in Antarctica. In this week's My Turn column, Yurth describes her job and her life in that place most people see as lonely and inhospitable.

But the Antarctic — during the summer season — is a thriving community. Several nations maintain bases and stations from which they conduct a variety of scientific research. Tourists even visit the southernmost continent these days, coming by plane and ship.

Antarctica has not been tamed, however. The continent is still lonely, still inhospitable, and Yurth describes some of the hardships as well as the pleasures of her stay.

In another tale of a visit to a distant — but considerably less forbidding — place, Utah State University Information Services writer John Flannery has provided this week's feature — an account of six weeks he and his wife Annie spent on Tern Island, this country's most remote wildlife refuge.

USU range science graduate Rick Vetter is manager of the refuge, where he lives with his wife, Joan Suther. The small island is home to a variety of bird species, and the Flannerys helped survey the different types of wildlife, as well as helping with the day-to-day chores required for survival on the desert island.

Flannery's article does not describe the kind of tropical island that has held my imagination in recent years. On Tern Island there are only five scattered palm trees, two 60-foot-tall ironwood trees and no waterfalls — in fact there is no fresh water except what the rains bring.

Human existence on Tern Island is not easy. But the Flannerys were captivated by the small island and its many species of birds and other wildlife. They found it difficult to leave.

I think I can understand why.

Pat McCutcheon
Cache editor



13 TERN ISLAND

By John S. Flannery

On a small piece of land 500 miles west of Honolulu is located this country's most remote national wildlife refuge. The refuge, home to a wide variety of wildlife, is managed by a USU range science graduate.

16 TV LISTINGS

Our weekly guide to what's what on the tube.

ON THE COVER: A male great frigate bird "displaying" during courtship by inflating his red gular sac to attract females to a potential nest site. Photo by John S. Flannery.



Aerial view of Tern Island, French Frigate Shoals, this country's most remote national wildlife refuge, west of Hawaii.

At home on a desert island

Editor's note: In mid-December, 1986, John and Annie Flannery (left) Cache Valley bound for Hawaii. John is a writer for Utah State University Information Services; Annie is a USU graduate student in wildlife biology. Their final destination was Tern Island, 500 miles west of Honolulu, where their longtime friend and USU graduate Rick Vetter manages a national wildlife refuge. John and Annie spent six weeks as volunteers on the island, participating in a program that brings volunteers to help on many national wildlife refuges.

Below, light green water, a few tiny, widely-scattered sandspits; far ahead, an elongated, near-rectangular small island and off to our left a single rocky promontory jutting 137 feet into the clouded sky.

Minutes later, the Beech 18 skimmed over a low metal seawall, touched down, rolled past white buildings on the coral and clay airstrip and turned around. Our eyes were glued to the windows. Outside the rapidly warming cabin were birds, birds and more birds. The very first I saw was a cattle egret, common enough in Utah, but a rarity on Tern Island, 500 miles west of Honolulu in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

This would be our home for the next six weeks. A desert island, the most remote national wildlife refuge, where we would be Fish and Wildlife Service volunteers.

The aircraft shut down in front of the living quarters. Longtime friend and refuge manager Rick Vetter sat on a golf cart, wearing tropical uniform. He waved casually, and looked pallid and worn, not at all in character with the ebullient Utah State University range science student who used to bounce energetically across the Logan campus. His wife, Joan, was not waiting to greet us as we had hoped and expected.

Joan was in bed, ill. A quick check of her symptoms, coupled with a rundown of their recent itinerary, spelled malaria. She and Rick had been on a collecting trip in New Guinea for the Bishop Museum in Hawaii. They had been bitten by mosquitoes two nights apart. The airplane that brought the two of us to Tern Island took Joan back to Hawaii and medical treatment.

Our work began as soon as the plane left. Birds were nesting, eggs were hatching, young were waiting to be measured and banded. 20,000-gallon redwood water-storage tanks had to be

repaired to stop leaks, then pumped full from the cistern on the abandoned tennis court which served as one of the rainfall catchments on the desert island. The golf cart, used for hauling tools, batteries and pumps was ailing; motors and motorboats, diesel generators, pumps and batteries constantly exposed to high temperatures, high humidity and salt spray needed continual maintenance.

The navigation antennae used by the charter aircraft that came every month or so was broken by a



Biologists Annie Flannery and Rick Vetter.

bird strike or from the weight of roosting frigate birds. Stakes to mark nest sites for future studies needed to be painted and numbered, entries had to be made in logs. Reports and narratives had to be updated. The weekly endangered Hawaiian monk seal study had to be continued without Joan's expertise. Weather station information had to be collected and recorded. Forty-hour work weeks grew to 60 and more as the weekend approached.

Normal? Probably, under the circumstances. Terrible? Not really.

Then Rick came down with violent shakes and high fever from the mosquito bites and life was hectic. A day would go something like this.

The alarm clock would ring about 6:30 and one of us

would grope for flipflops, shorts and a jacket, grab a flashlight and stagger through the dark to the generator building, 70 yards away. There would be toggle switches to be thrown, one of two generators to be checked, then fired up, water to be turned on to the remote radiator, more switches to flip, then with power and lights on, voltage and amperage gauges to be read and logs filled out. Switches were next thrown to start the freezer and cooler.

Back in the day room, Rick activated the radios to talk to headquarters back in Honolulu, where it was already daylight. Details and conversations went back and forth repeated and repeated again because of the idiosyncrasies and glitches in atmospheric conditions and marine radios.

Breakfasts were taken on the run, between other duties, and often were missed. Annie would disappear to read and record tide gauges and weather station information, then grab a clipboard and go out to do black nobby, albatross or other bird studies. Rick would continue the radio discussion and I would resume researching monthly reports for material useful in the preparation of the annual report, or, on better days, go outside to mend or clean up salt-corroded equipment, replace a steering wheel on one of the two Boston Whalers, assist with a bird count or try to find which of the remaining batteries could counted on to start vital equipment.

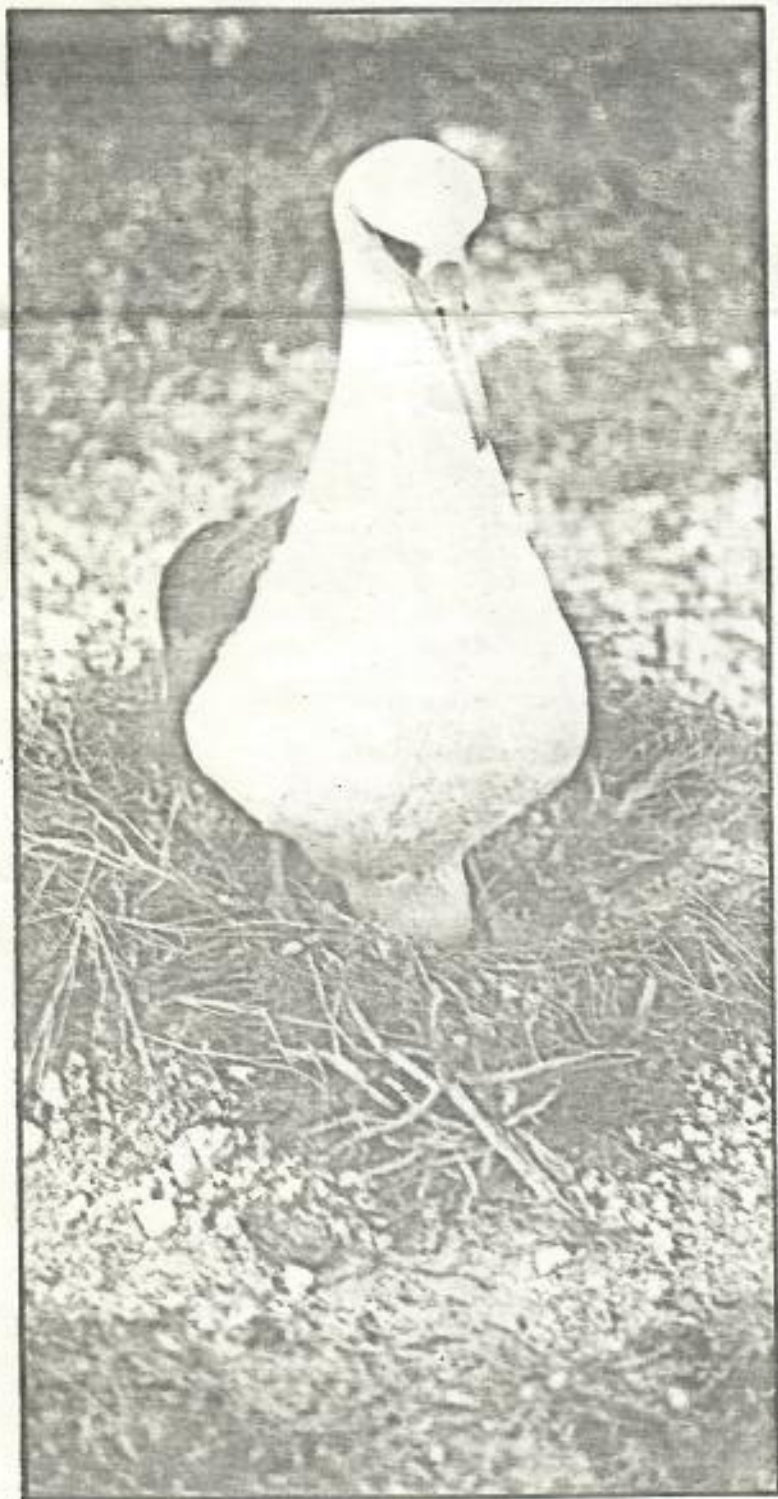
Mid-morning, the three of us might come together in the dayroom and talk about other tasks that needed to be done. Where repairs were needed, Vetter took the lead. In addition to his expertise in range and wildlife, he can fix or jury-rig anything from a backhoe hydraulic system to the complex circuitry of the dehumidifiers which keep several rooms dry and preserve some of the critical radios and other delicate equipment and supplies which are quickly destroyed by the presence of high humidity.

Invariably, one or two of us would return to studies in the bird colonies for the rest of the morning.

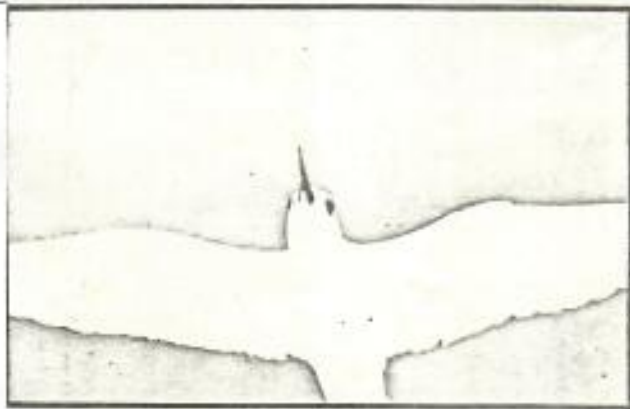
Lunch was leftovers from previous meals, snacks or sandwiches quickly prepared and usually interrupted by a second radio contact when the early morning talk with Honolulu had been interrupted by the high-pitched squeal that was rapidly ruining Vetter's ears.



Endangered Hawaiian monk seal.



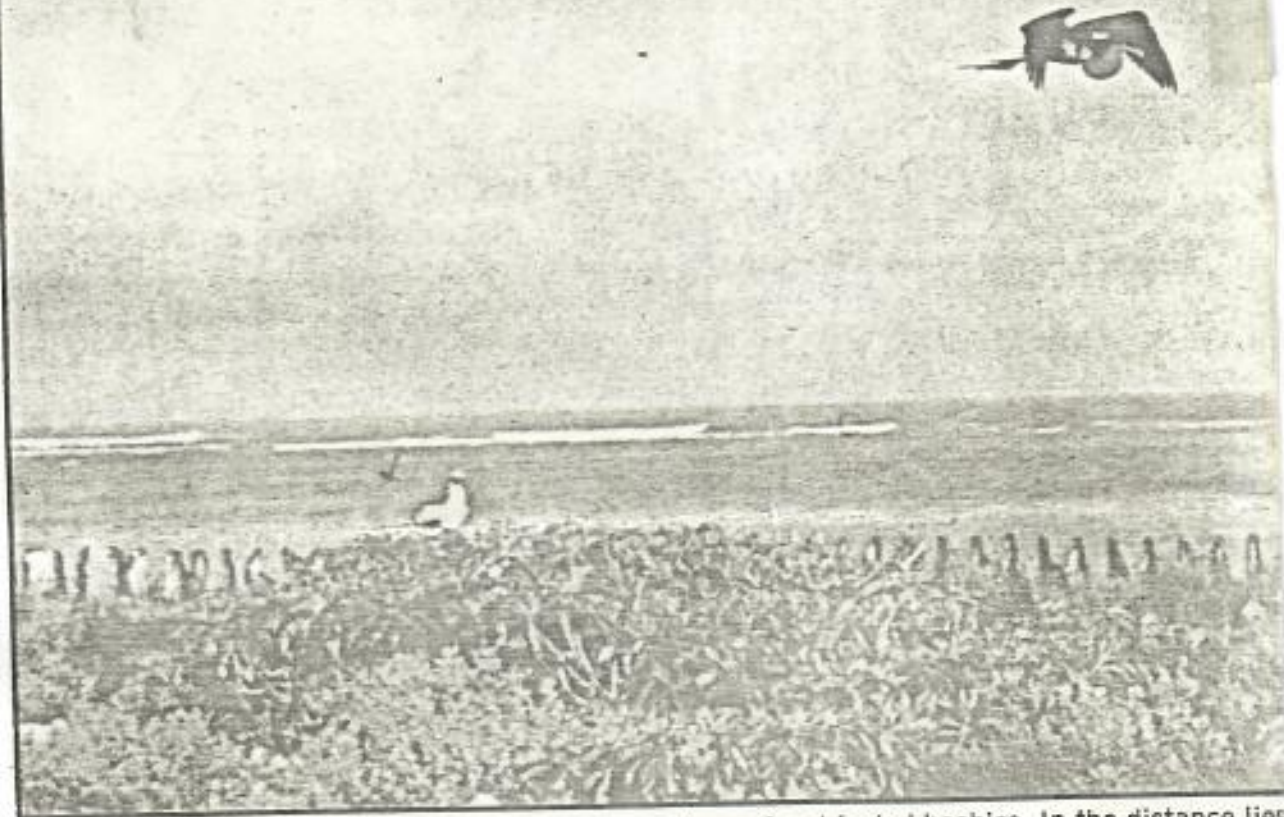
Laysan albatross with egg.



A fairy tern hovers in the Pacific sky.



The Flannerys' last view of the Tern Island bird colonies.



A great frigate bird flies over a colony of red-footed boobies. In the distance lies

Evenings meals were more formal. A rotation schedule gave one person responsibility for the particular evening meal and dish-washing. The food supplies were ample and varied, thanks to careful shopping in Honolulu and the walk-in freezer and fridge.

Evenings included a ritual of listening to marine weather. Weather takes on considerable significance when you realize that you are the only people on a tiny island with neighbors over four hours away — by air.

Twice in recent history, 40-foot breakers have smashed on the reef and put water across the runway, forcing the island's human occupants to seek refuge on the roof of the main building. Vetter was there in the last December storm, and spent weeks afterward clearing huge chunks of coral from the runway. We learned that he hoped in his particularly warped way that we too would get to share a similar experience.

Vetter's malaria continued and his temperature shot dangerously high. Finally the options became two — he could be med-evacuated to Hawaii by aircraft, or medicine would have to be dropped. His removal meant that we would probably be flown out, too. None of the three of us wanted to go, and the choice was made for an airdrop. The U.S. Navy came through, the parachute was on target and the vials of chloroquin were undamaged. The range/wildlife biologist-cum-refuge manager returned to normal in a few days.

He was well enough so the second Audubon Christmas bird count was carried off without mishap. He and Annie counted the tiny island's outlying islands. Regulations required that someone stay on Tern as a backup with a second, completely prepared boat in position on the hoist. I stayed and began that part of the count, counting and recounting Laysan and blackfooted albatross, thousands of frigate birds on the bushes and milling high into the sky, fairy or white terns which normally hovered around our heads but were scarce that day, red-footed boobies and the birds blown to the island by unusual winds — curlews, plovers and the cattle egret.

Rick and Annie returned with more numbers and new species to



Albatross tracks decora

include in the count. They conti while I sat on one of the flat counting birds returning from th the count in pitch dark with flas the nocturnal Bonin petrel numbe

After her malaria was cured, back to Tern Island on a fishing regular pace, though holidays a study days. The only letup in the howled and the biologists feared t



the reef that helps protect the island from the ravages of the Pacific Ocean.



...e a coral sand beach.

...ued counting birds on nests,
...uilding roofs in the twilight,
...sea around us. We concluded
...lights, getting a rough idea of
...s.

...Joan was able to find her way
...boat, and life resumed a more
...nd weekends continued to be
...eld work came when the wind
...he young birds would be blown

off the nests. Those days were spent on reports and reading technical books or popular magazines and paperbacks in the vast library which undoubtedly began when the Coast Guard manned a station at French Frigate Shoals.

During a lull in activities, Vetter took me outside the refuge beyond LaPerouse Pinnacle where, with saltwater tackle, I learned the fighting power of four-foot long Ulua, a marvelous silver fish. Later, with handlines, the two of us simultaneously hooked and landed smaller versions, trolling near a coral head. The filets were a pleasant addition to the menu.

The wonder of Tern Island never ended. Bird sounds were constant, but varied, never boring. The antics of sub-adult albatross — walking, meeting, doing their enthusiastic ritualized dance with clacking bills, honking, making seductive soft whistling calls — kept us laughing and enthralled.

Only those birds blown to the island by accident are wary of man. The rest, like those in the Galapagos Islands, know no fear.

We departed with regret and a feeling of incompleteness. There were new albatross chicks and redtailed tropic birds, were just beginning their spectacular courtship flights.

Two new volunteers came to assist, so Rick and Joan weren't left alone. At any rate, the couple is nearing the end of their two-year tour, and as a result of their hardship-duty station the Fish and Wildlife Service will find Vetter another refuge to manage.

Two things are certain, wherever they are assigned. The new post will definitely be a refuge with less water. And, there will certainly be more people around.

TEXT & PHOTOS:
JOHN S FLANNERY