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Headnote by Bill McKibben

WILLIAM T. HORNADAY

William T. Hornaday (1854–1937) here chronicles a pioneering moment in conservation history, when Theodore Roosevelt helped win the fight against the “plumage trade” that was devastating bird populations around the world. Hornaday was an eminent American zoologist who served as head of the New York Zoological Park for many years; a rough sense of the reasons why the social justice and environmental movements have often parted ways may be garnered from the fact that he saw nothing wrong with exhibiting a live African pygmy, named Ota Benga, in the zoo’s monkey house, later remarking that it was the “most amusing passage” in the institution’s history. His 1913 book *Our Vanishing Wild Life*, from which this account is taken, has a strongly nativist edge: immigrants and negroes are singled out as villains for their hunting of indigenous fauna.

The Bird Tragedy on Laysan Island



In the far-away North Pacific Ocean, about seven hundred miles from Honolulu west-b’-north, lies the small island of Laysan. It is level, sandy, poorly planted by nature, and barren of all things likely to enlist the attention of predatory man. To the harassed birds of mid-ocean, it seemed like a secure haven, and for ages past it has been inhabited only by them. There several species of sea birds, large and small, have found homes and breeding places. Until 1909, the inhabitants consisted of the Laysan albatross, black-footed albatross, sooty tern, gray-backed tern, noddy tern, Hawaiian tern, white tern, Bonin petrel, two shearwaters, the red-tailed tropic bird, two boobies and the man-of-war bird.

Laysan Island is two miles long by one and one-half miles broad, and at times it has been literally covered with birds. Its bird life was

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first brought prominently to notice in 1891, by Henry Palmer, the agent of Hon. Walter Rothschild, and in 1902 and 1903 Walter K. Fisher and W. A. Bryan made further observations.

Ever since 1891 the bird life on Laysan has been regarded as one of the wonders of the bird world. One of the photographs taken prior to 1909 shows a vast plain, apparently a square mile in area, covered and crowded with Laysan albatrosses. They stand there on the level sand, serene, bulky and immaculate. Thousands of birds appear in one view—a very remarkable sight.

Naturally man, the ever-greedy, began to cast about for ways by which to convert some product of that feathered host into money. At first guano and eggs were collected. A tramway was laid down and small box-cars were introduced, in which the collected material was piled and pushed down to the packing place.

For several years this went on, and the birds themselves were not molested. At last, however, a tentacle of the feather-trade octopus reached out to Laysan. In an evil moment in the spring of 1909, a predatory individual of Honolulu and elsewhere, named Max Schlemmer, decided that the wings of those albatross, gulls and terns should be torn off and sent to Japan, whence they would undoubtedly be shipped to Paris, the special market for the wings of sea-birds slaughtered in the North Pacific.

Schlemmer the Slaughterer bought a cheap vessel, hired twenty-three phlegmatic and cold-blooded Japanese laborers, and organized a raid on Laysan. With the utmost secrecy he sailed from Honolulu, landed his bird-killers upon the sea-bird wonderland, and turned them loose upon the birds.

For several months they slaughtered diligently and without mercy. Apparently it was the ambition of Schlemmer to kill every bird on the island.

By the time the bird-butchers had accumulated between three and four car-loads of wings, and the carnage was half finished, William A. Bryan, Professor of Zoology in the College of Honolulu, heard of it and promptly wired the United States Government.

Without the loss of a moment the Secretary of the Navy despatched the revenue cutter *Thetis* to the shambles of Laysan. When Captain Jacobs arrived he found that in round numbers about *three hundred thousand* birds had been destroyed, and all that remained of them were several acres of bones and dead bodies, and about three carloads of wings, feathers and skins. It was evident that Schlemmer's intention was to kill all the birds on the island, and only the timely arrival of the *Thetis* frustrated that bloody plan.

The twenty-three Japanese poachers were arrested and taken to Honolulu for trial, and the *Thetis* also brought away all the stolen wings and plumage with the exception of one shedful of wings that had to be left behind on account of lack of carrying space. That old shed, with one end torn out, and supposed to contain nearly fifty thousand pairs of wings, was photographed by Prof. Dill in 1911, as shown herewith.

Three hundred thousand albatrosses, gulls, terns and other birds were butchered to make a Schlemmer holiday! Had the arrival of the *Thetis* been delayed, it is reasonably certain that every bird on Laysan would have been killed to satisfy the wolfish rapacity of one money-grubbing white man.

In 1911, the Iowa State University despatched to Laysan a scientific expedition in charge of Prof. Homer R. Dill. The party landed on the island on April 24 and remained until June 5, and the report of Professor Dill (U.S. Department of Agriculture) is consumedly interesting to the friends of birds. Here is what he has said regarding the evidences of bird-slaughter:

"Our first impression of Laysan was that the poachers had stripped the place of bird life. An area of over 300 acres on each side of the buildings was apparently abandoned. Only the shearwaters moaning in their burrows, the little wingless rail skulking from one grass tussock to another, and the saucy finch remained. It is an excellent example of what Prof. Nutting calls the survival of the inconspicuous.

"Here on every side are bones bleaching in the sun, showing where the poachers had piled the bodies of the birds as they stripped them of

wings and feathers. In the old open guano shed were seen the remains of hundreds and possibly thousands of wings which were placed there but never cured for shipping, as the marauders were interrupted in their work.

“An old cistern back of one of the buildings tells a story of cruelty that surpasses anything else done by these heartless, sanguinary pirates, not excepting the practice of cutting wings from living birds and leaving them to die of hemorrhage. In this dry cistern the living birds were kept by hundreds to slowly starve to death. In this way the fatty tissue lying next to the skin was used up, and the skin was left quite free from grease, so that it required little or no cleaning during preparation.

“Many other revolting sights, such as the remains of young birds that had been left to starve, and birds with broken legs and deformed beaks were to be seen. Killing clubs, nets and other implements used by these marauders were lying all about. Hundreds of boxes to be used in shipping the bird skins were packed in an old building. It was very evident they intended to carry on their slaughter as long as the birds lasted.

“Not only did they kill and skin the larger species but they caught and caged the finch, honey eater, and miller bird. Cages and material for making them were found.”—(Report of an Expedition to Laysan Island in 1911. By Homer R. Dill, page 12.)

The report of Professor Bryan contains the following pertinent paragraphs:

“This wholesale killing has had an appalling effect on the colony.
* * It is conservative to say that fully one-half the number of birds of both species of albatross that were so abundant everywhere in 1903 have been killed. The colonies that remain are in a sadly decimated condition. * * Over a large part of the island, in some sections a hundred acres in a place, that ten years ago were thickly inhabited by albatrosses not a single bird remains, while heaps of the slain lie as mute testimony of the awful slaughter of these beautiful, harmless, and without doubt beneficial inhabitants of the high seas.

“While the main activity of the plume-hunters was directed against the albatrosses, they were by no means averse to killing anything in the bird line that came in their way. * * Fortunately, serious as were the depredations of the poachers, their operations were interrupted before any of the species had been completely exterminated.”

But the work of the Evil Genius of Laysan did not stop with the slaughter of three hundred thousand birds. Mr. Schlemmer introduced rabbits and guinea-pigs; and these rapidly multiplying rodents now are threatening to consume every plant on the island. If the plants disappear, many of the insects will go with them; and this will mean the disappearance of the small insectivorous birds.

In February, 1909, President Roosevelt issued an executive order creating the Hawaiian Islands Reservation for Birds. In this are included Laysan and twelve other islands and reefs, some of which are inhabited by birds that are well worth preserving. By this act, we may feel that for the future the birds of Laysan and neighboring islets are secure from further attacks by the bloody-handed agents of the vain women who still insist upon wearing the wings and feathers of wild birds.

Our Vanishing Wild Life (1913)