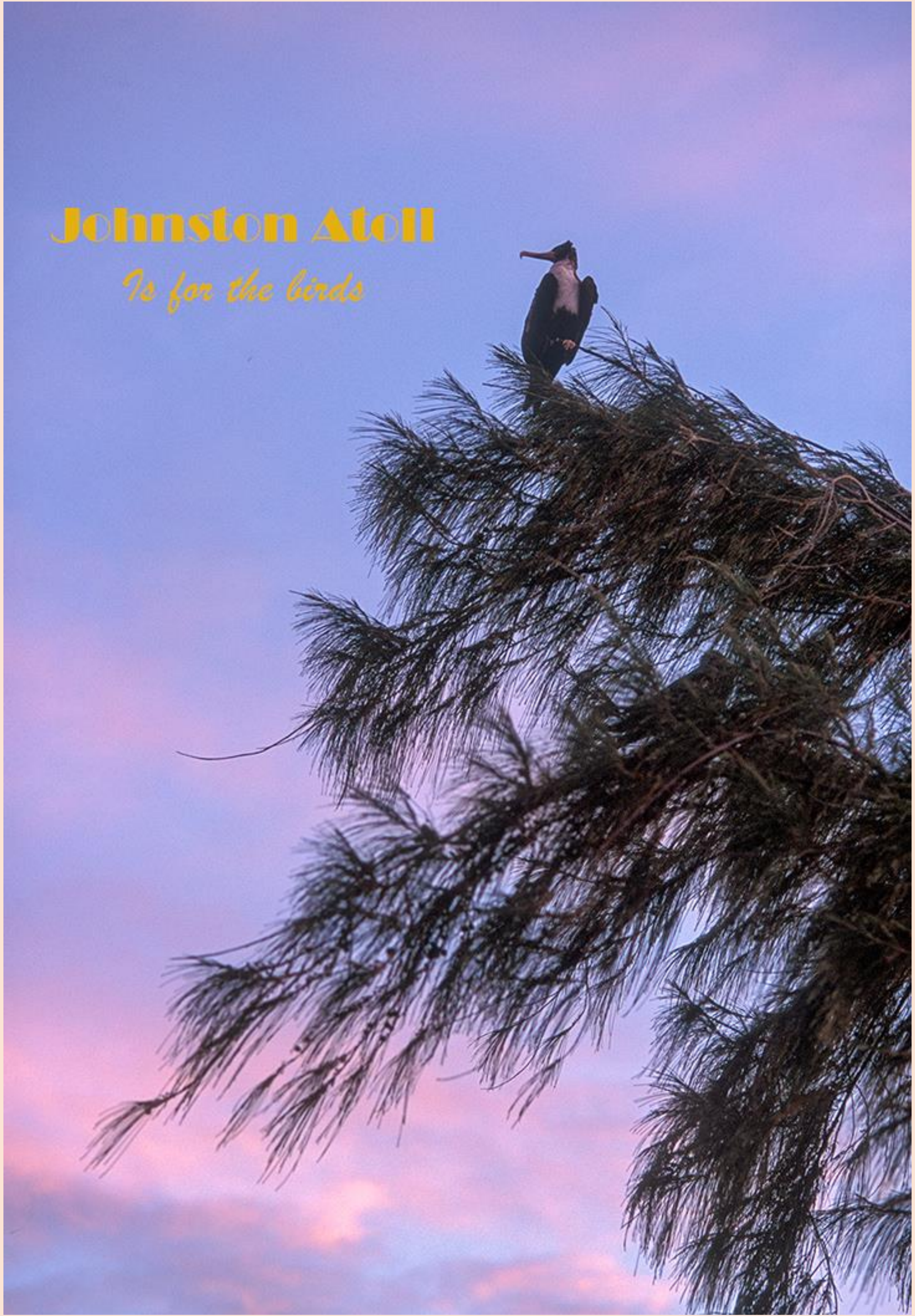
Johnston Atoll
Is for the birds

Johnston Atoll is for the Birds

By

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Aloha Airlines flight 355 from Honolulu dropped through the powder puff clouds and banked steeply to port. I strained to get a picture of the island that suddenly filled the window out here in the middle of the North Pacific Ocean. It seemed so small. Almost below me was the Joint Operations Command (JOC) building with the lighthouse perched on top; the treatment plant making drinking water from the sea; and the dock where the supply barges berthed. Over there were the storage bunkers and the Johnston Atoll Chemical Agent Disposal System (JACADS) plant that was destroying the last of America's chemical weapons under the SALT treaty. I could see along the full length of the island now as we swung around for our final approach. The runway stretched from end to end with apartment blocks, recreational facilities and treatment plants neatly arranged along its flanks. From this angle I could see the plant we had built to clean the coral from the Agent Orange storage area, tucked away at the northwest end of the island by the sea.

I had come to help with the restoration that would return this place to the wildlife refuge it was before it became a military base. The island was discovered when the American Brig

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Sally ran aground here in 1796. There were only two islands then, the larger about 1,000 feet long and piled high with guano and the smaller a mere patch of sand reaching about 8 feet above the sea. Captain Johnston of His Britannic Majesty's Ship *Cornwallis* charted the location eleven years later and the islands were given his name. Continuous human habitation began in the mid-1930s, when the prospect of hostilities with Japan emerged, and would last until 2004. For more than 70 years the island served as a storage area and supply base in 3 wars; a testing ground for rocket launching and nuclear weapons in the Cold War; and finally to house the JACADS facility. Now it was to be returned to the birds.

The jet parked just outside the low reception building. I stumbled down the gangway into the hot sunshine with 30 pounds of photographic gear and my lap top, cleared security and was driven to the "Redwoods" apartments that would be my home, off and on, for almost a year.

Johnston Island

Interstate 0, so marked, ran around Johnston Island. Circumnavigation took about 20 minutes in my pickup at the enforced speed limit of 15 mph on the dirt sections of the road, which was most of it.

The avian inhabitants on Johnston Island seemed to have reached a mutual understanding with the humans whom they seem to regard more as an inconvenience than a threat. The most common species on the main island were White Terns, Red-tailed Tropicbirds, Brown Noddies and Golden Plovers. The smaller White-tail Tropicbird with the distinctive yellow beak was present, but comparatively rare. I only saw one during the many visits I made

over the year. Most of the other birds, the frigates, boobies and Sooty Terns were visitors that bred on the outer islands.

Each morning the rising sun cast a soft orange glow over the ocean finding the frigates roosting in ironwood trees bent from the constant wind. At this, the windward end of the island, flight merely involved extending the wings. It was a favorite place for the frigates because stealing fish from the boobies and tropicbirds provided both sport and food. Sometimes, in the evenings, I'd watch five or six frigates engaging in spectacular aerial combat with the boobies. At night, if it was calm, the frigates would roost on the mysterious iron pilings on the south edge of the island.   When they were all occupied, latecomers would cruise around trying to knock a bird off its perch. It appeared that the frigates were neither courteous nor friendly.

My most wonderful experience was being "buzzed" by a flock of white terns that swirled around my head. They made a twanging sound like a bow string to express annoyance, or a screech if they were really upset. At times, I felt like Uncle Remus in "*Song of the South*". White terns reproduce four or five times a year on Johnston Island providing a steady supply of chicks. Eggs are laid in the most precarious position, in the

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fork of a branch, on top of a 4 x 4 post, on a stairway banister or on a concrete wall. The chick stays exactly in that location for a period of 5 to 6 weeks until fully fledged.

Most of the tropicbirds congregated on little hills of stacked coral heavily vegetated with Koa heole and Indian pluchea at the east end of the island near the weather station. But adults, chicks and fledglings could be found all over the island, on the ground or under trees and bushes. An unseen tropicbird can let out a squawk that will send you 3 feet in the air if you walk too close. They are graceful when flying, but land in an embarrassing jumble of feet and wings. They would take to the air around 11 am every day at the weather station in a screeching, hovering, diving mass. It would be all over by one o'clock. You could almost set your watch by it.

At twilight, when the sun went down and the coral turned golden between the long fingered shadows, I'd drive around behind the weather station to watch the long-billed Curlews sneak out from the tiny ironwood forest to join the plovers in pecking insects from the coral. Plovers were all over the island, particularly around the water treatment plant where there always seemed to be a puddle for wading. They were the tamest of all the birds, scurrying out of the path of vehicles and pedestrians and taking to the air only as an absolute last resort.

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Some evenings, after a particularly hard day, I'd spend the last rays of light watching the boobies come in from the ocean and cruise the sea wall looking for fish. The frigates, ever watchful for an easy meal, circled overhead. How special it all was.

The Outer Islands

If there were a lot of birds on Johnston Island, there was a population explosion on the outer islands which had already been restored and were now uninhabited and predator free.

Two new islands, North and East Island, had been built in the mid-1960s and the tiny Sand Island had been expanded with a causeway and a dock using coral dredged from the ship channel and the surrounding reef. I had taken the Boston Whaler "boat taxi" from the marina out to East Island that first Sunday. A pungent ammonia smell hung heavily in the air as we approached a dock lined with birds like a welcoming committee. I had to reach up to dump my camera bag and call radio (for the return trip) on the dock and climb up on an old tire fender. The spectators kindly moved aside. Almost immediately, though, I was assaulted by half-inch long flying beetles that crawled down my collar and worked themselves into my clothing. Thankfully, they didn't bite.

East Island was saturated with frigate birds, brown boobies, sooty terns, and brown noddies. The adult boobies sat on eggs or paraded around with their oversized fledgling oblivious of the frenzy of flying terns and noddies about them. Normally, I like to keep my distance from the animals I'm photographing to reduce stress. In this case I was the one

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under stress from birds swooping around my head as dense as a swarm of mosquitoes. It reminded me of another movie, this one by Alfred Hitchcock.

The brown boobies were the most endearing. Two eggs are laid. If successful they hatch up to six weeks apart, but the elder chick pushes the younger from the nest. Family portraits with the male, female and a frequently taller offspring covered in white down were irresistible. The bill is blue on the male and yellow on the female. The hatched chick grows from the size of fitting in the palm of one's hand to full height in a few weeks and takes up to 3 to 4 years to acquire adult plumage. I've never considered myself to be a birder, but this opportunity was too much to pass up and I had to see the other islands. So, I decided to pay a visit to Fish and Wildlife to see if I could tag along on their next visit.

I found Joe Wiggins at his desk on the top floor of the JOC building. Joe loaded me up with booklets on the birds of Johnston Atoll and invited me to accompany him and his assistant Crystal to Sand Island on their trip to inspect the vegetation on the landfill burial site. The invitation was even more special since Sand Island was off limits to all visitors.

We crossed the sparkling clear turquoise water of the lagoon in the pontoon boat. When we reached Sand Island, Joe and Crystal set about watering the Sea grape and Sea purslane planted on the landfill for erosion control while I wandered around photographing the Red-footed boobies , very carefully avoiding stepping on eggs. Thankfully, there were no flying bugs here.

When the watering chores were finished, Joe and Crystal gave me a tour of the island and its inhabitants. The golden sand at the end of the causeway, it turns out, was not sand at all, but coral ingested and excreted by parrotfish. The brown noddies congregated there in a group Joe called the Noddy Club. There were many frigate birds here, the males with their characteristic inflated red throat pouch and the females with the red ring around the eye.

Every so often puffs of sand would appear out of what looked like rabbit burrows. These were nesting Wedge-tailed Shearwaters. If you were quiet, you could hear their distinctive low melancholy moan. The ground seemed to be totally undermined with these burrows and moving across the area was akin to stepping through a minefield. The north end of Sand Island was almost completely taken over by sooty terns which Joe said

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can spend up to seven years at sea. I thought of my wife Barbara, who is a birder, and how much she would have enjoyed this trip.

I visited North Island later that year when most of the nesting was over and there were fewer birds. We were doing GPS surveys to determine the precise location of the landfills that held the demolished buildings and facilities. The weather had changed by that time with frequent squalls passing over the islands. Earlier, one of our biologists had discovered a Short-eared Owl hiding in the low brush. No one knew where it had come from, perhaps on a supply barge from Honolulu. But it seemed to be quite healthy and content living on the tiny mice that scurry about when it's dark.

Caring for the Birds

All the buildings and treatment plants were coming down at Johnston Atoll. Some of the debris was being landfilled on the island and some was being shipped off by barge for disposal on the mainland. Fish and Wildlife worked with the engineers and demolition crews to minimize disturbance of the bird population. I watched burly excavator operators carefully move a tern chick around demolition operations for two weeks. The parents kept feeding it and it fledged successfully after the job was done. Joe started an orphan tree to care for chicks taken from

buildings before they were torn down and ran nightly expeditions with a flashlight and net to catch fingerlings to feed them. By mid-June in 2004 the job was done. The treatment plants and the support facilities were gone. The last of the Redwoods came down and the rear guard spent the night on the beach under the stars. In the morning, the Air Force transports carried the last human inhabitants away from Johnston Atoll.

Epilogue

I often think about my time on Johnston Atoll, how special it was, and what a privilege it was to be there. The island belongs to the birds now, and it will be theirs forever. I expect that the "bad boy" frigates club still hangs out in the ironwood trees in the morning sun and roosts on the steel pilings at night. The tropicbirds probably still have their daily fuss, and the curlews undoubtedly still peck away at the coral at dusk. And the boobies still cruise the sea wall in the dying light searching for a last meal before turning home to the outer islands to await the new day.

I can see them all now.

Postscript

Fish and Wildlife continued to periodically maintain Johnston Atoll after the closure, traveling to the island from Hawaii by sea on the good ship *Kahana*. In 2010 the team

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discovered an infestation of “crazy ants” that attacked and destroyed ground-nesting birds like the Red-tailed Tropicbird by spraying them with acid. Fish and Wildlife responded by setting up support groups eventually called the Crazy Ant Strike Team (C.A.S.T.) on six-month back-to-back rotations to eradicate the ants. Their story is told in the August 2015 Audubon article:

http://www.audubon.org/magazine/july-august-2015/one-remote-islands-battle-against-acid

As of now, March 2018, CAST #15 is on the island, the infestation is 90%+ under control; the birds are flourishing; and the crew is planting native flora. It has been a Herculean effort. But the irony is that the wildlife survived 70 years of plutonium, asbestos, PCB, Agent Orange and chemical weapons pollution from military operations only to be almost destroyed by ants. Then again, Fish and Wildlife protection was there all along.

See more photos in the Gallery. Click on National Wildlife Refuges/Johnston Atoll NWR in the Navigation page of the website https://www.alistairmontgomeryjourneys.com/