

THE INTRODUCTION AND ACCLIMATIZATION OF THE
YELLOW CANARY ON MIDWAY ISLAND.

BY WILLIAM ALANSON BRYAN.

WE are accustomed to look on the common Yellow Canary (*Fringilla canaria*) and the numerous varieties that have been artificially produced from it as a cage bird pure and simple. It is the belief of many that through centuries of confinement and domestication they have lost the power to sustaining themselves should they be given their liberty and forced to shift for themselves in the open. It is urged that through hundreds of generations they have become so modified and adapted to cage environment that liberty means nothing to them and that they must perish miserably before they would be able to adapt themselves to the conditions existing in the larger and freer world of which they see and know so little.

It is a matter of considerable satisfaction therefore to be able to lay before the readers of 'The Auk' some of the facts kindly supplied me by Mr. D. Morrison, through the courtesy of Captain Piltz touching on the liberation and subsequent acclimatization and establishment of a colony of yellow canaries on the little low isolated island of Midway.

For the benefit of those who may never have heard of Midway, it may be well to state that the Hawaiian group as a matter of convenience has been divided into the Windward or inhabited islands and the Leeward or uninhabited chain. Midway belongs to this latter division of the group and save Ocean Island, it is the farthest removed from Oahu of the list of small low islands that stretch away from Honolulu towards Japan in a northwesterly direction. It is something over 1000 miles distant from Honolulu and as its name implies it is near the geographical center of the North Pacific for which reason it is now used as a relay station for the Commercial Pacific Cable Company's wire across this great ocean.

As a matter of fact Midway is made up of two small patches of sand known as Eastern and Sand Islands. These islets are sur-

rounded by a narrow circular reef six miles in diameter. Sand, the larger of the two, is now occupied by the cable station and the comfortable quarters established by the company. The buildings are surrounded by a number of introduced trees and shrubs, but at the time of my visit in 1902, an account of which I have elsewhere published,¹ it was an uninhabited shimmering white pile of sand on which during my short stay I was able to collect only six species of littoral plants. From the nearby Eastern islet I was able to secure ten species of grasses, vines and low growing shrubs, — species that are common on the coral islands in the group.

For the ornithologist, interest ordinarily centers about the great colony of countless thousands of sea birds that represent the dozen or more species making the island their home. But for the present we are especially concerned with the birds that have been introduced on Midway and particularly with the establishment of the Yellow Canary there. I therefore quote from the letter written me December 15th, 1911, by Mr. D. Morrison who for a number of years has been the superintendent in charge on the island in reply to my request for the data concerning the acclimatization of the "Song-birds" on Midway.

"I assure you that it is a pleasure to learn of your interest in the matter and I am only too willing to furnish you with the particulars which you are at liberty to make whatever use of you wish.

"YELLOW CANARIES (called by us Canton Canaries):— In March, 1909, I purchased a pair of these birds from the crew of the S. S. Siberia in Honolulu harbour. They had a number of them in the fore-castle which were to be sold for whatever they would bring upon arrival at San Francisco. I brought them to Midway Island in separate cages at the end of the same month. They were put together in a breeding cage in January 1910 and the female started with five eggs none of which hatched out.

"A month later she laid seven eggs out of which six healthy birds were hatched.

"In April she laid six eggs and hatched out four birds.

"Some weeks later seven eggs were laid none of which hatched out.

¹ Report of a Visit to Midway Island by Wm. Alanson Bryan. Occas. Papers B. P. Bishop Mus., Vol. II, No. 4, pp. 37-45.

"These eleven young birds were kept in large cages until July of the same year on account of a number of very troublesome cats which were living in a wild state amongst the shrubbery. They were wary and extremely difficult to kill. One of our Chinese servants devised a large frame trap of chicken netting, with partitioned compartments (parlour and bedroom we called it) with a drop door at each end attached by string to the bait. This was successful and in May, 1910, we were sure that there were no cats left on the Island.

"In July two male canaries were sent me from Honolulu and these along with the eleven young birds which we had raised here were liberated. For a time the young birds would return to the doors at night to be taken in but they quickly became accustomed to their liberty.

"In December they began nesting. One built in a slender and very exposed Australian Ironwood tree (introduced) close to the buildings and hatched out three healthy looking birds but they perished during a gale with a very low temperature on the night of January 13th, 1911, and the nest was abandoned. Shortly afterwards we discovered that well sheltered nests were being built in the heart of clumps of "Marianne" grass and young birds soon made their appearance at the feed boxes which we have attached to veranda railings. New batches came at intervals up to the month of August.

"We estimate the offspring for the season to be about 60, and at the present time (December, 1911) mating has begun, and with fairly favourable weather conditions we have every reason to expect a large increase during this season.

"They are beautiful songsters and most attractive, and although not quite so friendly as the Laysan Finch (*Telespiza cantans*) they will feed with a person standing within a yard of them. During the spring of 1911 the original pair were put together but from several batches of eggs no birds were obtained.

"THE LAYSAN FINCH": In May, 1905, I happened to be at Laysan Island on the "Iroquois" and procured from Mr. Max Sclammer a cage of these birds. They were liberated upon arrival here but were only seen around the buildings for a week or two. Another cage of these birds was secured at Laysan by Capt. Piltz and sent here to Mrs. Colley in September of the same year (1905). They

were liberated on Eastern Island, as we believed it useless to try to domesticate them here on account of the cats. They increased rapidly over there and in January, 1910, we brought over a number of them as well as a large cage full of "Wingless" birds (*Prozanula palmeri*), but still having cats with us I fear a good many of this importation was destroyed. In May another lot of Finches and Wingless birds was taken over and both of these have increased remarkably and have been found most useful in keeping vegetation free from destructive caterpillars.

"You are more familiar with the history of the Laysan birds than I am and probably know how the Finch and Wingless bird were introduced there. I have heard that Captain Walker's crew brought Wingless birds from Laysan to Eastern Island in 1887. But the canaries and Finches were established on this island as herein related. They appear to be finding a good deal of food amongst the vegetation which has recently been established over the north end of the Island, but we still continue to keep the feed boxes well filled with mixed bird seed, and to distribute dishes with fresh water around the verandas. The yellow birds enjoy their daily bath but the Laysan Finch does not bathe.

"I shall be glad to furnish you with any further particulars regarding the birds or their progress at any time.

"Yours very truly,

"D. MORRISON,

"Superintendent, Midway."

Under date of March 11th, Mr. Morrison again writes me from Midway that he is exporting to New York on that date fourteen young Canaries of this season's hatch, two of the 1911 hatch, and the male of the original pair that was carried to Midway in 1909. The female bird of the parent stock is still retained on the island. The young birds were all hatched in the open but the old male bird had never been at liberty.

With these facts before us I venture to say that the future of this colony of Yellow Canaries will be followed by those who are interested in the introduction and naturalization of song and game birds since it furnishes an excellent example of a species returning to its natural wild habits in an inhospitable environment after centuries of confinement and artificial breeding and feeding.