

PACIFIC BIRD EXPERT BREAKS NEW GROUND

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For many it has been called the definitive field guide for "birders" in Hawaii and the tropical Pacific.

Dr. Douglas Pratt, senior author and illustrator of "The Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific" released in 1987 was in Pohnpei during the first week of April. He was here to do more field study for an entirely new book that he says is still "at least two years out."

Dr. Pratt is the Research Curator of Birds at the NC Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh, North Carolina. He has conducted numerous research expeditions to Hawaii, Micronesia, and Polynesia, and is a pioneer in the recording of vocalizations of Pacific island birds. While doing field work in the Nahn Pii Valley, and in Palikir he was able to get several recordings of the birdsong of the Long Billed White Eye. The recording is groundbreaking in that there is no known previous recording of the songs of that particular bird.

In the field, Dr. Pratt uses a high powered parabolic microphone, a sensitive microphone surrounded by a "dish" that bounces sound waves into the microphone in a more efficient manner than a microphone alone could do. He also uses a Nagra Ares BB+ portable digital recorder which weighs about two pounds to capture the sounds that the microphone picks up. The digital recorder can capture bird songs in the field as if they were being performed inside a recording studio.

Dr. Pratt's team consists of birdwatchers from Washington D.C., New Jersey, Hawaii, South Dakota, North Carolina, and Illinois. The team is armed with cameras sporting lenses the size of small cannon. They are outfitted with binoculars, and sighting scopes the length of my forearm, digital recorders, computers to store it all and I'm sure, an array of gadgetry that I never saw, all with one purpose in mind: to document birdlife in the Pacific.

Dr. Don Buden, of the College of Micronesia was one of Dr. Pratt's classmates at Louisiana State University. He spends whatever free time he has collecting zoological specimens of many kinds from all over Micronesia. It was during one of his free time excursions to Nahna Laud on the fourth of July in 1995 that he acquired a specimen of the Pohnpei Mountain Starling (*Aplonis pelzelni*), a species of bird found only in Pohnpei.

Before that time the bird had not been officially documented since 1956. A report from 1990 said that the birds were "possibly extinct". The specimen acquired on the fourth of July, 1995 was obtained by a local guide who knew the bird was important to biologists. Its presence indicated that there was still a population in Pohnpei.

Buden wrote a paper on the finding published in "The Auk" in 1996.

Pratt's group wanted to document the presence of the Pohnpei Mountain Starling while in Pohnpei but the bird remained elusive. Due to follow through problems with a local agency, Pratt's team didn't get an opportunity to make the trek to the summit of Nahna Laud where the bird might have been found. Dr. Pratt, in better humor than might have been expected under the circumstances said he was disappointed in the missed trek to Nahna Laud but that the trip to Pohnpei was successful nonetheless.

He said that the "bird population and numbers in Pohnpei [are] in as good a shape as they were 1976" when he was gathering data for his 1987 book. "Pohnpei is in pretty good shape as far as birds go." He said that he was particularly surprised at the numbers of Serehd, the Pohnpei Lorikeet, a member of the parrot family and the Pohnpei State bird. At the time of his first visit to Pohnpei people were capturing the Serehd as pets, and some were being killed for food and for sport. Now that the Serehd is protected under the law, the population is much bigger than when he first visited.

He said, "People want to know where they can spot a Serehd. I tell them, 'Just look up. You'll find them everywhere!'"

Micronesian Pigeons are another story. They are large birds unprotected by law and are hunted for food. Pratt said that the bird appears to be experiencing a decline in Micronesia.

The group has gone to Palau followed by trips to Yap, Saipan, and Rota before they return to their homes.

Pratt intimated that Saipan is going the way that Guam has already. He and his team want to document the birdlife that remains. Because of the unintentional introduction of the non-indigenous Brown Tree Snake, Guam has a noticeable absence of birds. Pratt said, "Guam is a poster child for ecological disaster."

Dr. Buden said about Pratt, "He's a talented guy! He's an illustrator and an expert ornithologist." Buden's words might be an understatement.

Dr. Pratt has, despite his lack of artistic training become a preeminent illustrator. His paintings and illustrative credits are extensive and impressive. He considers his remarkable illustrative work to be "a hobby that got out of hand." His first book illustrations were for Lowery's *The Mammals of Louisiana and its Adjacent Waters* (1974), soon followed by illustrations of birds and mammals for *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

He painted one quarter of the illustrations in the *National Geographic Society's Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (1983- 2002), which has become one of America's best-selling field guides. Many other publications contain his illustrations and paintings. His ornithological beginnings were humble which seems to be an apropos description of the man himself. He said that his aunt who he later learned was an amateur bird watcher gave him what he now recognizes as a poorly illustrated book of birds for him to color. Regardless of the quality of the illustrations Pratt said the glorified coloring book probably first influenced him. When he was in the third grade his mother gave his father a pair of binoculars for his birthday. Two weeks later, little Douglas had taken possession of his father's binoculars so that he could watch birds. His father never got them back.

Pratt, who, when he was a young man, earned the highest achievement in the Boy Scouts of America, the Eagle Scout Award, said that he probably started getting serious about bird watching while he was working toward the Bird Study merit badge.

In Pohnpei, at the Village Resort and Hotel, one of the members of his team who is from South Dakota came to the table where I was interviewing Dr. Pratt and excitedly mentioned that they had seen and photographed a Laughing Gull that very morning. Dr. Pratt smiled a knowing smile.