

The Romance of Maps

On Christmas, 2000, my daughter Robin gave me a copy of the newly published *The Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Allen Sibley. Like the Roger Tory Peterson bird book before him, Sibley both authors and illustrates his work. The principal difference between the two being the time of publication; Peterson was first published in 1934, Sibley in 2000. Both men embraced the latest knowledge in the field of ornithology, but Sibley employs maps showing summer and winter ranges as well as migration routes. You wouldn't think that much would change in this category over a span of less than 70 years, but I discovered one significant bit of information that has a Colebrook connection of sorts, which I find most interesting.

The beginnings of this article go back many years to my youth, and since I am a "native Colebrookite", all this shouldn't be considered a "stretch" in connecting the gist of this article with Colebrook history.

Very early on, I had a fascination with things geographical, which included a love affair with maps, which I have never lost. My duties in the U. S. Navy included working with and updating navigational charts from all over the globe, and following my four years in the navy, I went to college where I majored in geography and specialized in cartography, the science of maps and mapping. As a child, I read and reread *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, *Mutiny on the Bounty*, as well as selections from Charles Darwin's writings about his discoveries while on the voyage of the *Beagle*. Growing up at times seemed to be an interminable span of time until I could see and walk on my first real island, preferably one in the Pacific Ocean with Palm trees!

My chance came while I was in the service. My home port was San Diego, California, and the ship I was attached to (a destroyer), was deployed to Korea. The trip across the North Pacific took us first to Pearl Harbor, then the Territory of Hawaii, where we refueled and replenished supplies, then continued northwestward along the great circle route, which ultimately would take us to the Far East. Eleven hundred and fifty miles along this route lies the Midway Islands, near the western-most atoll of the Hawaiian Chain, and at mid point between the U. S. and Japan; hence the name choice.

We had a two-hour refueling layover here, and I think I spent one hour and fifty-nine minutes walking on that island and soaking up every essence that I could find. The first thing you notice upon arrival are trees and sand and light green lagoon water. Once on land, something else dominates your attention, and that is in the form of a large albatross, to be found everywhere on land as well as in the green waters of the lagoon, which goes by the name of the Black-footed Albatross. However, no one ever calls them by that name, they are universally known as "Gooney Birds". The U. S. Navy had complete jurisdiction over Midway Atoll, and every person who set foot there was informed that these were protected birds, and that this small atoll (6 miles in diameter) was the only known location where they visited. At certain times of the year, they mated and nested here, laying a single egg (the size of a medium sized avocado), which the males and females fit into a pouch behind their breastbone as they took turns incubating. Nothing was known to science as to their whereabouts when they left these islands, and one of the tasks assigned to all naval ships operating in the Pacific was to keep our eyes open for Gooney Birds wherever we traveled and make any sightings known to the Secretary of the Navy.

I visited this atoll a total of six times over a three year period in the early and mid fifties, always spending much of my time observing these beautiful birds, who average about a yard long with a seven foot wingspan. They showed no fear of humans at all, allowing us to approach to within touching distance while they incubated their egg. For better than three years some of us kept our eyes peeled for any sign of these birds, but to no avail; neither we nor any other person ever had contact with a Black-footed Albatross other than while on Midway. Many years passed, and I never heard much about these albatross until one day while I was manning the Rock School House during a summer weekend awaiting “customers”.

A man and his wife, recently retired, were driving up Rt. 183, and stopped at the museum. Once inside, the man became fascinated with our map of the world, which hangs on the front wall. This is a very large and detailed map, about six feet by five. It was a gift of Robert Chase, now departed, who was a life long friend of Colebrook and the historical society in particular. This map, which had been in his family for generations, was printed in 1839. Every important discovery is documented to the best ability of the mapmaker, the Pacific and Africa being (to me at least) among the most fascinating.

Our visitor paused when he came to the Hawaiian chain and commented that the Midway Islands were not shown (they weren't discovered until twenty years after this map was made). Then he dropped a bombshell (at least to my ears) saying that he had been a member of a scientific team that was centered on that atoll, researching the Black-footed Albatross in particular. Their efforts paid off; the long sought answer to the secret of their existence while away from the atoll was found. (This was in the late 1970s) It seems that they spend all their time fishing off the west coast of the North American continent, an enormous area stretching from the Aleutian Islands to the southern tip of Baja California. They cruise the ocean, sometimes quite close to our shores, but never visit land. When they have caught enough, they head back to Midway, a distance of up to 5,000 some-odd miles; truly one of the most amazing bird sagas known to man.

If you get hold of *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, turn to page 31, and see for yourself drawings of this remarkable bird, along with a map of its fishing grounds.

During the summer, when the Rock School Museum is open, come and visit us. You might even want to bring along a picnic lunch in case you wish to get an in-depth feel for the many learning tools that are to be found there.