

# H. Douglas Pratt, Jr., Designer of Palau Bird Stamps

BY DONALD HINES

**H**AROLD Douglas Pratt, Jr., a research associate at the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Science in Baton Rouge, has been a stamp collector for as long as he can remember.

A second interest of his that also dates back to his early childhood is that of a desire to study birds.

In particular, the 38 year-old ornithologist who hails from Charlotte, North Carolina, has for the past nine years actively participated in an ongoing field study of the Birds of Hawaii and the South Pacific.

His most recent accomplishment occurred when the Republic of Palau, a U.S. Trust Territory in the Micronesia sector of the Pacific Ocean, chose four of his illustrations as the designs for the first segment in a series of postage stamps portraying birds of the island chain.

Commenting on the fact that his interest for birds and the collecting of stamps evolved at the same time, Pratt admitted that in addition to concentrating on a general U.S. stamp collection, he especially enjoys the overall philatelic topic of birds-on-stamps.

## National Geographic

At the present time, Pratt is in the final stages of his participation as one of the chief illustrators in the National Geographic Society's new "Field Guide to Birds of North America."

This ornithological study which will be the most comprehensive compilation on this topic to date is scheduled for publication some time in September.

Yet, despite his interest in North American birds, Pratt's true fascination lies with the birds of Hawaii and the South Pacific.

Ever since he was a child, the North Carolina ornithologist and bird illustrator can recall reading and studying a lot of books about Hawaii.

A graduate of Davidson College (Davidson, N.C.), where in 1966 he earned a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in biology, Pratt taught high school biology in his home state for four years (1966-70).

At the end of this period, he decided to return to graduate school. Enrolling at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, he obtained his Master of Science (1973) and Doctor of Philosophy (1979) degrees in zoology



Four Palau bird species were depicted in the recently released se-tenant block of four stamps: Fruit Dove (upper left); Palau Morninbird (upper right); Giant White-eye (lower left); Palau Fantail (lower-right).

while specializing in the branch of ornithology.

It was while at L.S.U. that Pratt met a fellow student of ornithology who came from Hawaii. In 1974, his friend invited him to stay at his home and together the two began a field study of Hawaiian birds.

Since then Pratt has made it a point to return every year to Hawaii where he has engaged in intensive field research of Pacific birds for varying periods of time.

Once he finishes his work for the upcoming National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America, the L.S.U. research associate will be free to complete a project that he initiated nine years ago during his first trip to Hawaii.

## Pacific Bird Book

From that 1974 visit, Pratt along with Phillip L. Bruner and Delwyn G. Berrett, have embarked on a project to compile under the sponsorship of the Hawaii Audubon Society a pioneering work entitled "Birds of Hawaii and the South Pacific."

Included in this compilation which is the first of its kind for the Pacific region are the birds of Palau. Pratt is the sole illustrator of this study which is scheduled for publication sometime next year.

When asked about his professional accomplishments, Pratt emphasizes the fact that he does not see himself primarily as an artist. Rather, he is an ornithologist who has a talent for illustration.

Commenting on his recent design of the Palau bird issue, Pratt noted that



Ornithologist, artist and stamp designer, Harold D. Pratt, Jr., is shown above at work in his studio, in Baton Rouge, LA, painting one of his bird illustrations. (Photo, courtesy of Public Relations Dept., Louisiana State University.)

unlike others who have designed bird stamps but have not actually seen the depicted bird species or visited the territory releasing those particular stamps, he has on three occasions visited the islands of the Republic of Palau. Also, he had previously painted these birds in connection with actual ornithological studies that he was engaged in.

Pratt has personally spotted and photographed all of the four land birds that he designed for the Palau Post Office. In reflecting on this work which constituted his first credit for postage stamp artwork, Pratt stated that he thought his experience as a long-time stamp collector was for him a major plus.

#### Palau Study

The following information on the four bird species depicted on the recent Palau stamp issue was compiled from a study entitled "Notes on the Taxonomy, Natural History, and Status of the Resident Birds of Palau" that Pratt was one of the primary authors of.

The notes on Palaun birds were the result of special observations that Pratt and his colleagues undertook at various times during the years 1976 to 1979.

For the most part the study of Palaun birds has been sadly neglected by professional ornithologists during the past three and a half decades of the U.S. trusteeship with but a few occasional reports.

The Palau islands have today the distinction of supporting one of the richest avifauna (bird communities) in all of the Micronesian chain of the Pacific.

To date some 38 different bird families have been spotted on the island chain in either a capacity as a breeding resident or a migratory visitor.

The four Palaun birds depicted on the recently released May 16th issue are all breeding residents that have not been found in other island chains.

#### Natural Environment

All of the four Palaun bird stamps designed by Pratt focus on a solitary member of the respective species as it is connected to a flora element of its natural environment.

The stamps which appear in a set-tenant block of four format are each bearing the 20c denomination which covers the postal rate of domestic mail delivery within the island and to points within the United States.

In designing the Palaun stamps, Pratt was forced to rely on photographs as the Palau District Code prohibits the taking of bird specimens even for the purpose of scientific study.

#### Fruit Dove

One of the four birds illustrated by Pratt is the "Palau Fruit Dove" (*Ptilinopus pelewensis*). This species is to be sited in almost all of the forested

habitats of the Palau chain.

The song of this bird is one of the primary sources of the environmental sound of Palau. Feeding on small fruits and fleshy seeds, the Palau Fruit Dove has once again become common, after having been threatened by hunting during the Japanese mandate rule prior to the American take-over of Palau in the Second World War.

#### Fantail

The "Palau Fantail" (*Rhipidura lepida*) is another species that was once endangered but has now apparently regained population strength and can now be termed quite common.

It can be viewed in forests throughout the island chain. The vocal calls of the bird can be identified as being rather loud and squeaky with a downward inflection. Adult Palau Fantails have also been recorded to emit a rhythmic "kee-keer-kew", a song that is composed of an excited jumble of chirps and squeaks.

#### Morning Bird

The "Palau Morningbird" (*Colluricincla tenebrosa*) is in appearances a rather drab looking bird. Yet it can deliver one of the most delightful of all Palaun bird songs, especially just before the coming of dawn.

The Palau Morningbird has been spotted in the lower regions of the

island's forests where it carefully forages for its foods.

#### Giant White-eye

Completing our study of the 1983 Palau bird issues are a few words on the "Giant White-eye" (*Megazosterops palauensis*). This bird is a somewhat noisy and curious species that easily attracts human notice. Its main diet consists of caterpillars, assorted insects and fruits.

With the release of these four Palau bird stamps, designed by Pratt, philatelists will be given a look into one aspect of the island chain's overall ecology.