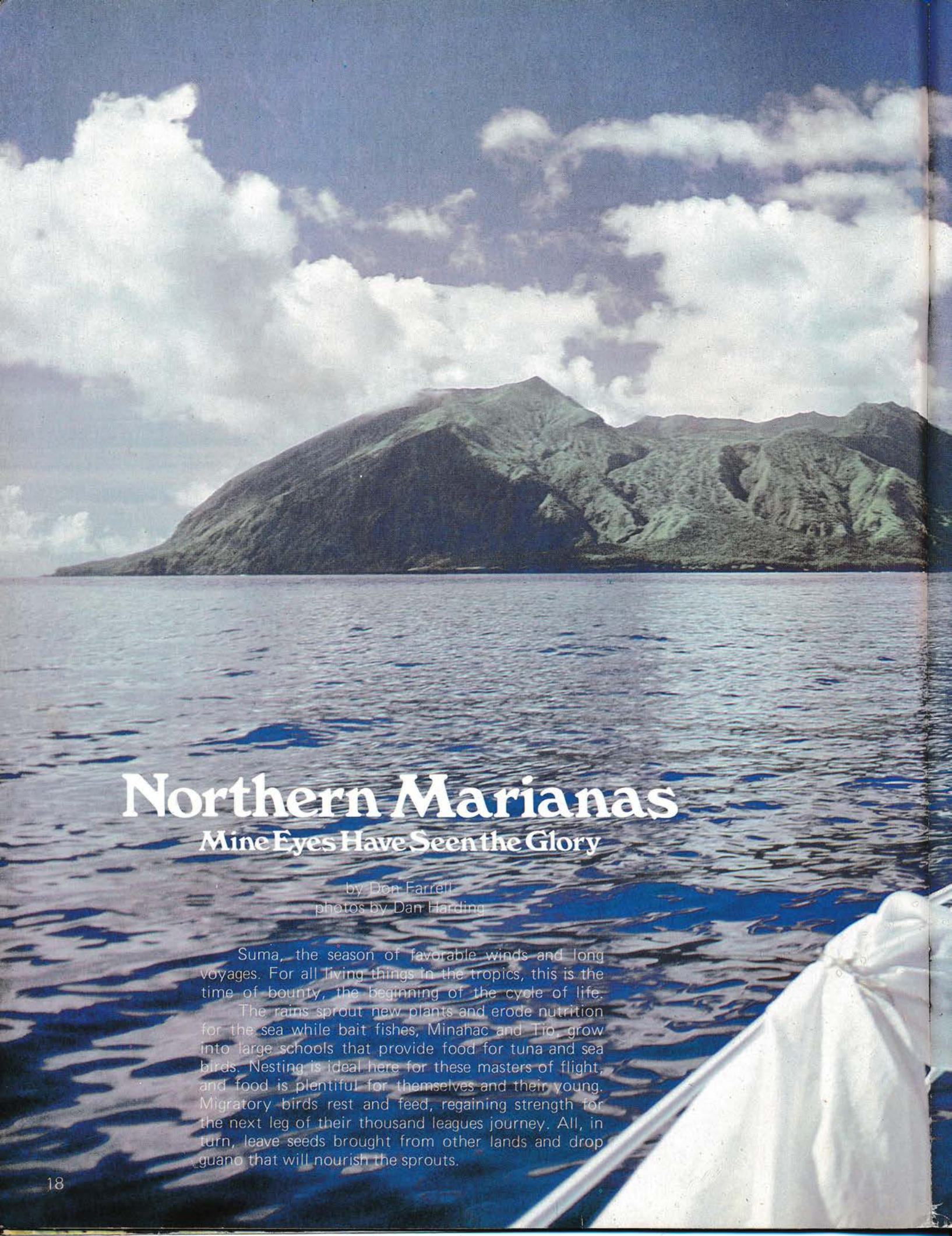


Northern Marianas

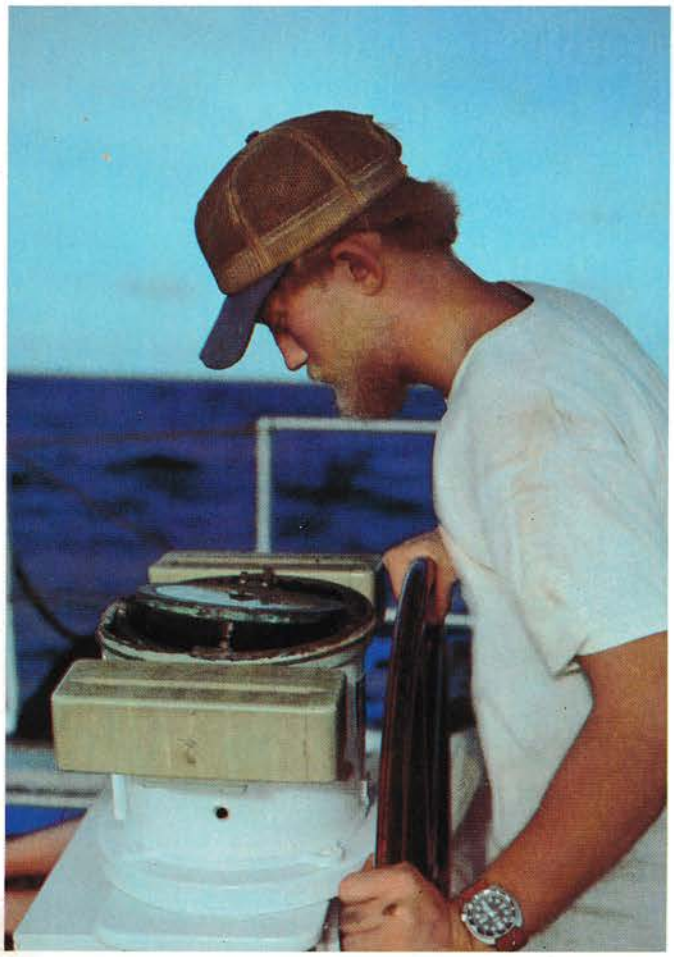
Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory

by Don Farrell
photos by Dan Harding

Suma, the season of favorable winds and long voyages. For all living things in the tropics, this is the time of bounty, the beginning of the cycle of life.

The rains sprout new plants and erode nutrition for the sea while bait fishes, Minahac and Tio, grow into large schools that provide food for tuna and sea birds. Nesting is ideal here for these masters of flight, and food is plentiful for themselves and their young. Migratory birds rest and feed, regaining strength for the next leg of their thousand leagues journey. All, in turn, leave seeds brought from other lands and drop guano that will nourish the sprouts.

(below) Dan Paben keeps careful watch on the compass and Bubbles pickles a prized specimen.



Suma is also the beginning of the stormy season: giant cyclonic storms called typhoons raise winds in excess of 200 miles an hour, capable of tearing ships to shreds. Mountainous, grey bearded waves turn the ocean into an unleashed trolley car ride.

Nestled in this ambivalent cornucopia of plenty is the Marianas, a unique group of islands. All of volcanic origin, they rise from a fracture in the earth's crust (aptly named the Marianas Trench) as part of the Pacific's great ring of fire.

Guam, Rota, Tinian, Saipan and Medinilla (in order forming the southern five islands) are older volcanos that lifted, then sank below the ocean to be covered with thick coral reefs. Now uplifted again, they are called the limestone islands.

The northern Mariana Islands are late volcanic formations, most of which have been active in recorded history and some of which are still quite active today.

Because of their relative inaccessibility and the ocean's potential dangers, these islands continue to develop, unmolested by modern man. The breeding colonies of wildlife are as undisturbed today as they were a thousand years ago. But even these pristine islands, the only volcanic high islands in all Micronesia, will inevitably feel the pressures of man's demands on nature.

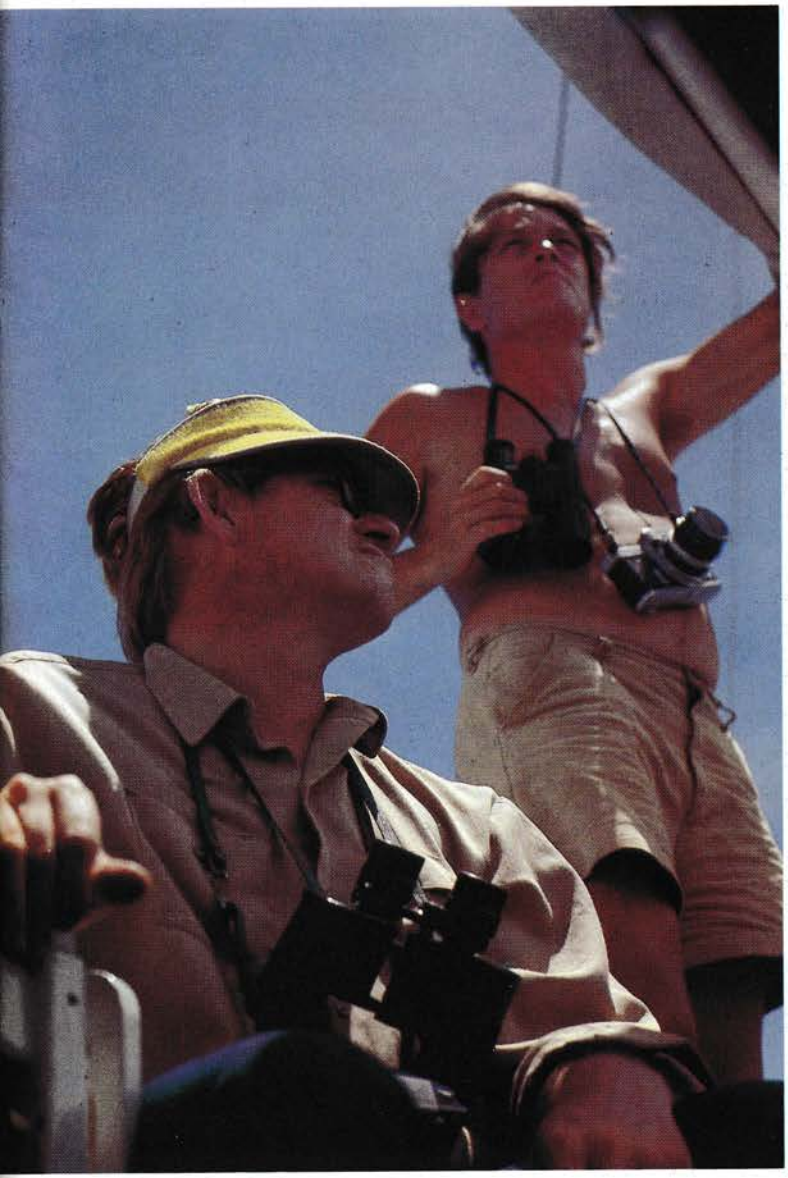
For that reason and more, the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Fish and Wildlife Laboratories decided it was prudent to visit these islands and find out what life actually does exist here. So, on July 28, 1979 expert Pacific sea-bird man, Roger Clapp, and museum technician, "Bubbles" (one large male Russian Jew), boarded the Yacht ***Lions' Den*** in Saipan for a three week voyage through the Marianas. Accompanying them was Dr. Jeremy J. Hatch, Associate Professor of Biology at the University of Massachusetts and an expert on the behavioral ecology of birds (better known to the rest of us as an ornithologist).

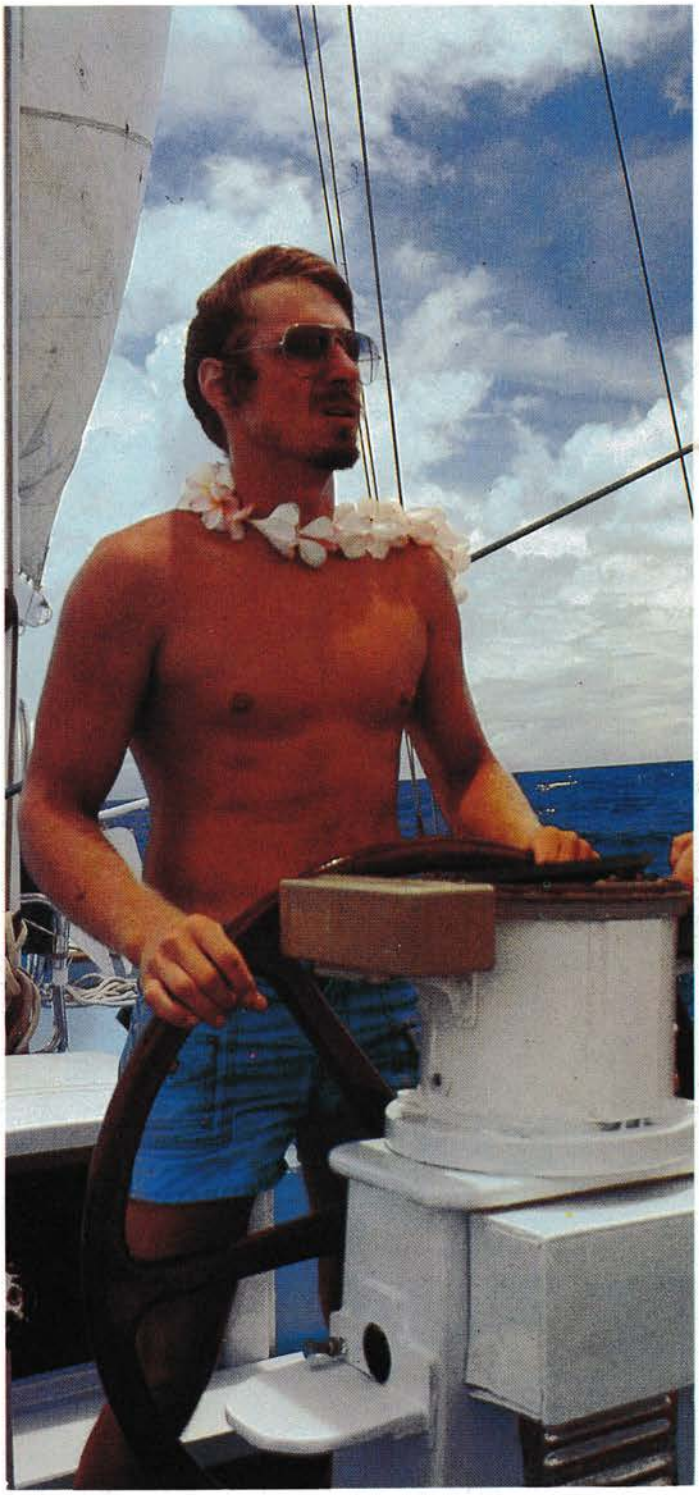
As with Charles Darwin's voyage on the ***H.M.S. Beagle***, the objective of this trip was to collect, catalogue and form a plan, this time for the complete study of the biome of the Marianas.

Clapp, the acting project leader, showed up at the boat in Brogands, carrying a briefcase and a bag of dead birds. He was ecstatic about having found a bird that was heretofore unreported in Micronesia, "much less Saipan." To an ornithologist this was Christmas in July.

Sporting a British accent that sounded perfectly real, Dr. Jeremy J. Hatch took off his shoes and made himself at home on the boat, while Bubbles, the collector, explained his position to me.

"My job is to kill things for the museum, " he began delicately. "That's why I'd rather you didn't use my name. Publicity can only bring me trouble." Which is a shame really, as it takes a real talent to get specimens of museum quality. Bubbles began donating to the Smithsonian while still in high school. Since then he has become somewhat of an expert on croco-





(clockwise) Clapp and Hatch; skipper Don Farrell; navigator Logan Kock and his prize catch.

diles and is generally considered to be a herpetologist/mammologist. He is now employed as a museum technician by the National Fish and Wildlife Laboratories, the last remnant of the old U.S. Biological Survey.

Equally involved in this joint venture was the volunteer crew of the ***Lions' Den***. "Equal ecstacy and equal agony," as Dan Harding put it. As a wildlife photographer he would shoot more than fifty rolls of film during the trip as well as participate in the ship's sailing.

Logan Kock, Masters student in Marine Biology at the University of Guam and the ship's navigator, saw the trip as a unique opportunity to observe the changes in Marine fauna across a transect of seven degrees of latitude.

To Dan E. Paben, down home "son of Illinois" (but a Missouri Mule at heart), who ended up on the U S.S. Hunley in Guam, it was a chance of a lifetime. 'Why, I've got a whole parcel full of stories to tell when I get home."

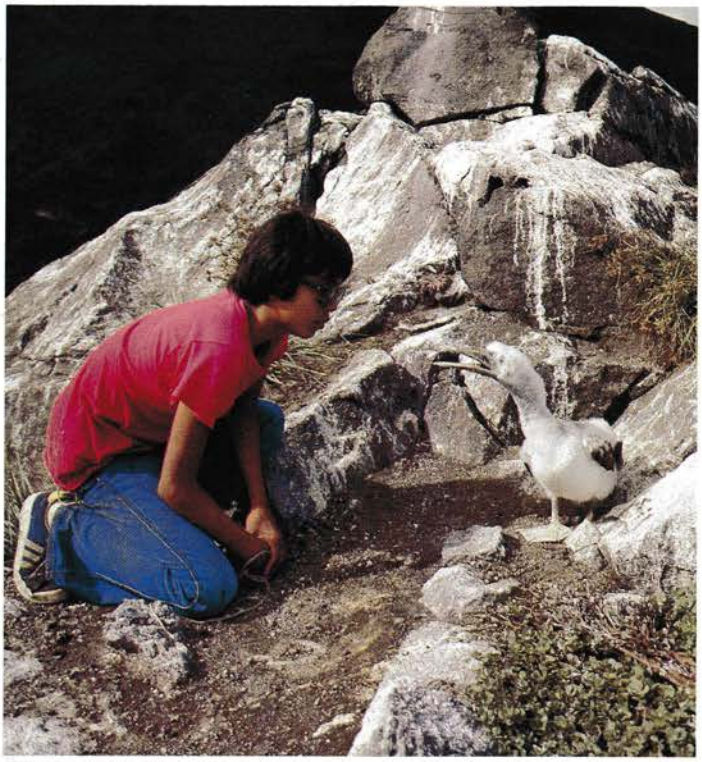
For 12 year-old Robbie Liberty, this was an extension of the boat life that began for him when he was just six. His never-ending capacity for energy was only exceeded by his hollow-legged appetite and followed by a sleep of the dead.

For myself, I had to see what these people were like. To an amateur biologist (lobster catcher, actually), spending three weeks with people that were even peripherally associated with the Smithsonian (they share the same museum) was a dream.

On the first morning out, as Saipan disappeared astern, Roger explained why these islands hadn't been studied before. "The Catch 22 of these expeditions is getting the funding. Only in the last few years has money been available in the Pacific for research to find out what critters actually live where. Getting research proposals approved requires a purpose, something to see. If no information is available, then those who approve or disapprove funding, more used to situations where a good bit is known, may assume that it is fruitless to investigate the resources, or may conclude that available money would best be spent for other purposes. That is why this trip is important, so that we may show that further study is warranted and is worth more funding.

Danny fixed French toast for us in the morning as Farallon de Medinilla, a low limestone island, appeared before us. The Navy uses this island for practice bombing runs. Even though they'd assured us there would be no sorties during the time of our visit, there were a lot of ears tipped to one o'clock during our approach.

As the pock-marked rock loomed larger on the horizon, Roger continued, "We are public servants really. The people are very interested in preserving their wildlife for many different reasons. Hunters themselves are often partners with the Department of Fish and Wildlife, which pays my salary by the way. And there are some 17 million birdwatchers in the U.S. Our job is to get the people what they want."



Robbie Liberty relates to a fledgling boobie on Pajaros.

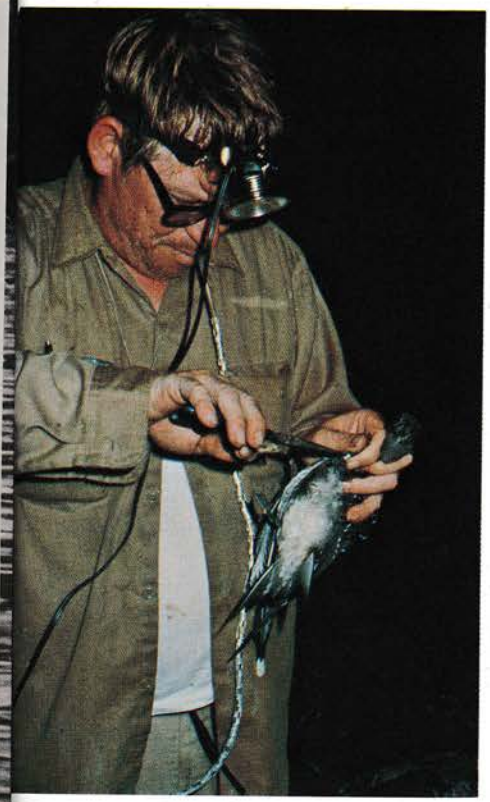
When I asked why it was necessary to actually collect the birds, Clapp answered, "Some work can be done by banding, other work must be done by collecting, yet most should be done by observation. I will try to preserve a population as much as anyone else. But my ultimate responsibility is the preservation of wildlife, not the protection of someone's feelings about a particular bird." Rather modestly he added, "Actually the last time I shot a bird was in March, 1968."

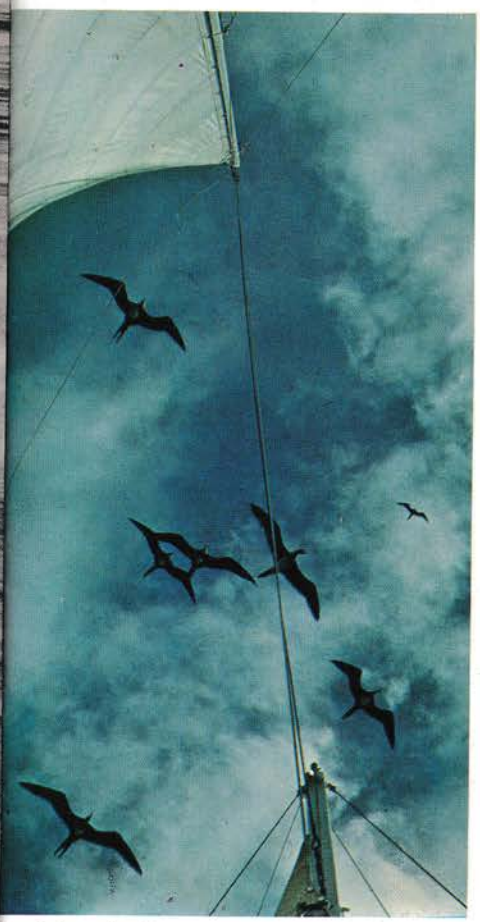
"After all," he added, "races of birds are very difficult to identify. You have to collect the animals first to be able to study them, to know exactly what they are. If I can show that this is a healthy viable breeding population of special significance, then legislation can be proposed to protect these resources. Which, by the way, means that we can protect every other living thing that is associated with it by making the area a wildlife refuge."

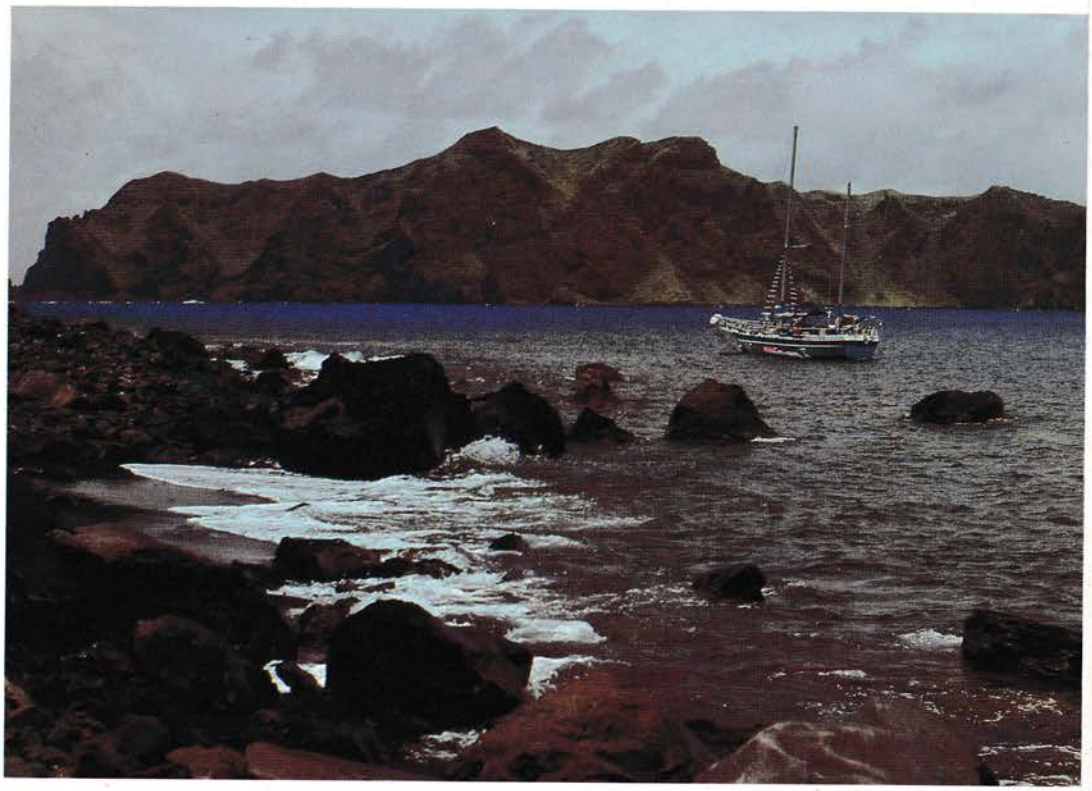
Very close up, Medinilla appears similar to the channel islands of Southern California: bold red cliffs topped with greenery fall steeply into a veridian sea. When still three miles out, Clapp's eyes were alight as he tentatively identified two species not previously reported from this island.

Dr. Hatch, at the helm, was also very pleased about the birds; but at that moment, with a crisp breeze blowing and over a thousand square feet of sail cracking above him, he was making memories that would salvage many a rainy eastern night.

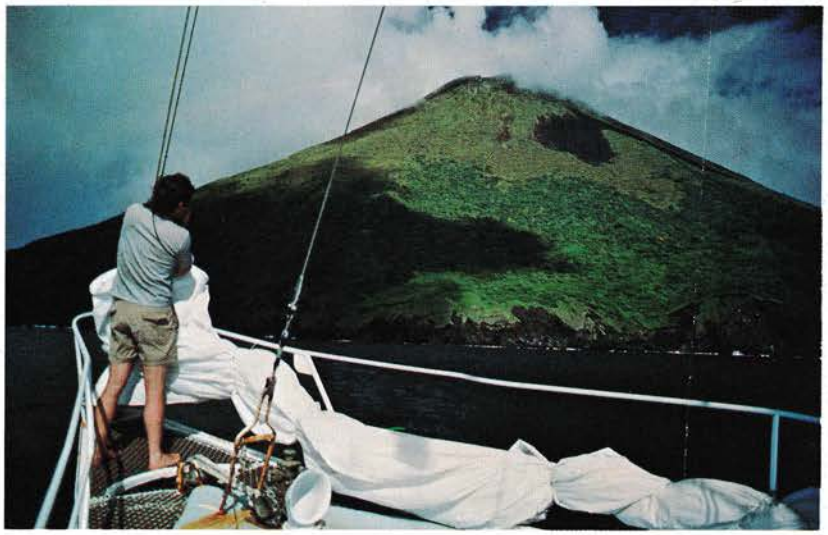
No one was to go ashore here as we couldn't get permission from the Navy to land without taking along two Explosive Ordinance Demolition team members (all expenses paid).



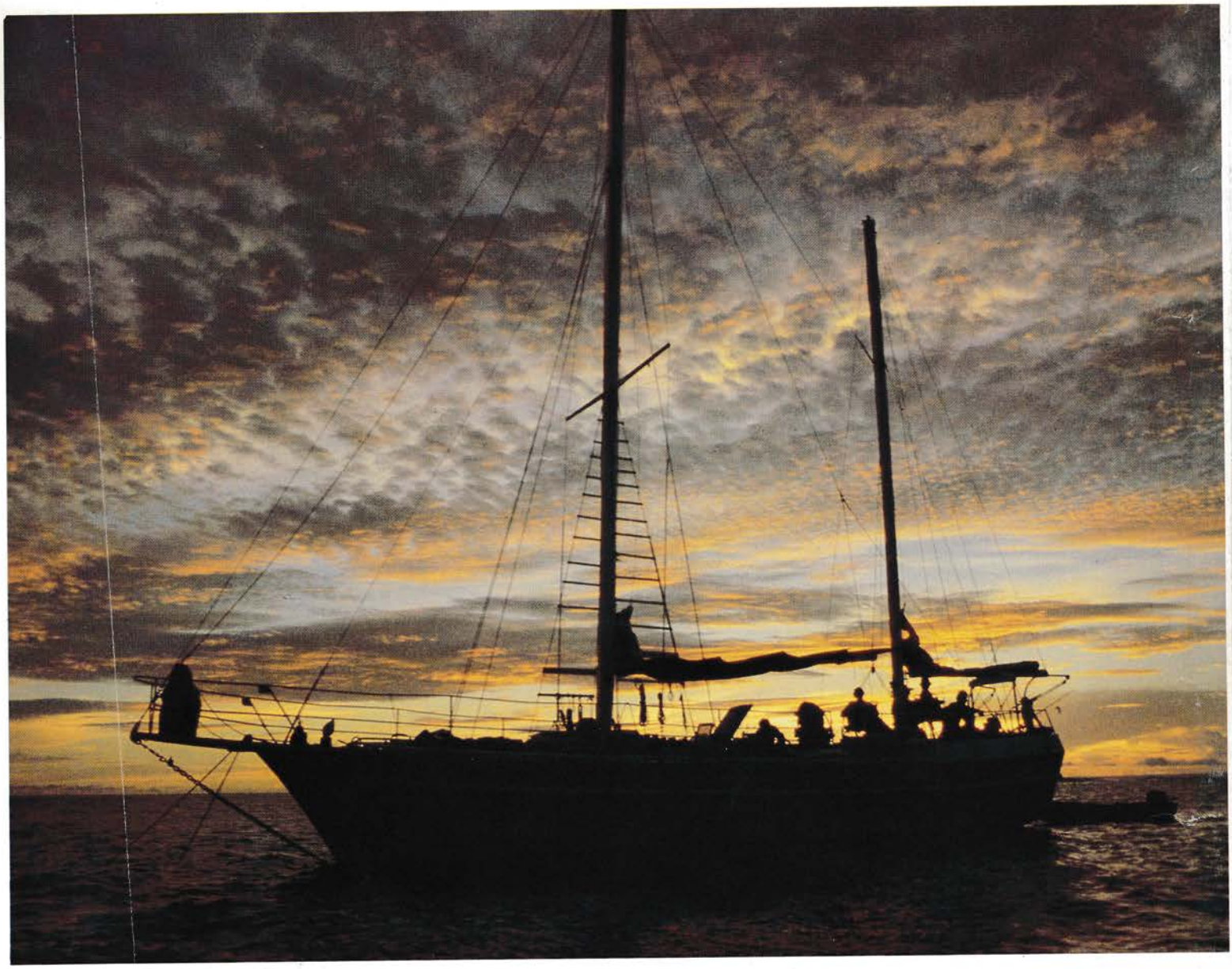


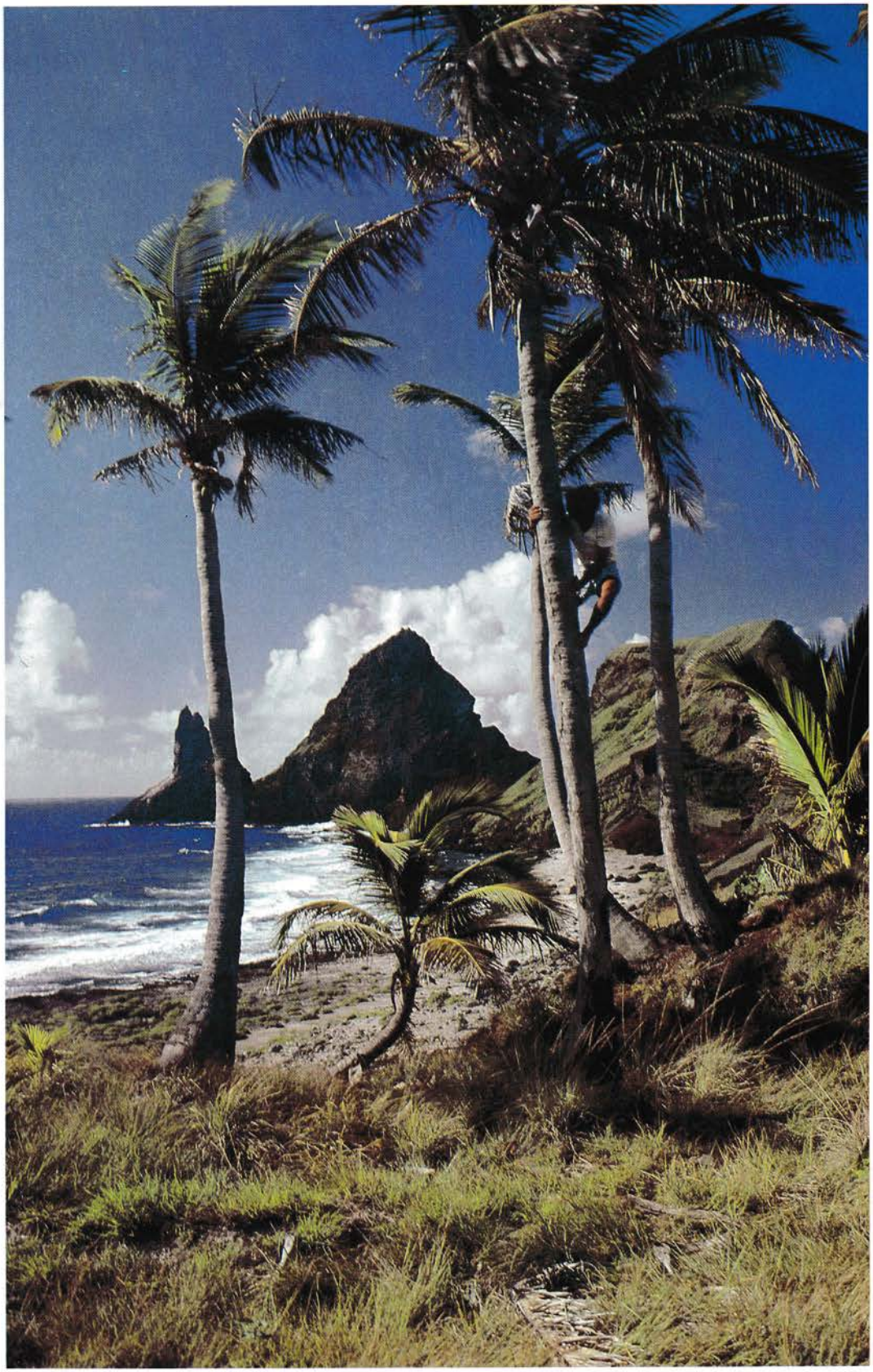


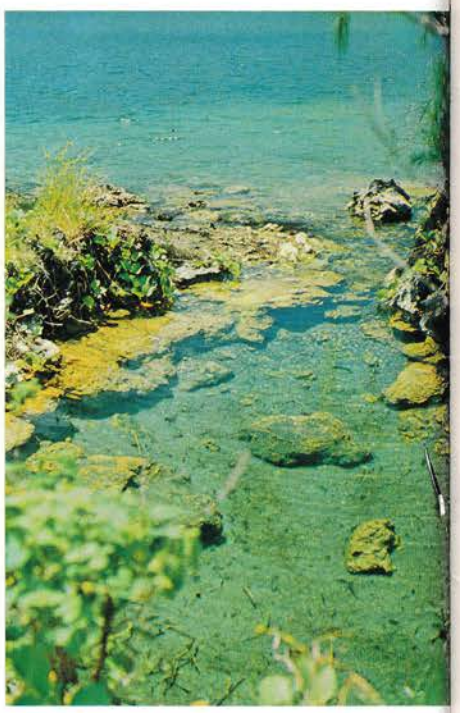
(above) Clapp banding a bird; frigate birds; (right) Pajaros; (right below) Lion's Den in the Maug atoll.



(above) Approaching Ascuncion; red-footed boobie; (left) newborn fairy tern and the egg he hatched from.







(clockwise from left) The Lion's Den; Pagan; adult sooty tern on Guguan; hot spring at Pagan Lake; fledgling kingfisher; Pagan's only village.

From the ship Medinilla looked like Lost Island for sure. We could see old wrecked trucks on top of the cliff and the bluffs were dotted with what must be 20mm cannon strafings.

"Oh, what beautiful Brown Boobies," shouted Dr. Hatch. The crew made a mad dash for the deck. "See," he continued, "there are both Brown and the Blue-faced or Masked Boobie." The crew members muttered to themselves and returned to their jobs below.

Roger said that from what he could see, the island has the largest nesting population of Brown Footed Boobies in the Pacific. "This is important," he said, "since a resource of this magnitude, considering as well the other relatively large nesting seabird populations here, clearly indicates that further, more intensive censusing and observation is needed." (In other words he wants to come back.)

Leaving for Guguan the next morning, we motored around the south end of Medinilla where it took on the appearance of some strange monster out of the past. Roger nicknamed it Isle Stegasauraus, because of the peaked backbone that ran down to a cavernous, gaping mouth. In and out of this deep dark hellhole flew innumerable squawking birds. The windward face of the island was even more imposing. There wasn't a single beach. Waves that had freely run the length of the Northeast Pacific expended their energy against bold headlands.

The gales of August then came upon us, as Dan Harding said, and our ride north through the night to find Guguan was a Nantucket sleigh ride. *Lions' Den* foamed along at six knots on a close reach, the following seas occasionally causing her to surf.

On reaching our next goal, as we got the anchor down, Harding jumped out to check the hook. He came back to the boat shaking his head. Not that our anchor wasn't well set; he was simply amazed at what he had seen. In the infinitely clear water a ten-pound jack swam up to him to say hello; then a hawksbill turtle glided past him within arms' reach. Incredible life! At that moment I lost control of my crew, and the bird fellows, watching every sort of fowl circle the boat, began to twitch noticeably.

How often does one get to observe an island that is a mirror image of itself: in adolescence and old age at the same time? Guguan is composed of two neighboring volcanoes, one active and the other a lush tropical paradise.

It's a high island which drops vertically into deep ocean water. The northeast trade winds blow steadily across its twin peaks. One is still active. The other is its grandfather, now covered with dense tropical growth. A hundred shades of green serve as the background for Mother Nature's easel. Her palate knife dashes white Boobies here, golden blooming plants there, all surrounded by a vale of blue sky dotted with puffy summer clouds.

The water close around the island is high in nutrients and oxygen. These conditions favor large populations of bait fish which provide a handy food supply for nesting and migratory birds. Some of these birds in turn serve as food for a small population of coconut crabs, which are at the apex of the terrestrial trophic pyramid.

Underwater, the geology and fauna is just as fantastic. Only 150 feet from shore the water is a frightening hue of bottomless blue. A sheer cliff rises to within 40 feet of the surface, its shelf covered with black volcanic sand and granite boulders. Snorkeling in closer to the surf-ridden rocky shoreline, one finds a terrazo of pentagonal plates that give the adventurer visions of finding the lost Atlantis. A deeper investigation reveals long columns of granite that fractured like crystal long ago as the lava very evenly cooled. Imagine if you will, a view of Devils Post Pile National Monument from above instead of below.

Although there is no reef formation, many of the boulders are covered with ample live coral growth of both the soft and stony varieties. In and out of these living rocks weave myriad colored fish, from tiny brilliant wrasses and butterflies to giant emperor angels and groupers. Occasionally, the chief of the marine food web cruises up out of the abyss; pelagic and reef sharks feed on the wounded or ill, thinning out the weak and securing available food for the healthy. These denizens of the deep are intimidated by no one, and certainly weren't by us.

After a morning hike, Jeremy J. returned to the boat quite full of smiles. "Birds everywhere, you know. There is also papaya," he continued, " but it hasn't much flesh. And what it does have is rather dull, mostly seedy and rather not worth eating." The British have such subtle ways of saying things.

It is a pleasant yet humbling experience to walk on an uninhabited island. No footprints, no trails and no trash. No human sounds. No sounds other than the constant squealing of birds, birds that have not learned to fear humans. A cardinal honeyeater, scarlet red across the head and back, perched on a twig, not two feet away and nodded its head in curiosity. It made me wonder who was studying who. As we walked through a nesting colony of sooty terns hundreds of pairs of flapping wings swarmed about our heads: it would have brought chills to an Alfred Hitchcock fan. Adult birds hesitated in mid-flight (click, snap, rewind) to shout warnings at us. Downy chicks screamed for lost mothers.

The gravelly black slopes of the active volcano make one think of the ancient days of the earth's formation. Steaming fumeroles, small cracks and openings around the mountain which allow pressure to be released, hissed around our feet as we scaled the volcano's sides. Any of these crevices could serve as future avenues for new lava flows. Peering down into them, one could see only black, dark depths that seemed to reach to the very pit of the earth, depths that could only have been adequately described by Jules Verne.

Hiking to the south end of the island, we traversed millions of years of succession, from the sterility of

volcanic ash to the gregarious life of an undisturbed ecosystem. Small skinks, lizard-like reptiles, darted under our feet as we carefully dodged burrows dug by coconut crabs, rats and megapodes, a chicken-like bird of the old order. We skirted the edge of the jungle (which was definitely impenetrable without porters and coolers of beer) and ambled through the low grasses watching the wildlife and firing off our cameras.

The main feature for the evening turned out to be bird banding. As the last dying rays of the sun neatly outlined great black rainclouds against an orange and turquoise sky, we sat down on a cliff face above a tern colony and awaited darkness. Below us clusters of tiny white dots marked the roosting places of adult terns. Other adults were still making their way in from the sea, carrying freshly caught food for their young.

Fledglings could only be seen when they moved, their coloration perfectly mimicking their background. Slightly older birds were practicing their flight techniques, rising into the wind, flying up the short valley then turning to soar down the cliffline and land again. Landing is something that sooty terns don't do very often; other than at breeding times, they never stop flying.

No sooner did darkness begin to set in and the birds to roost than a brilliant half moon rose, making our path to the colony easily traversable, but also keeping our potential captives awake.

Robbie caught the flopping birds while Roger taught Dan and me how to band. Outrageous! The first baby vomited a half-digested squid in my face, put a nice new streak on my pant leg and then proceeded to destroy my great right finger. Nevertheless, I felt good when the band was clamped on his leg. Fitted neatly between the hind toe and the first joint of the left leg (identifying him as being from the western Pacific and not one of millions of birds banded on the right leg in the East) this ring would bind the bird to me for life.

We banded more than 200 birds before the night was over. With revolting regularity each one regurgitated a small fish or squid; with uncanny accuracy, they polka-dotted our shoes with splotches of white; and with vicious abandon they pecked our pinkies raw.

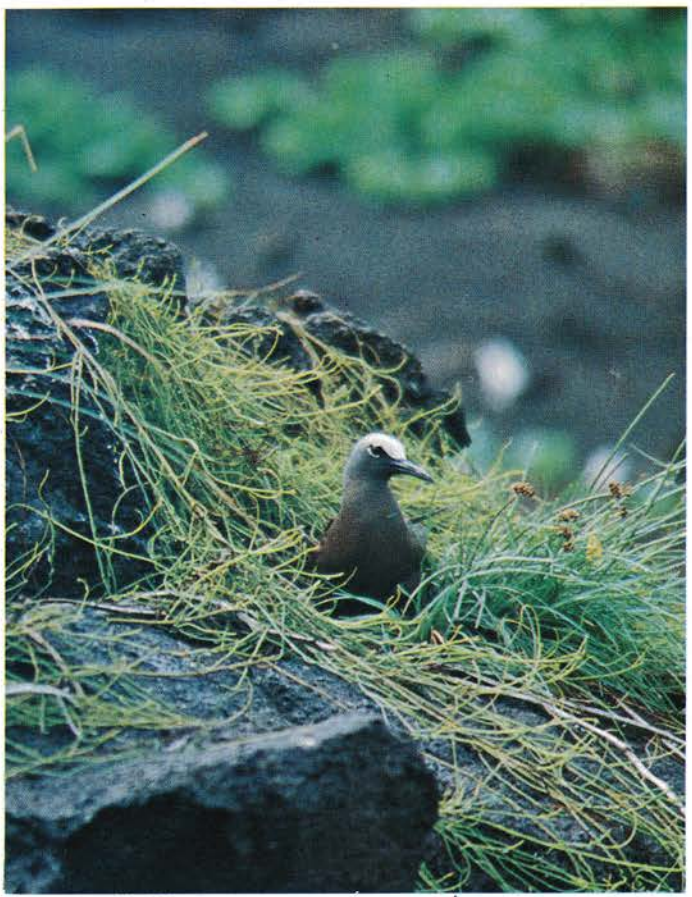
Roger just laughed at us and said that a good bander could do two birds a minute, alone.

Typhoon Hope passed to the north that night, and sent large storm swells that rocked the boat — the kind of rocking that eventually hurts your ribs like laughing too hard, so everyone looked forward to pulling up anchor and getting on to our next adventure, Pagan.

Although Pagan is an inhabited island and wasn't part of our itinerary, the crew found it convenient and necessary to stop there. It is structurally similar to Guguan, but on a much larger scale. The north end is an active volcano and the south is of much older origin, having sheer granite cliffs and high, inaccessible plateaus. There is plentiful vegetation, featuring sweet island bananas, fat watermelons and the juiciest wild pineapples ever devoured.

There are deep forests and large coconut groves. There are frightening vertical walls of rock with the first bounce hundreds of feet below. And there are gorgeous expanses of black sand beach. Here a Kodak instamatic could produce a picture postcard.

The people of the island greeted us cordially and helped with the water and supplies that we needed. Joseptha, a gracious lady who served us coffee, brought out two sooty tern chicks that she kept as pets; Jeremy promptly disappeared out the door with camera and binoculars flying over his shoulder like the Red Baron's scarf.



Common Noddy Tern

Bubbles found a monitor lizard, shoved the two foot-long reptile into a dingy brown bag (that Jeremy described as exuding a "delicate scent of decay") and headed for the hills.

So, with the bird watcher and technician wandering off into the sunset, the crew was left to enjoy the peaceful sort of evening now rather rare among "civilized" humans.

Birds sang out territorial songs. The greenery of the flat lands that surround the village slowly darkened. The shadowy cliffs to the south intrigued us with their changing faces. Then the flashing colors of sunset added a crescendo to the symphony of life around us.

To complete the Michener's Adventures in Para-

(above) Dan Harding on Guguan; (left) aboard Lion's Den.

dise image the villagers put on a pig roast in our honor. Succulent dripping ribs, fresh vegetables and piles of white rice were served with a cooled case of beer brought from the boat.

Later, as we voyagers made our bunks on the ship's deck and stared at the Milky Way, we had to smile to ourselves. How truly fortunate to be able to enjoy one day in the tranquil life of these people. We slowly closed our eyes and built imaginary huts on Pagan beaches.

The next day there were misty eyes as Pagan disappeared off our stern, as well as skeptical eyes as our bow pointed into waters that were seldom visited, especially during this time of year.

Over a hundred miles later we found the northernmost of the Marianas, a place seemingly lost in time. A throwback to an era when the earth was void of all but archaic life. A place not yet fit for man.

In the dark of night, barely visible on the dusky horizon, a black triangle mingled with the silhouettes of clouds. Pajaros. In the pre-dawn light a single strand of smoke could be seen wisping away from its peak. Sunrise defined sea birds feeding offshore, bait fish boiling the water and tremendous typhoon swells mushrooming off the barren rocky shoreline.

The crater of Pajaros fumes steadily and abundantly. All around the west face of the island are active fumeroles, not small ones like those on Guguan, but large holes in the side of the mountain blowing out smoke. Beneath the rim and each of the fumeroles are hideous yellow sulfur stains. The air stinks of unhealthy gases.

Visible through the clouds of steam and smoke streaming out of the cone are craggy broken ridges of dried lava which depict the volcano in its last violent throes of eruption. Magma that gurgled out of the volcano's mouth is frozen in time, like the death masks of Pompeii.

Two small southern promentories bear the island's only vegetation. There brown boobies, and their cousins the masked boobies, nest and rear their young.

The sheer awesomeness of Pajaros makes one sit back and take notice. The terrain looked frightful. Dr. Hatch and three crew members did scrounge up the courage to climb the southern headlands and measure the nesting birds. The rest of us found sufficient excuses to remain on board.

By that evening the weather conditions had deteriorated significantly. Here, at the northernmost island in the Marianas, 300 miles north of civilization, we were in no position to sit and wait for rescue.

So at dusk, as the sea birds were returning to the island after a day of feeding, we got our anchors free and turned south for the first time.

The following morning we were awakened to the sight of porpoises leaping all around the ship and leading us into the south pass of the three islets of Maug.

At one time this was a single volcanic cone. It was chilling to realize, as we passed through the rocky entrance, that we were actually sailing inside a volcano. A volcano that, like Krakatoa, built up such tremendous pressures that, in one cataclysmic explosion its entire center sunk, leaving a ring of islands, called an atoll.

To today's visitor only the dynamic inner faces of the islets are evidence of this calamity. They are very dangerous if not impossible to climb. The rocks are covered with beautiful vegetation, but the plants only grow on the rocks and are not really embedded in soil. Trails mark where boulders the size of houses have broken free from the upper slopes and tumbled through the underbrush to crash into the deep blue water of the lagoon.

Small, aggressive white-tipped reef sharks were a nuisance to our spear fishermen, but the ornithologists had a hey day. Boobies, fairy terns, tropic birds and even fruit bats were quite common. Maug is one of four islands named as potential wildlife sanctuaries by international convention, as well as one of two (Sarigan is the other) named by the government of the Northern Marianas. It has also been considered by the Japanese as a potential super-tanker port.

Only Dr. Hatch and crewmembers Danny and Robbie succeeded in getting over the rim and onto the back side of East Island. They returned tired, cut up and hungry. But, they also returned smiling, for not only had they done what most others could not do, they also returned with dinner for everyone — coconut crabs, some with as much meat in the claws as an average restaurant lobster would have. So, with sauce and butter dripping off our fingers and chins, we boiled and ate, cracked and picked and munched and dipped until we could barely drag our newly gained rotundness up on deck.

The following morning we set sail for islands to the south. With a fair northeast breeze cracking down on us, the only sounds other than those of nature was the sloucing of the hull as it cut through the following seas. Eight to nine foot breakers rolled under us and smashed away at the black volcanic cliffs that dress the windward shores. Multicolored birds screamed out of the jungle to investigate our masts and spars. Flying fish leaped out from our bow and skipped from wave to wave, often for a hundred yards or more.

Ascuncion proved to be more of a delight to the fishermen aboard than to the ornithologists, and the catch included runners, wahoo and yellow fin tuna. Large numbers of shearwaters did make their appearance here. They would glide up alongside us, then rise a few feet in the air and pause just long enough for a talented cameraman to frame them in the triangles of the sails. Then they would swoop off into the trough of a wave, wingtips miraculously never quite touching the water.

Shearwaters, like terns, fly constantly. It is said that they can sleep and fly at the same time. No one really knows too much about them. Where they are for ten months out of the year is still a good question. From the boat there was no indication that they were nesting on Ascuncion.

We took a southerly bearing for our next island, Agrihan, and entered the doldrums. The ocean became so calm that the white, cumulo-nimbus rain clouds building above Agrihan were mirrored on the surface of the water.

Approaching Agrihan from the north, one can see where the rim of the defunct volcano once split open, allowing the last lava flow to run like a river over the side of the caldera and down to the sea. Now it appears as a flood of deep green, rushing through the yellows and browns of the sloping mountainside. Again, there were few birds seen, nothing to compare to Guguan, Medinilla or Maug. This island has been sporadically inhabited.

During the night we passed Pagan and arrived at Sarigan. This third island north of Saipan and one of the two designated as a wildlife sanctuary proved to be quite a lesson to us in island ecology. Before we sighted a single bird, we saw the goats. As we cautiously rounded the island, we counted over 150 of them. Where were the birds?

The answer we found ashore. During the time the

island was inhabited, the goats had been regularly harvested. When the humans left, there was nothing in the islands's ecology to control the goats. With a relatively unlimited food supply, they propagated to the hilt, the competition for food became keener and now the goats are literally chewing the island bald.

Add to this the wild pig population rooting up the soil (after the goats have neatly trimmed it) and the result is one colossal erosion problem. All of this contributes to the relative lack of vegetation on the island, therefore the lack of available habitat space, ergo few birds. The introduction of the monitor lizard (which eats anything, including birds from the egg to the adult) and rats have not helped the situation.

So, although we enjoyed our fresh goat and pig (open pit barbequed that night) a bird delight, Sarigan is not. If this island is to be maintained as a wildlife reserve, as the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas wishes it to be, then some serious thought must be given to solving the problem of introduced pests.

Anatahan, an island much larger than Sarigan and only twenty miles to the south, was to be our last stop and our last night at anchor. Making our usual sunup landfall, we found Typhoon Irving was sending in a nasty swell from the west, which made our expected anchorage unavailable. Sailing around to the south we came to a little bay which (other than the flies) turned into a beautiful stop.

Again, there were very few sea birds. But the ornithologists satisfied themselves with chasing through the brush after the many little ground birds that inhabit the island. The crew played hide and seek with a curious shark that tried to steal everything they speared, while Danny bagged another goat, which was promptly barbequed and devoured.

Early the next morning the crew began preparation for our last crossing. As the anchor came out of the black volcanic sand for the last time, Anatahan said good-bye in a way that only a tropical isle could. Vampirish fruit bats winged in and out of coconut palms. Grey reef herons that had been feeding along shore spread their graceful wings for a demonstration in gliding. Common noddy terns squawked as we rounded the headland. Yet, compared to Medinilla and Guguan, our bird people were disappointed with the feathered fauna of Anatahan. Said Roger, "Too many goats, and damned few birds."

Anatahan grew smaller behind us as we coasted along. The wind was steady and from our port quarter, which is normally a sailor's delight. But the seas were becoming confused, there were nasty looking thunderheads on the horizon and the sky was taking on an unnatural look. The weather report from Hawaii mentioned nothing in our area. Yet each crewman was glancing from the seas to the sails and around at the changing cloud patterns. For three weeks we had sailed through the middle of an infamous typhoon belt. Two had missed us close at hand. We were on our last leg and somehow we sensed that Mother Nature would not let us off so easy. We had seen her best. Now there were silent prayers that we wouldn't see her worst.

Omen. Logan saw a brilliant display as a satellite broke out of its orbit and fell through the earth's atmosphere. Like a Roman candle on the fourth of July, the man-made instrument burst into greens, blues and reds as it disintegrated over Anatahan, sending showers of crimson raindrops to light the disappearing island. We gaped at it, then peered ahead at the flashes of lightning in the growing squalls before us.

By midnight the world was veiled in rain. ***Lions' Den*** drove through the water churning up new visions. The ocean was alive with bioluminescence. The foamy wake alongside literally sparkled.

At two in the morning it broke loose. Tropical Storm Judy (soon to become Typhoon Judy) had unexpectedly formed. With no weather report to warn us, we had left Anatahan just in time to sail right into her loving arms.

The sudden lurching of the boat, a scream from the helm and the sound of breaking dishes in the galley sent all hands on deck. Momentarily we stood in awe. The rain was pelting down on us and lightning was flashing all around the boat. The seas had gotten up so that Harding was staggering with the wheel like John Wayne in ***The Wake of the Red Witch. Lions' Den*** herself was charging through the seas like a Yankee Clipper on the homebound run.

Then she did a nice parabolic arc on a grey-beard-er which snapped us back to our senses. "Get the main in!" Logan shouted. "Danny, sheet her in and for God's sake don't let go or we'll be tossed overboard like grapes out of a sling-shot."

Down came the mainsail. Three wet bodies crawled out along the boom, fisting in the heavy cloth, trying to tie it down securely, all the while glancing at the cresting waves that pitched the ten-ton yacht like a cork in the Colorado rapids. Oh, the glories of a Walter Mitty at sea!

Shortened down to jib and mizzen, we still made the lights of Saipan by 4 a.m. With a man on the helm and two on the bow, we worked our way around the hidden reef that extends westward from the island until we could make out Tango Buoy, the guiding light to the entrance of Saipan Harbor. First dawn brought clearing skies, hot coffee, and adrenalin smiles.

We joked with the ornithologists about the rusting hulks of wrecks strewn in the harbor. But each crewman knew in the pit of his stomach that with a little less luck or a mistake at the wrong time, and somebody could someday have been pointing at our resting place.

Once on shore we scanned the front page of the local newspaper: seventeen sailors lost at sea in a storm during the Fastnet race in England; and a massive oil spill was destroying other paradises in the Gulf of Mexico.

A moment of silence passed. There was no need to say more. ∎