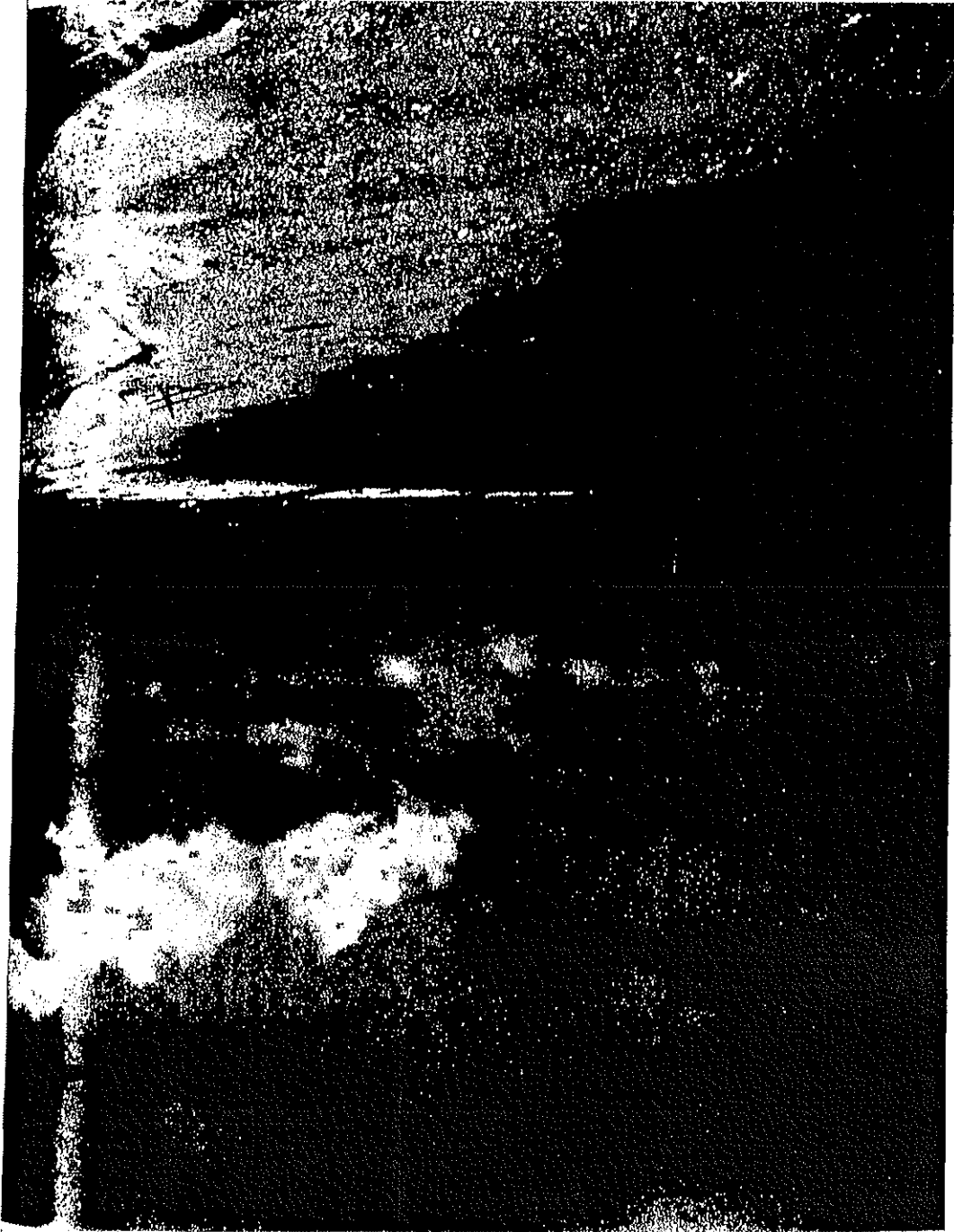


# Ibbon Itsi:



A lame frigate-bird  
 swoops for tossed  
 fish. The birds are  
 fed daily, to keep  
 returning. Without  
 the lame bird  
 decoys, the wild  
 ones would not  
 know that easy  
 food is available -  
 and the sport of  
 'Ibbon Itsi' would  
 cease.

The Nauruan 'national sport' involves catching  
 a bird considered to be a messenger of the gods.

# ! To Catch a Frigate-Bird

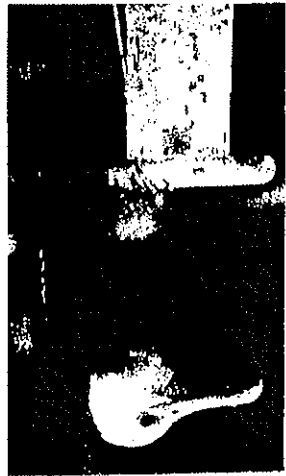


Geo 9(2):70-77

1987

DR. STEPHEN GARNETT  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
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*The wing, a young frigate-bird (above) chosen for its strength and richness of voice. Although tethered, the wing has sufficient cord attached to its leg to allow it to fly in broad circles while calling - enticing wild birds within catching distance. A young least frigate-bird with marked wings (below) - despite the gaps in its wings, a lame bird can still catch a fish in mid-air with ease.*



THE SKY ABOVE NAURU was blue and empty when the fisherman walked to of its hooked bill, and soared away into the sky. Then another swooped - and another. The routine was evidently familiar to both birds and man. It was then that I noticed each bird had a 'window' in its wing, not just a missing feather, but a distinct hole in one or more of the flight feathers; and each of these holes was a different shape.

I was fascinated. There are many ways of marking birds, but most methods affect behaviour, or are difficult to sight. These birds had obviously been deliberately marked by a technique I had never heard of - a mark not only obvious but apparently leaving the birds as aerobic as ever. Although wild and free to fly about the Pacific, these frigate-birds evidently preferred to be fed by the hand that had caught and tamed them.

Behind the beach were frigate birds that had not been released. Some were in a cage, others were tethered to poles, but most were atop a tall frame of breadwood and bamboo apparently built especially for the purpose. Puzzled that so much attention should be given to wild birds, I approached an old man on the beach for explanation. It was from this old man that I learnt of *Ibdon Iki*, the ancient Nauruan sport of catching frigate-birds.

Frigate birds are among the most aerial of seabirds. So aerial, in fact, that they daren't dive for fish in the sea - if they do their feathers become too waterlogged to fly. To be sure, some do snatch fish from the water's surface: but the frigate birds' great skill is piracy. They will harry terns and boobies (more adept at fishing than they), until these harassed birds are forced to disgorge their most recent catch. The frigate-bird then plunges beneath the bulled bird, intercepting the falling fish before it hits the water. Such aerial dexterity was just the skill needed at the Nauruan beach where I stood watching.

The next time the man tossed a fish, one frigate-bird plunged after it. Pumping the air with its metre-long wings to gain speed, the bird caught the shimmering arc at its zenith.

Each catcher of frigate-birds has his own individual mark (above), made by clipping the bases of the flight feathers - such marks do not appear to alter the flight performance of the bird, and last only as long as the life of the feather (usually about a year).

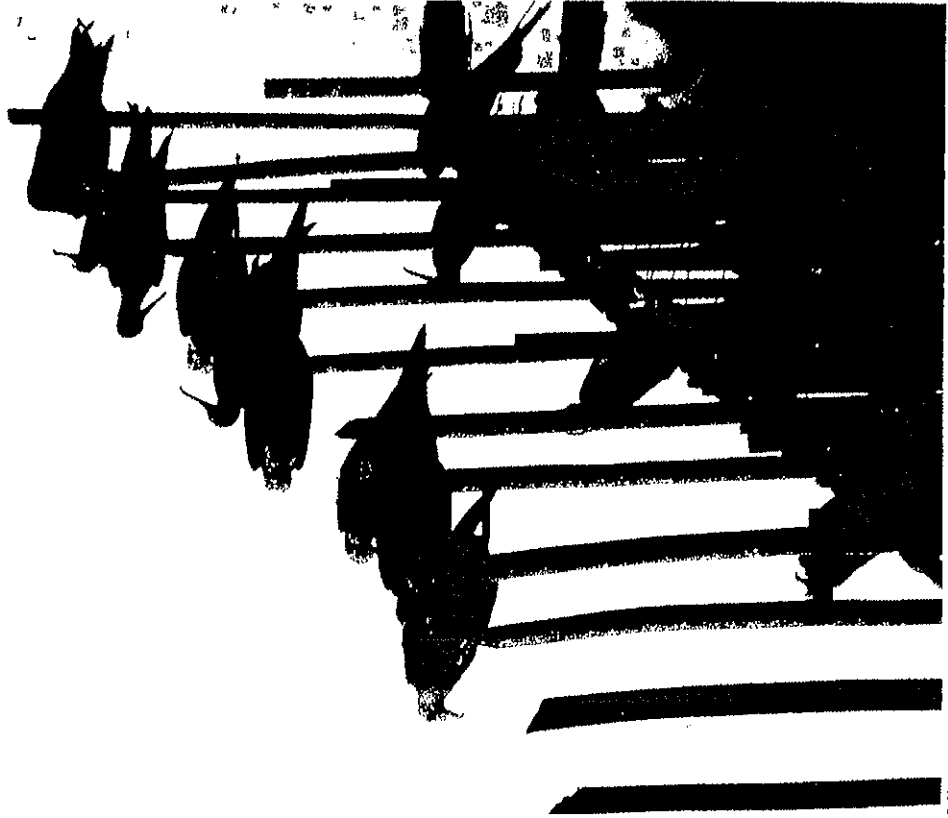


only recently has this rather painful practice been abandoned. For about an hour, the fish is swung backwards and forwards. If the bird has not taken the fish in that time, the owner will take a three-hour break. The pattern of an hour on, and three hours off, will continue all day until eventually the fish is snapped up by the starving bird and swallowed: after that, most frigate-birds take food readily. In two or three weeks a young bird can be fully trusted; once it starts feeding it is as tame as a saddled horse. The few *adult* birds caught, however, are *never* trusted, remaining tethered to the frame - never to fly freely again. The frame, called an *eya*, to which they are tethered, also serves as a roosting place for the young, free-flying birds. In the dawn light, the frames bristle with the silhouettes of young *cap* (male) and *aren* (female) frigate-birds. Unable to hunt in the dark, frigate-birds need somewhere to sleep, and despite the discomfort of their recent experience, there can be few places where they are treated with such hospitality. Before release, each bird is given the mark which I had seen at the beach, rather as one might brand free-ranging cattle. The hole is created by clipping the bars at the base of several flight feathers. The windows can be a whole variety of shapes and sizes, each equivalent to a personal brand. Although Nauruans consider their tame birds less elegant in flight than their wild companions, birds with enormous holes caught tossed food as skillfully as those yet unmarked - just as they would do during the natural process of moult.

THE SPORT CALLED *Ibbon lisi* is a competition between two groups of men who, two or three times a year, spend about a week attempting to catch as many frigate-birds as possible. To enable this competition to take place, tame birds have to be sustained throughout the year. It was these tame birds that I had observed being fed on the beach. The birds coming to the beach to be fed are young ones - only the young ones will return after they have been released. Although they eventually grow older and fly away, they have by then brought in more wild young birds to take their place. The birds in the cage had been caught the previous day and were now taking the first steps in the process of being tamed. They were obviously not enjoying it. Their wings were bound with twine to stop them from flapping, and they were tethered to their perches. To tame such a wild bird, the handler must first subdue its spirit, as a horse-breaker may pacify a brumby. The Nauruans employ a method once also used to tame falcons in Europe - denying them food for three days until they are weak with hunger. (Any that appear unable to survive such privation however are quickly released, for the death of a frigate-bird in captivity is considered a very bad omen.) Captive frigate-birds which persevere are placed on poles outside the cage where, at last, they are offered fish by their captor. He ties a small, freshly-caught reef fish to a string, and swings it before the bird's beak. In the old days, he would have included with the fish a thin slice of his own flesh, to encourage devotion.

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Birds perch on the homecoming roost (above). At night, more than one hundred birds may appear, and during wet weather (when the frigate-birds are more common) extensions may have to be built. Young frigate-birds await taming on the *etea* (right).



OAKEN STAKE

**B**OTH GREAT AND LEAST frigate-birds (*Fregata minor* and *Fregata ariel*) travel thousands of kilometres to get to Nauru. No frigate-birds nest among the phosphate and coral pinnacles of the island's centre, nor on any other island within 500 kilometres. Nauruans have caught some birds that were banded as chicks on the atoll of Kiribati (the local name for Christmas Island, a part of Kiribati), nearly 3,000 kilometres to the east.

It is a long way to come for a sport in which, initially, their participation is involuntary. The first wild frigate-bird is captured. The contest is as much between the spirits embodied by the frigate-birds as between birds and people – so the contestants must first prepare their souls. They gather in the *kamadu*, a sacred place where they must abstain absolutely from the game actually begins at least a week before the first wild frigate-bird is captured. The contest is between the spirits embodied by the frigate-birds as between birds and people – so the contestants must first prepare their souls. They gather in the *kamadu*, a sacred place where they must abstain absolutely from the

In the water each team has one man with a bucket of fish. Beside him is another, ready to bind the birds when captured. Two men stand beneath the *etea* holding long poles (used to encourage the tethered frigate-birds to flap their wings). On the beach itself are the catch-

After due preparation, the two teams move to their allotted positions to await arrival of sticks. At the appointed time the two teams sometimes divided into two territories by a line of the *aste*, the beach below the *etea*, which is sap exuded by the cut stem of a coconut flower, living entirely off coconut meal, and toddy – the losing her life. The men must also eat no fish, who came in sight of either the *kamadu* or the *aste* (the site of the game itself) was in danger of company of women. In earlier times, a woman



in fact, a surprisingly high proportion of frigate-birds speeding wing, sometimes 30 metres above the ground. Unable to swerve in time, the wing's leading edge strikes the cord, and the weight swings backwards, then under, wrapping around the wing until the bird's flight is arrested and it begins to fall towards the water. Just as a fly fisherman must be able to both cast, and land fish, so must a frigate-bird catcher be able to bring his bird down within his own territory. To land it in the opposition's territory is the equivalent of scoring an 'own goal' in football. As soon as a bird is landed, it is tied up by the fish-thrower's offside, and placed (with the rest of the catch) in the cage at the top of the beach. As many as a hundred may be caught by a team during a single competition.

Over and over goes the weight: a balanced, rhythmic, patient motion. Finally a wild bird dips within range and the team leader launches his *abio*. The birds are swift and highly manoeuvrable, so the weight must be swung hard, fast, and at precisely the right point in front of the wing. Many throws will miss or be skillfully avoided. Rarely – very rarely – is a bird hit and damaged.

By now all the catchers are ready, each holding loosely in one hand a 35-metre coil of fine cord, the *abio*, while the opposite hand spins the weighted end of this cord. Traditionally the *abio* was made of woven coconut fibre, and the weight was a clam shell, but these days modern materials are more usually employed.

The tame birds swoop readily to take the proffered food, and thus encouraged gradually the wild birds gain confidence. The wild frigate-birds often respond to one or other of the tethered birds more than the others, and this one captive is made to flap more vigorously.



The messenger of the gods emblematised in stone (right), outside Nauru House, Melbourne. One of the best frigate-bird-catchers (below) displays his *abio*, and the weight used to carry the line into the air. A good catcher may have half a dozen such lines attached to his belt during a competition – remarkably, they never seem to become tangled. At this stage the men wait. When they are not chanting to encourage the birds, all is silent but for the cries of the frigate-birds on the frame. One in particular, called the *eiwong*, has been chosen for the power of its voice, and trained to call when tantalised by a fish held just out of reach. This now is no regular feeding exercise: there is no waving arm or other enticement. The birds must come of their own accord, encouraged by the diligence of those who have fed them between competitions. Finally the frigate-birds arrive and begin to circle. The players search for birds without markings. Only now can fish be offered to bring the birds lower. Captive birds on the *eiwa* made to flap, and the *eiwong* made to cry out.



(Above) Collecting toddy – the sap of the coconut – from the cut stalk of a coconut flower, for a week before 'Ibbon Iisi' begins. The contestants must live on only coconut meat and toddy. (Below) Young men attempt to catch frigate-birds. 'Ibbon Iisi' is a game played entirely by males – in earlier times women saw the event at their peril.

Frigate birds are, to Nauruans, very much birds of the spirit. When captive and tamed, they are more deities than pets. Some are given names and are remembered in stories for years afterwards. The frigate birds have about them the nobility of falcons or racehorses, and are treated with the same respect.

Nauru has the reputation of an island being mined into oblivion for its phosphate. On its perimeter, however, is a rich cultural heritage of which *Ibbon Iisi* is only a small part – a heritage that has flourished even through the changes brought with prosperity.

The old man on the beach, my mentor, had been a team leader. A short while later his children and grandchildren came out to practise their skills. There is every indication that *Ibbon Iisi* will be played for many years to come on Nauru. Certainly, whenever I visit this isolated island in the central Pacific, I shall always pay homage to the regal masters of the *etea*.

□

*Freelance biologist and journalist STEPHEN GARNETT is RAOU sub editor for GEO and author of several books on birds*

AT THE END of the week, a major celebration is held – at least for the victors. For the losers it is a time of unbridled shame and distress. To begin with, they have to provide all the materials for the victory feast of the opposing team and their entire families. Such a feast may require as many as ten fat and expensive pigs, as well as fishes and chickens. To add to the shame, the losers are sometimes ordered by the winners to prepare the food and even to wait on those who defeated them. At the feast, the losers are the constant butt of ridicule and derisive songs, especially the captain of the losing team, who is obliged to attend to accept the insults – even if the rest of his team has managed to avoid the occasion.

In this feasting ritual the two groups no longer relate to each other as people; rather it is the spirits of the frigate-birds that demand great praise from those who have been favoured, and it is the spirits that failed to help the losing team that are being denigrated.



(Above) Collecting toddy – the sap of the coconut – from the cut stalk of a coconut flower, for a week before 'Ibbon Iisi' begins.