

## Midway Atoll and the Island of Hawaii

Trip report by John Brodie-Good

9<sup>th</sup> March 2009

After 16 hours in the air yesterday this afternoon's onward flight to Midway Atoll would take nearly another five. Originally named for being halfway around the world from Greenwich, it is also halfway across the Pacific Ocean. I met my fellow travellers at the somewhat plush charter air terminal at Honolulu's International Airport for our 1600 departure. Our two sun-tanned pilots said they wanted to wait a few minutes longer before take off to ensure we landed well after sunset to minimize the risk of hitting the breeding seabirds as we landed. A strong wind was blowing from the east as we took off and climbed through the bumpy skies before turning west-northwest into the late afternoon sunshine. The twin turbo-prop Gulfstream I plane boasted Rolls Royce on the engines and from her age had obviously had many adventures from years in the air. We were soon at our cruising altitude of just over 20,000 feet and leaving what most people call the Hawaiian Islands behind us, flying over Ni'ihau, populated by only native Hawaiians and pretty much closed to the outside world. Our 1250 mile course would take us over coral atolls and islets including legendary place names such as French Frigate Shoals and Laysan itself. Midway Atoll was only handed over to the US Fish and Wildlife Service from the US Navy in 1996 and these trips now are only the second series allowing the public to visit. The first open years were deemed a failure as the atoll was opened for tourism including fishing and diving but the first tourists showed little heed for the tropical seabird colonies which quickly began to suffer from the human invaders. This initial programme was stopped and a new limited series of 'educational' small group tours were allowed instead, Even these programmes ceased in 2002, fuelled by the collapse of the original airline providing the charter flights. The atoll re-opened only in 2008 and after a successful season which sold out in 48 hours, this year's license was granted. Designated a National Wildlife Refuge in 1988, the atoll forms part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. Already the global economic meltdown has caused a number of the planned trips to be cancelled and it struck me as place to go to sooner rather than later, whilst the opportunity exists.

I tried to doze but I guess the excitement prevented me and so I spent some time standing behind the pilots watching the Pacific cloudscapes below. Confidence was clearly the order of the day as the pilot had blocked the sun completely on his side of the cockpit window and the co-pilot went off back to the loo and to chat to some of the other passengers. I fetched my camera to take a few record shots thru the screen and sat back down as we flew forever westwards into the now fading daylight. A coal red sunset could be seen on the portside which eventually turned deep orange and then finally even that started to fade. Finally a change in engine tone as we started our descent and the pilot came on and said 12 minutes to Midway. The sky was now completely dark as we descended into the low scattered cloud over the ocean. All interior lights were off and the small plane started to flicker as we got lower. All of a sudden through the windscreen ahead I could see two rows of white lights, Midway. I hope we didn't hit any of the

precious birds we had come so far to see. It appeared we didn't and we were soon taxiing behind the firetruck, whose main job was to clear the albatrosses off the tarmac ahead of us. Even through the windows, you could see hundreds of white blobs, inches from the edge of the runway, Laysan Albatrosses galore. As we deplaned a pair of golf buggies awaited us, and we drove the few minutes to the former officer's accommodation block, our home for the next seven nights. Laysans were just everywhere whilst flying around, within inches of the buggies were what were clearly Bonin Petrels! This place is just surreal and its dark! A nearly full moon shone down on the assembled masses and I mean masses. Our block was in an area of other buildings and just everywhere, feet apart, were adult Laysans, mostly pairs and all of them sleeping. Amongst them trios however of displaying birds, presumably sub-adult non-breeders, dancing and bill clacking. Teenagers keeping everyone else awake.... Outside my room window a pair so close, I could reach down and touch them if I wanted. Some clearly had chicks, some chicks were sleeping on their own, their parents being out at sea and even a few, presumably added eggs could also be seen in the little nests. We had already had a quick briefing from one of the staff, stay on the roads and if you use a torch, point it downwards. The Bonin Petrels were attracted to light and every few feet you could find one on the roadway or just beside it. Chasing each other, often in pairs, just yards from your head. In spite of the warning on my second walk a Bonin hit me square in the chest but thankfully seemed none the worse and flew off. At the bottom of the steps of our building, gates led out to the road, these were to stop the 'dancers' from blocking the bottom of the stairs! As I type I can hear the chorus outside, maybe one more short walk before turning in. Is this really real?

### 10<sup>th</sup> March

Time differences woke me at 0500, and just after 0600 I went back outside and soon after the first signs of daylight. As the light brightened all I could see were Laysans, everywhere and all of them were starting to wake up. The chicks coming to life sitting in their little 'nest mounds', the adults stretching and greeting each other. The displaying started all around although in fact the vast majority of birds were sub-adults and practicing and looking for their lifelong mate of the future. Bill clacking, whistling like high-pitched oystercatchers and braying like Antarctic penguins. Pairs, trios and small groups of six to eight birds together. In amongst them breeding adults were returning from the ocean, feeding their hungry chicks and then taking off on their next feeding foray. The last of the Bonin Petrels disappeared out to sea for the day. A lone Great Frigatebird drifted over a line of distant Ironwood trees. A few Pacific Golden Plover fed amongst their much larger neighbours whilst small groups of cage bird type bright yellow and white Canaries also appeared with scattered pairs of also introduced Common Mynas. White Terns whizzed around the skies, buildings and trees, newly returned for their next breeding season, egg-laying still to happen. As you walked around the island they would often come and fly around a few feet from your head, giving their distinctive chattering little calls. Breakfast at the Clipper House, overlooking the main lagoon of the Atoll, the waters an incredible glowing pale turquoise whilst Laysans and a few Black-footed Albatross's glided by whilst small flocks could be seen bathing out in deeper water. Who needs Bora Bora? The first Red-tailed Tropicbirds appeared, in pairs and small groups, their rasping calls filling the skies. They too had start started to think about

breeding and the birds often were doing their parachuting display flights and flying backwards. A few Black-footed Albatrosses could be seen on the ground amongst their whiter cousins, keeping much more distant from the buildings and trees. Our small group was being guided by Breck Tyler and Martha Brown, a delightful couple from California who had spent much time on Midway since 1988 and often led the annual albatross count. Their love of the place, personal knowledge of the birds and other wildlife greatly enhanced the trip. We walked to the US Fish and Wildlife building and Tracy gave us an excellent introduction to the island via a powerpoint presentation and handed out maps telling us where we could not go (!) Most of the island's beaches are off limits, for the benefit of the endangered and endemic Hawaiian Monk seals, a fine example of which was hauled out on the one beach we could go onto. Four species have a minimum distance of 150 feet, these were one, Green Turtles were the second, the endemic Laysan Teal the third and the occasional visiting Short-tailed Albatross the fourth. An adult Laysan peered in through the glass door at one point, as if seeking shade from the rapidly warming morning outside. Midway has the largest colony of Laysans in the world, over 470,000 breeding pairs in 2007. Every year a group of bird counters are flown in at the end of December, beginning of January for three weeks. The initial results of the 2008 count was a 20% decline but the scientist's view seemed to be a natural fluctuation, for which I hope they are correct. Following a decline on Laysan, Midway now hosts the largest colony of Black-foots too, but a mere 22,000 pairs in comparison. Back outside, running around below some Ironwood trees one then two Bristle-thighed Curlews, a gorgeous buffy member of their family. As the group heading back to our quarters I walked in the ever increasing heat to a group of distant trees in pursuit of the curlew which had now flown off. Black Noddies had also arrived back to breed and were busy collecting nest material from the side of the roads and then flying up into the trees as they built their nests. Almost every spare piece of ground had Laysans and their chicks, just everywhere. In some ways this place exceeded the Galapagos in terms of sheer spectacle. I found one of the curlew and enjoyed more views but a little too distant for decent photos. Back in the main settlement again and more White Terns and tropicbirds including one sitting tight under a bush, egg still to be laid. Another two curlew, they are partial to eating the island's mice which must be a sight. I never saw one on a beach the whole week. Lunch at the Galley again, sitting outside in the shade, watching albatrosses, tropicbirds and White Terns flying by. A Glaucous-winged Gull flew past, a rare visitor, with 50 White Terns in hot pursuit. Just superb. At 1330 we piled into the two buggys and went off on a tour of the island to get our bearings with Tracy and Martha driving and leading. We drove first towards the south, stopping at Rusty Bucket at the end of a WW2 runway with scattered Laysans (of course) and some stunning Black-foots on the deck with their larger, and more chocolate-mottled chicks just above the beach. Four distant monk seals could be seen on a closed beach. Three more curlews flew over the turquoise waters behind. We then went back up to the live runway, stopping at the rainwater catchment pond by the big orange and white water towers. Two Pintail and a American Wigeon were completely eclipsed by a pair of re-introduced Laysan Teal which suddenly swam out from in front of us and then proceeded to mate. A surprisingly handsome small duck, and one of the world's rarest, otherwise only found on Laysan itself. Breeding success on Midway has been very good already, in spite of loosing some birds in 2008 due to avian flu. A small flock of Pacific Golden Plovers and Turnstones

were also present with a tattler walking the shallows on the far side. We drove all along the southern side of the runway, albatross city of course and I paid particular note to the area where a sub-adult Short-tailed had been seen recently. We drove round to the harbour area, stopping briefly for a hybrid Laysan/Black-foot, unfortunately asleep but looking like a pale grey Blackfoot. At the turtle beach a number of Pacific Green Turtles were hauled out basking in the sun. The rest of the afternoon just slipped away enjoying the Laysans and as night fell the Bonin Petrels started coming in again.

### 11<sup>th</sup> March

Despite a stiff breeze and threatening skies our trip over the water to the uninhabited Eastern Island was on. At 0800 we boarded a superb little 'rescue' boat with 2 x 425hp outboards on the back. The trip that normally took 15-20 minutes took about four as we raced over the turquoise waters and climbed up the stairs of the little jetty. This island also had runways and buildings but all of them had been taken down including a 'secret' tracking station one of our party had help build in 1951. It confirmed to the Americans that Russia had indeed gone to Space, picking up 'Sputnik' as it travelled over the Pacific during the 'cold war'. The density of breeding Laysans and Black-foots seemed even higher over here but like on Sand Island the birds did not favour the concrete runways although the ones here were breaking up very badly. They will probably be gone in 10 years time. Small flocks of Sooty Terns called overhead, they too just starting to return to breed, their numbers yet to really build up. The occasional Red-footed Booby and a single Brown Booby flew over. Great Frigatebirds breed here and could be seen cruising around and sitting in some of the small bushes. White Terns seemed abundant too, often hovering feet from our faces as if trying to work out if they could land on us and perhaps lay an egg? Occasional light drizzle fell as the clouds scurried by but mostly we were bathed in sunshine and the morning's wind fell away. As we slowly picked our way past thousands of albatross chicks and adults we came to a tiny, recently dug little pond. At least 20 plus Laysan Teal were present including a male with quite a whitish head, one of the original stock from Laysan Island itself. As a lot of the group dawdled I impatiently wanted to reach the other end of this small island where some decoy albatross sat amongst the real ones. These decoys had yellow heads however, their 'beaks' pointing skywards. I was slightly further ahead of the group and started scanning through the Laysans. A large albatross with a yellow head filled my field of view, a stunning adult Short-tailed! Sitting down, it initially tucked its head in but quickly re-awoke. It seemed slightly nervous, even though we were a fair distance from it. I started taking photos and within minutes it was standing. It preened briefly, stretched its wings and then was off, running towards the sea, into the light breeze and was soon airborne. It looked like it owned the sky, quipped David from our group and somehow he was right. Structurally more like the great albatross than its North Pacific cousins. First it flew left and then turned and came back right. It seemed to be thinking about landing but then veered off out to sea. I followed it for some minutes before it disappeared from sight. Easy to pick out with it's white wing patches. What a bird, what a smile on my face. One day, they may breed here is the hope. Not a guaranteed bird here by any means, two sub-adults were found on Midway in December 207 by Breck and Martha, possibly the same two that were displaying last March. We slowly started walking back up the old runway, photographing as we went. I noticed a small brown lump on the ground, close to a bush

and put my bins up again. Lady luck was with me still, a pair of small, all dark brown shearwaters sitting on the ground. Probably the first to return Christmas Shearwaters. As I walked closer one panicked and scuttled off into the centre of the bush. The other bird settled down and seemed happy to allow a closer approach. It seemed uniformly dark brown all over with a slim, glossy black bill. It conveniently stretched its wings and the pale under primaries and secondaries could be seen, unlike the pale centre wing flash Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwaters show. A nearby Laysan got too close (not me) and it suddenly flew, quite high and seemed to want to come back to the same spot but kept circling. It did appear relatively small and perfectly formed. The wings not too long and the tail similar and slightly rounded but not pointed. We slowly walked up to the old main runway and reconvened as a group. A pair of Grey-backed Terns were noticed on the ground and immediately flew around us, calling. Gorgeous, very pale grey upper wings and black top crown and eyeline. They seemed slightly longer tailed than Sooty and with a larger head. I realised as we walked away from this area a little while later that the bird called out as this species which I saw on the 2007 Western Pacific Odyssey clearly wasn't one and must have been an Aleutian Tern instead. Two new seabirds in less than an hour plus my second Short-tailed Albatross, could'nt be bad! We photographed more Laysans and their chicks when another hybrid was noticed. This time a Laysan type bird with a tea-coloured cast of Black-footed all over its body. Most of these hybrids are fertile apparently and caused by Black-foots 'raping' Laysans. The recently publicized plastic problems for the albatrosses was much in evidence here. A corpse seemed to have as much bits of plastic as bone. Disposable lighters, minus their tops were commonplace. Fishing floats that looked like long clothes pegs and I even found a toothbrush. Plastic bottle tops and a folded over piece of what may have been part of a rubber hot water bottle, all regurgitated by the young albatross plus small pieces of fishing net. Blue plastic seemed to be a favourite. What are we doing to this planet and what gives us the right? All too soon we returned to the little jetty and after removing the barbed seeds of a low-lying native plant boarded our boat again and were whisked back to Midway for lunch. I had so many on the bottom of my crocs our departure was slightly delayed and my feet felt like I had had free acupuncture all morning!

After lunch and photo downloads I decided to walk around the airfield, the same route as we had been shown in the buggys the previous afternoon. You cannot get used to Laysans everywhere, especially amongst all the buildings, they are such a treat and so beautiful. There seemed to be a lot more Pacific goldies today and a short stop to photograph a tropicbird sitting on the roots of a tree flushed another Bristle-thighed Curlew. I photographed the albatrosses flying low over the turquoise waters of the harbour and as I walked away found a freshly dead Bonin Petrel. A big male Hawaiian Monk seal lay on the boat ramp although it looked like a Tiger Shark has ripped a hole in his forebelly at some point in the past. A long circuit around the perimeter of the live runway was the plan and as I walked out into the open area I noticed something small move into the grass ahead of me by a Laysan chick. It certainly wasn't a Canary and as I got closer I could see a white head, black eyeline and straight black bill. ?..as I got closer still I could see a pale grey mantle and then bird got up and flew across the road and dropped down again amongst a group of Laysans on the other side. A winter plumage Grey Phalarope of all things, a vagrant and in very weird habitat although the harbour was pretty turbulent due

to the stiff breeze that had come up again. I walked along past throngs of Laysans and Black-foots, occasionally sitting down to watch them displaying. A pair of Black-foots were particularly enthralling, doing a kind of funky chicken thing and throwing their head's back and screaming. Stunning. Chicks and adults were just everywhere and you have to watch where you put your feet all the time. Sometimes the adults would walk a few feet backwards. If you sat down the Laysans would often come and check you out, pecking at my blue daypack or sandals (but not bare toes thankfully). The chicks, often asleep would spin round and clack their little bills at you, very endearing. I was beginning to realise how really special this place is. I've been lucky enough to see many great bird spectacles, all over the world but this is something else. It was really brought home when I sat down at the little southern point to do a mini-seawatch. Everywhere you scanned, for 180 degrees, all you could see, at every distance was clouds of albatrosses, clouds. Considering practically every few feet of the island (2 x1 mile) was covering in adults and chicks, and most of the adults were non-breeders, how many where there here really, 2-3 million plus, got to be (and that excludes chicks). I glimpsed a mouse and walked to re-check the little lagoon by the water tanks. Although the Navy has gone the island's runway is an emergency landing for civil airliners which cross the Pacific. Although the alberts don't nest or walk on the runway, hundreds are in the air over it all day long. Occasionally it does happen and a Continental Airlines 777 landed during daylight hours late last year. A 747 was going to land in February with a seriously ill passenger but the authorities persuaded the pilot to continue to Honolulu and it's major medical facilities instead. The pool held the Wandering Tattler (winter plumage) and I started heading back to the barracks. By the enormous old hanger, a flock of at least 1000 Pacific Goldies roosting on the tarmac. Im sure there's a lot more around today, there were small flocks on Eastern Island this morning too. Spring migration? After dinner and sunset, the Bonin's started spiralling out of the darkening skies again, like long-winged bats. In 1988 there were only 4000 pairs but after the rat eradication nobody knows but there's now 10s of thousands of them at least.

12<sup>th</sup> March

The short stroll to breakfast again, Laysans all the way, this place is wonderful. Food was amazingly good, American and Thai, cooked by Thais. After brekkers another attempt to photograph the Black Noddies, collecting material from the ground for their new nests in the trees above. This morning was windy and so no boat trip to the far side of the lagoon and it's reef. I decided to go to Frigate Point to try and shoot Red-Billed Tropicbirds and so headed off. The big flock of PGP's were again roosting on the tarmac by the big hanger and I checked the lagoon by the water tanks but nothing new. I frequently stopped to watch courting albatrosses of both species, bill clacking, head shaking, mock preening, mutual preening, throwing their heads back and shrieking, the whole gambit. The Black-foots have similar display characters and different ones. The Laysans do walk slightly like big chickens but I don't think are ungainly at all. The Black-foots lean forward and walk with a swagger, almost mafia-like. A windy day like today was perfect for them, a short walk or they just spread their wings facing the wind and they were off. At the beginning of the season you apparently often see terrible landings, with birds rolling over and over and finishing in a big heap. I did witness two takeoff disasters when ended in bushes but they just recompose themselves and walk off, as if hoping no one was

looking. The beach path by the Clipper House was used as an albatross runway, the sand totally patterned by their feet. At the western end of the runway was an area of Naupaka, a native shrub which actually holds the coral sand together and therefore basically the island. I followed the trail in for a few yards in the morning sunshine and avoided the wind at last. Picking my way past the Laysans and their chicks I noticed a small white one. Two single Sooty Terns flew over. The pure white sand beach was off limits for the monk seals ( it's 2130 as I write, I can still hear bill clacking outside the window!) so I just stood on the trail and waited. Myriad Laysans and Black-foots came over from the sea, and then the occasional tropicbird which were clearly prospecting for nest sites amongst the low bushes, their harsh calls drawing attention to their presence. The wind off the runway allowed them to hover low over the bushes. After an hour or so I route-marched along the southern side of the runway to opposite the water tanks to check for a certain pink-billed albatross but to no avail. There was quite a lot of dead ground I noted. I returned back to base, glad to be out of the heat and sunshine even though clouds seem to be building from the south east. After lunch the east-northeast wind was still fresh but I decided to explore the harbour area and it's piers, planning to scan for the 'resident' (Hawaiian race) Spinner Dolphins. I sat on the end of the Cargo Pier for 45 minutes, just managing to stay directly out of the wind by sitting by a bollard. Tropical albatrosses wizzed about in all directions and ignoring them (!) I searched for other species and dolphins. I picked up first two and then another 'brown-looking' oceanic terns flying low over the water heading east. I had the light behind me so they clearly were not Sootys and from yesterday morning not Grey-backed either? A few minutes later and a couple more but just too distant to get any detail, wish I had a scope. Suddenly four more, much closer and I fired off a poor, but usable record shot to deal with later. A big Pacific Green Turtle appeared close too and after some breaths on the surface diving under the pier behind me, heading for the 'turtle beach' beyond. I walked round to the boat pier in the inner harbour via the turtle beach on which about 10 were hauled out, seemingly just basking in the sunshine. The waters offshore were every hue of turquoise and steel blue as I sat down out of the wind to scan over towards Eastern Island. A few inquisitive Laysans walked up to check me out, took a gentle peck or two at my blue backpack and WildWings luggage label, again not my bare toes thankfully, they seemed to be very gentle. I walked around towards the boat ramp after a while and met 'chef' in a golf buggy who stopped for a chat. He mentioned a Hawaiian Monk Seal swimming along close to shore and when I got there it was still loafing in the water. I didn't know if the 150' applied still and took a few shots from considerably less than that but the animal didn't even know I was there. After dinner I went back down to the same area, finding two female tropicbirds just yards from the path under trees. They really are stunning with a strong pink cast to their plumage. I could'nt resist more Laysan photos, especially with the turquoise water behind them. The first of the night's Bonin Petrels were inside the harbour walls, the first time I had seen them in daylight and over the sea. I walked back to the end of the cargo pier , arriving at sunset (although there wasn't one due to cloud) and then enjoyed the Bonins wheeling over the sea, just yards away at times in daylight, superb. A few small parties of Red-Footed Boobies drifted by and as darkness fell thousands of petrels were wheeling over the atoll's lagoon, replacing the albatrosses of the day. As I finally started to walk back home they started climbing a bit and heading in over the island. Breck gave a short but interesting talk on the physics of

seabird flight.

13<sup>th</sup> March

Another breezy morning in albatross heaven. After breakfast I headed down to the Cargo Pier again and did a short seawatch. Yet again more sea terns with 'earth brown' uppers. I took some more record shots and one bird seemed to show a white nape. On via the inner harbour and out to the far side of the live runway stopping to enjoy and photograph the alberts and a pair of Red-tailed Tropicbirds under a tree. A small, almost hidden pool contained at least 20 Laysan Teal. I walked out to the little southern point and sat on the bench for another seawatch, flushing a Bristle-thighed Curlew which I got reasonable flight shots of. The local Laysans having decided I wasn't edible started displaying to each other all around as I scanned out over the turquoise waters inside the reef and the open ocean beyond. Besides the ubiquitous alberts, a few Bonin Petrels were flying by, the first I'd seen during the day. Two small groups of Sooty Terns flew low over the waves, into the prevailing wind, towards Eastern Island. A Brown Noddy also flew by, the first pair back on the western beach apparently. I carefully checked the alberts by the runway for the big boy but no luck again and route-marched back to base for lunch. My dicky right foot was playing up again and so in the afternoon I went out on the buggy with Breck and a few others and we walked a path just inside the beach inside Frigate Point. As we picked our way amongst the adult alberts and chicks Breck shared some of his extensive knowledge from working on the islands. The male Laysans were the ones that whistled, the sub-adults would pick their spots and wait for females to practice their age-old dancing and courtship rituals with. When two birds performed in perfect unison a bond would be created between those two birds for life and they would return the next year, or possibly one year later, pick their spot and begin to breed. The birds walking around, testing suitable mates were of course the ladies... We did venture onto the top of the beach itself briefly, a monk seal hauled out in each direction. The beach was of pure white coral sand, with turquoise waters stretching to the distant reef, more perfect than any tropical holiday brochure. A brief squall came through as we reached the buggy again, pausing briefly below an old dead albatross carcass, high up in an Ironwood tree. We stopped by the water tanks and checked another small pool with about 15 Laysan Teal on it. We also scanned over the rainwater pool and at least eight Bristle-thighed Curlews were in view. I saw over 10 in the end today. On the drive back someone spotted another albatross stuck high in a tree, this time a live Laysan. Breck got out and walked over and started shaking the tree. The bird came tumbling down and despite his best efforts he couldn't catch it. It had dislocated its wing, injured its neck and could barely walk. It was not in good condition. None of us had the strength to do what was probably the right thing and we left it and called in to see the Fish and Wildlife people. Their current policy is to euthanase only if the bird is clearly 'in agony', there was little doubt what was to happen to this magnificent bird sadly. The Ironwood trees are a huge problem, as their name implies, they have no give. The current management plan is to remove them except around the housing areas and the quicker they get on with it, the better. At least Breck said it was much better than even the late 80s when radio ariel wires caused deaths daily. After dinner most of the group came down to the Cargo Pier to watch the evening Bonin Petrel spectacle I had witnessed the night before, with a bonus of at least three large turtles in the sea, just yards off the pier below us including a beautifully ornately marked

individual which may have been a Hawksbill. Finally Roy, one of our group, who had served on Midway in 1950 and 1951 showing some amazing photos of the island then and as we walked back to base we took a few photos by flash of adult Bonin Petrels sitting outside their burrows.

#### 14<sup>th</sup> March

Five of us had asked to go back to Eastern Island and for \$60 each, Fish and Wildlife said yes. We departed the boat pier at 0800 for the few minute blast over to the little jetty, on a still windy and overcast morning. A monk seal teased us in the water close by but then hid under the pier we were standing on, frustrating the photographers. Tracey again was our main guide (thanks!) and we retraced our steps onto the old main runway via the teal seep and turned south to the side runway down towards the short-tailed albert area. Again, the sheer spectacle of albatrosses, White Terns, frigates and Red-footed Boobies was overwhelming. Dead albatrosses are picked up around the buildings on Sand Island but here nature takes it's course. The pieces of plastic were everywhere that the adults bring back from the seas and feed their chicks with. One carcass even had a disposable razor in it, at least the safety cover was still on (sic). Some of the lighters had oriental writing and logos on them and Tracy even picked up what she called a freshwater fishing float, at least minus it's hook. Perhaps discarded into a river which then ran into the ocean..... We also noticed at least three dead frigatebirds suspended in bushes. No STA today but one of her volunteers had got too close to two Christmas Shearwaters trying to photograph them and they took flight in front of us giving an excellent photo opportunity before finally landing in the breeze again close to what may their nesting bush. Small groups of Grey-backed Terns sat on the concrete, prospecting too. They really are stunning with clean pale grey upperparts. As we reluctantly walked back towards the pier Sooty Terns flew overhead with their raucous calls, numbering 100s rather than the thousands that would soon be present. After removing the stuck seeds from the soles of our shoes to prevent the thorny plant in question establishing itself on Sand Island. Even though a native plant, it damaged the seabird's feet as well as going straight thru my crocs on occasion again. 'Captain Russell' had just opened the boat's throttles up again when he slowed right down to a slow daddle back across. We were surrounded by a party of the atoll's Spinner Dolphins which although were clearly in resting mode were happy to come along with us. Only a calf occasionally actually span but the adults were all around us giving us some nice photos and a real extra buzz when we arrived back at the boat ramp. A distinct race, they seemed shorter and fatter with a shorter snout than the Spinners I had seen in the Indian Ocean a few years back. Very cleanly marked too.

After lunch and a short doze I set off for the far side of the runway again but never actually got there. I stopped to check the rainwater collection pool which still had the winter plumaged tattler, a few PGPs and a pair of Bristle-Thighed Curlew. I walked on down the old main runway towards Rusty Bucket and flushed another pair of curlews, always wary enough to make getting decent photos difficult. I spotted something white on the ground and came upon an upside down Laysan. As I got closer I realized it was still alive as its feet paddled the air fruitlessly. A clearly broken wing was the problem and my heart sank. I bent down and carefully picked the bird up and turned it over and at least it could walk away. It may even have been the bird in the tree yesterday but showed

no sign of neck injury. I knew it was doomed, such a magnificent bird and it could take days to die. I didn't have the guts to do the right thing and left it to its fate although couldn't resist looking for it on my way back. It was hunkered down, sheltered by some vegetation at least, flaps on the injured wing, waiting to die. I hope it came swiftly. Down at the point Laysans and Black-foots practiced their centuries old courtship dances whilst I could count five distant monk seals sunning themselves on the beach to the south. After dinner a vain attempt to photograph the gathering Bonin Petrels in the fading daylight, they were just too fast (and close!). An interesting talk by Breck followed about the albatross breeding ecology. As we walked back to base a Bonin Petrel was sitting on the concrete leading to the steps into Charlie Hotel. I picked it up and put it out on the grass in the dark, amongst the sleeping Laysans. Needless to say it was back five minutes later.

### 15<sup>th</sup> March

My penultimate day on albatross island. I took the usual long walk around the island via the far side of the live runway to re-check the favourite STA spot. Being Sunday, no food until 0900 onwards so I took two cookies and a totally tasteless apple for sustenance. The wind had finally dropped back to a breeze from the east, it was going to be a warmer day. A short seawatch from the bench at rubbish tip point yielded only a Sooty Tern but a group of 20 plus Spinners cruising past at 0820 out on the ocean was a nice bonus. Otherwise just enjoying the albatrosses wizzing about over the Pacific breakers as they rolled in towards the atoll's reef. A Laysan chick sitting on the remains of a predecessor could have been called 'life and death' if I had bothered to take a photo. All around the non-breeding young adult Laysans and Black-foots practiced and honed their dances. There are thought to be 24 components to the full Laysan dance. Often 'adopting temporarily' a chick for a few minutes. The real parents only return to feed their chicks briefly, give them a quick preen and then off to sea for another day or two. Later in the season some of the Laysans adopt tropicbird chicks but usually with fatal consequences as they won't let their real parents get at them to feed them. Breck told us the Laysans stay at sea for their first four to five years and then return each season for another three to four years before first attempting to breed. The chicks were getting much bigger already just in the week we had been here, some looking pretty plump indeed but many still small. It was hard to imagine most wouldn't survive. As the day wore on it did get hot and many of the chicks not in the shade sat back on their haunches to lever their feet off the ground through which they could lose body heat at least. If you were out in a golf cart you had to check underneath every time you parked it as the chicks would sit under them giving them shade. The larger chicks were starting to move around more too, something that happened much more as the season wore on. The Laysan parents would 'talk' quietly to their eggs so when they were born parent and child could recognize each other by voice. One of the early victims was the little white chick I had found a few days earlier, now sadly dead on its nest mound. I also thought about going back to see how the broken-winged Laysan was and thought I might have the nerve to put it out of its misery. I changed my mind a few minutes later as at least it had its memories of flying over the ocean and was entitled to them for as long as nature allowed. We found another one later in the day too. There seemed to be more tropicbirds this morning and as the day wore on there were literally hundreds. As Breck said, they came in from the ocean between 1100 and 1500 and the skies were full of their raucous calls and aerial displays. Some birds

were coming down and settled under bushes too. By late afternoon most had disappeared out to sea again. Some of the birds on the ground has the most fantastic pink flush to their body plumage, hard to capture with a camera. Breck had studying these birds on the islands in the past and said the tail streamers were dropped soon after egg-laying. He also said they had been never witnessed mating. I quipped perhaps they did it on the wing at night and he said I was'nt the first to come up with that idea. The Glaucous-winged Gull was sat on the live runway and later on the catchment pond. This now contained a third Pintail and the Yankee Wigeon but no new waders still. Mid-morning I joined Martha and four others for a beach clean-up by the cargo pier. In an hour we filled the eight seat buggy with trash including bits of plastic, glass bottles, light bulbs, lighters, fishing floats etc. It looked a lot better for the tattler who was frequently on it by the time we left. After lunch I took a cart ride back to Frigate Point with Martha and the air was again full of tropicbirds, hundreds of them. It seemed they had been waiting for the winds to drop and she said even so they were early in these numbers. A Grey-backed Tern flew east low over the ocean, a few Great Frigates overhead and two and threes of Sooty Terns directly overhead. Three single Brown Noddys were seen too. Down to Rusty Bucket with a Monk Seal hauled up on the beach to the north. A Brown Booby circled over the sea, it's underparts turquoise from the reflected lagoon water which I did manage to capture on camera. I picked up a plump albert chick so we could drive past, they really are so cute and delightfull. Before dinner I sat on the bench outside the accommodation and just watched the Laysans all around. After dinner I borrowed a bike and went down to Cross Point to watch the Bonins come in with Breck and David. Four Bristle-thigheds flew past plus a few Red-footed Boobies, all heading towards Eastern Island. Just as it was really getting dark they finally started landing all around us whilst two frigates landing in a dead ironwood tree above us for the night. Cycling back lots of mice ran across the tracks and more Bonins whirred around our faces.

### 16<sup>th</sup> March

The last day and my final walk around the island and seawatch off the southern point with a rapid, borrowed bike-ride version mid-afternoon. The usual suspects again with the addition of a pair of White-tailed Tropicbirds as I returned for lunch. The group had finally gone snorkelling on the edge of the atoll's reef by boat and seen some colourfull fish and sea urchin. Midway's coral is the amongst the most northerly in the world and was less impressive than other famous dive destinations although the whole Hawaiian chain boats a long list of endemic fish. An amazing hybrid Laysan/Black-foot appeared by our accomodation. Superficially a pale black foot but bigger (much bigger than Laysan) with a Laysan's bill and head pattern plus a Black-foot's white base to the bill, plus a white vent. He was apparently four years old and these hybrids occur 1 in 50000. Interesting to meet one at sea, I didn't see his underwing. After our final dinner, we watched the Bonins arriving again, the best showing yet in the clear sky above us. As darkness fell we were driven back to the big hanger to await our flight. Again, Bonin Petrels flew around inside the giant hanger roof as the Gulfstream returned. As we walked out across the tarmac to board the night sky above was incredible, stars galore as light pollution here was just about nil. My final thoughts were with all the chicks, it would be great to think that one day I would see some of them at sea in the future, as adults gliding and soaring over their ocean home. Many obstacles lay ahead of them

however. The overall species list is maybe short but the quality and the quantity was undeniable. I've been lucky enough to see many of the world's great wildlife spectacles, there is little doubt that Midway is up there amongst them. Long may it stay that way. It's future seems assured in terms of little likely military use again, it's real threat must be the rising ocean levels but until then it remains the tranquil breeding home of many ocean wanderers.

17<sup>th</sup> March

The old bird landed at about 0215 and I shared a taxi to the main terminal at Honolulu for my 0500 Hawaiian Air flight to Kona, on the 'big' island of Hawaii itself. Home to still active volcanoes, this island boasts 11 of the world's 14 different climate zones. My onward flight took off on time (if I hear the word 'mahalo' again, it's worse than 'have a nice day', especially when said by a computer generated voice). The short flight landed at Kona early and after a short but expensive cab ride I was at the outfitter's office for our 0620 departure early, but rather lacking sleep. The 4-wheel drive minibus was soon loaded up and Gary, our guide started his never-ending comedy patter. As the day wore on however I discovered he was one of the best guides I've ever encountered anywhere and a good birder to boot. After picking up a few more passengers on the way the nine of us headed for the highlight, driving through lava flows, past cinder cones, the peaks of the big volcanoes shrouded in cloud however. We finally arrived at the entrance to the Pua Akala tract of the Hakalau Forest Wildlife Refuge, the largest remaining remnant of Hawaii's original rainforest, covering many thousands of acres. We parked up by a barn above the trail, with eight Nenes or Hawaiian Geese walking around the same meadow, most with colour rings on their legs. They struck me as paler than the birds I've seen in UK wildfowl collections but it would make them blend in more with the pale grasses of their upland home. Uniquely amongst the world's rainforest this forest comprises of only two tree species, Koa and Ohia-lehua with the understory proving small plant diversity. Because of the year-round similar climate up here, at 6000', the trees are aged by their diameter, not the number of 'rings'. In addition to knowing the birds, Gary also was very conversant with the plants of this beautiful place, and showed us various species including one with less than three individuals remaining in the wild, the native honeycreeper that pollinated them having become extinct. The forest was relatively 'open' the trees evenly spaced and both species in about similar quantities. It remained cloudy and drizzled most of the day. The canopies were heaving with birds, a variety of the endemic honeycreepers occurring here, and they are always on the move. It takes time to get good views of them all but with our superb guide, we pretty much managed it as we left at about 1600. With the continual drizzle and the fact the birds were relatively high in the trees, the camera stayed in the backpack. I'm not going to mention any of the island's introduced bird species which are many but few occur in the native forest apart from a pair of Kalij Pheasants (from the Himalayas!). The commonest species was Iiwi, a bright red and black honeycreeper (not dissimilar to the ones found in South America and Trinidad) which were abundant. These have long pink de-curved bills and were followed by Apananes, another red-plumaged bird with a much shorter decurved black bill and white vent. Smaller, Amakihis were also common, a much drabber, olive green bird, again with a short decurved black bill. Many of these birds could be seen feeding amongst the many red flowers in the Koa trees. Hawaiian Creeper was next, a drab bird

that wends it's way up and down tree branches. I kept hearing a very fluty song, which reminded me of part of a Nightingale's. Unsurprisingly, it turned out to be Oma'o or Hawaiian Thrush, which like all the other birds, prefers the upper part of the trees. Annoyingly I missed a perched Hawaiian Hawk in a clearing before we sat down under some trees for our picnic lunch. For the rest of our time we concentrated on finding the other two endangered species. Akepas are tiny little birds, the males being bright orange, very smart. I finally got good views of a few Elepaio, a flycatcher, and not unlike the fantails of Asia and a different species than the ones on Oahu I had seen many years before. Bird of the day however was Akiapola'au, a unique passerine whose upper and lower mandibles are different! The lower mandible is quite thick and straight whilst the upper mandible is thin, curved and long. They hang upside down on branches hammering the bark with the shorter mandible and then using the longer one to eek out grubs and insects within. I lay on the ground watching an immature male working some branches above us, amazing little plump birds. We saw a distant Short-eared Owl on a post as we drove back down to Kona, late afternoon. I finally checked into my overnight hotel to find a message from the whale-watch operator I was booked to go out the next morning. Trip cancelled due to poor weather. I was so tired I just hit the pillow and slept for the first time in two days.

18<sup>th</sup> March

The sun shone through the curtains and as I opened them I was looking out over a calm and flat ocean, a perfect morning. Seems like someone wasn't telling the truth the night before, probably lack of bookings was the real reason, this resort being very quiet with the global credit crunch entrenched. A shame because he was recommended as the best operator. After breakfast I walked down to the harbour to see if there were any alternatives. A horrible-looking blue and yellow boat was loading up with lots of passengers from a distant cruise ship, no thanks. I picked up a leaflet from a trimaran and rang their office from the hotel. 1330 it is then! I was going to go and see Captain Cook's death place further down the coast (Kealakekua Bay) but a chance to go out on the ocean was too good to miss, middle of the day or not. It turned out to be a catamaran and pretty much fully loaded with tourists. Continual Bob Marley and orders being taken from the bar seemed to be the order of the day but as I was to discover, we hit pay dirt. Shortly after leaving the harbour we were side-following a calf cow pair with an attendant male Humpback, and we stayed with them for about two hours of the three hour trip. The calf would surface first, two or three times, then come up with it's mother to blow, followed by the male. The only birds seen were a pair of Black Noddies flying low over the sea. After about an hour of following the trio we were suddenly rewarded with the male breaching three times and the calf twice. Superb, and I managed to get photos too. Some flipper waving followed, a sign of the calf being given milk by it's mother and towards the end of our session finally some fluking as the animals dived deeper, rather than just cruising which they had been doing most of the time. We finally turned and left them and slowly headed back to port, 'looking for dolphins' on the way in. Another distant Humpback was briefly seen to breach too. I drove south and then east afterwards to my next destination, Volcano House Hotel, on the rim of the crater of Kilauea. I arrived after dark and it was steadily raining.

19<sup>th</sup> March

The day's first light was streaming through the shutters so I got up and walked out towards the crater's edge. Blue sky above suggested a good day but it was short lived. A short stroll brought me to a viewpoint and what a view! Below was the part forested caldera floor, an 11 mile drive around the perimeter. A cloud of gas, sulphur dioxide, was pouring into the sky from the active part of the crater and other steaming gases could be seen from smaller points too. The sun was just hitting the top of a nearby volcano too. Apapanes were everywhere, abundant, and I recognised the forest was the same two native trees as days before. Within minutes clouds had rolled over the scene so I strolled back for breakfast and checkout. I drove the 20 odd mile Ring of Craters Road, down towards the ocean to the south. Dormant crater after crater, lava flows and sections of forest and then a steep descent from 3000' to the sea and low black lava cliffs. A few Pacific Goldies flushed off the road but no sign of Hawaiian Hawk, the bird I wanted to see today. A few Brown Noddies flew low over the ocean. It began to rain. In the distance to the east, a cloud of steam rising from a headland further along the coast. The point where red hot lava from the most recent eruption meets the sea. My next destination. The whole 50 mile drive was undertaken in rain which eased when I reached the current end of highway 130. Disappointment city, the viewing area was closed, no public access. Great, I headed for Hilo, where my flight this evening back to Honolulu was to depart from. I walked around the city's park pond but saw only a couple of Night Herons and plastic ducks. I drove out south past the airport and parked overlooking part of the coast in now driving rain. And more rain. What a great birthday this was turning out to be. After an hour of so I ventured out and stood under a lifeguard lookout which at least provided shelter from the driving rain. A tattler flew past and I then noticed a Green Turtle loafing in the shallow water just offshore. A couple of scans out to sea produced a final surprise, whale blow! A Humpback was cruising past in the murk, a final farewell from Hawaii. I gave up at 1600 and drove into town for a bite to eat before heading for the airport. I noticed a car bumper sticker, 'rain reigns in Hilo', too right. Aloha!

Species List

Midway Atoll

Birds

Laysan Albatross  
Black-footed Albatross  
Short-tailed Albatross  
Bonin Petrel  
Great Frigatebird  
Red-tailed Tropicbird  
White-tailed Tropicbird  
Christmas Shearwater  
Red-footed Booby  
Brown Booby

Sooty Tern  
Grey-backed Tern  
White Tern  
Black Noddy  
Brown Noddy  
Glaucous-winged Gull  
Pacific Golden Plover  
Turnstone  
Wandering Tattler  
Grey Phalarope  
Bristle-thighed Curlew  
Pintail  
American Wigeon  
Laysan Teal  
(Canary)  
(Common Myna)  
NB: Wedge-tailed Shearwaters also breed from April onwards.

#### Mammals

Hawaiian Monk Seal  
(Hawaiian) Spinner Dolphin  
Mouse sp

(Pacific) Green Turtle

#### Hawaii

Birds (excluding introduced species)

Brown Noddy  
Black Noddy  
Nene (Hawaiian Goose)  
Night Heron  
Pacific Golden Plover  
Wandering Tattler  
Pintail  
Shoveler  
Hawaiian Coot  
Short-eared Owl  
Elepaio  
Oma'ō (Hawaiian Thrush)  
Amakihi  
Akiapola'au  
Hawaiian Creeper  
Akepa

I'iwi  
Apapane

Mammals

(Pacific) Humpback  
Mongoose sp

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