

Return to the Garden Isle



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I spent a few days in Kauai, the Garden Isle of the Hawaiian island chain with my young family many years ago, 1986 to be precise, but had not thought of returning until I read about the Laysan Albatross that arrive there in November/December to court, mate and support their hatched chicks until they fledge and return to the sea in May/June of the following year. Laysan Albatross normally spend up to 5 years cruising the ocean and breeding on the largely unhabitated Hawaiian chain stretching northwest to Midway and Kobe islands. The greatest density of birds is on Midway Atoll (now closed to visitors) at the northwest end of the chain and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The albatross on the north coasts of Kauai and Oahu are accessible and I wanted to extend my experience of photographing seabirds on Johnston Atoll by returning to Kauai. The trip also gave me the opportunity to document the flora and fauna on other parts of the island.

Kauai can be divided into 4 distinct areas: the business center around the Lihue airport and the surrounding towns; the north coast with the upscale residences, condominiums and golf courses in and around of Princeville, National Wildlife refuges and the roadless Na Pali wilderness; the south coast defined by Poipu Beach; and the southwest town of Waimea where Captain James Cook landed in 1789. Each has own characteristics. The north coast is lush with abundant wildlife and occasional rains throughout the day. Waimea is dry and brown with a dead-end main road that shoots north towards the Na Pali coast through picturesque Waimea Canyon. The Poipu south coast is the principal tourist beach spot with wall-to-wall condos relieved by spectacular National Botanic Gardens to the west.

My research on the Laysan Albatross led me to Hob Osterlund who has devoted her life to the care of these magnificent birds. A heart-wrenching story of her work there can be seen in her video <https://vimeo.com/297216910> and in her book "Holy Moli" (moli being hawaiian for albatross). We met Hob "at 8am sharp" at the Princeville library for our tour starting at the Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge with an intermediate stop to see a Laysan Albatross and "Grace" on the way to the Kilauea NWR complete with its lighthouse.

North Coast, Hanelei to Kilauea



A favorite with ancient Hawaiian royalty, Hanalei NWR is a 917 acre site in historic traditional wetlands located between two ranges of hills that combines about 34 acres of constructed wetland habitat for endemic and other bird species with the rest for taro farming. The only entrance is a single-track road just after the narrow bridge on the road to Hanalei town. The pond where we stopped briefly had Black-crowned Night-Heron, Hawaiian Stilt, red-head Hawaiian Gallinule, Hawaiian Ducks, the Hawaiian Goose (Nene, the Hawaiian State Bird), Common Myna and Cattle Egret (found everywhere on the island) under a seemingly perpetual rainbow. The adult Night Herons are chasing a juvenile from the pond In a territorial squabble In the photo on the next page. All the photos were taken from the car due to Hanalei NWR restrictions.



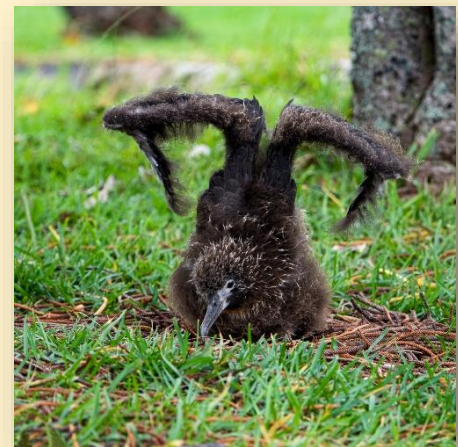
Heading back to Princeville on the way to Kilauea Hob led us to the only Laysan Albatross we saw close -up squatting on a grassy knoll in the middle of a residential area. The birds have no fear of humans, but are at risk around dogs and cats.



The chick stays in place until it fledges, a period that takes 5 to 6 months from hatching. It is fed periodically by the

parent who combs the

ocean for squid (hopefully without plastic – another gift from the human race) in a separate stomach reserved for feeding. The chick had been christened “Grace” by an 8-year old boy whose grandmother lives near the nest site. Note the joints



that build huge wings for endless soaring over the sea for thousands of miles. She took to the ocean in early July where she will live for the next 60 or so years if she has a full life, only coming to land to breed every year or every other year after reaching maturity at around 9 to 10 years old.

Hob said it had been a poor year for albatross immigrants to the island in November and December likely because of La Nina keeping fertile cold waters too far away for feeding, so we left Grace and her companion waiting for mom while we pressed on to Kilauea NWR.



The lighthouse at Kilauea is the prime tourist destination for seabird viewing on the north coast. There were a few albatross there, scattered in the trees south of the “launching pad” where the fledged birds take the first flight into their future. Principle seabirds that nest or can be viewed in the area are Red (and White)-tailed tropic birds, Wedge-tailed Shearwater that raise their young in burrows,



Red-footed Boobies (pictured) that uncharacteristically build nests in trees across from the lighthouse and Great Frigatebirds that attack and steal fish from the Boobies. We said goodbye to Hob here with a promise to stay in touch. The world could do with more like her. It was our last day on the north coast before we left for Waimea.

Southwest Coast, Waimea

Driving south from Princeville leaves the lush hills and perpetual mist of the North Coast behind. The main road near Lihue gives way to multiple smaller side roads, navigable with the aid of a GPS, that wander through townships and clusters of small houses before connecting to the main coast road west. (Captain James Cook landed in Waimea in 1778 claiming the islands for Britain and naming them after a sponsor, the 4th Earl of Sandwich). As the north coast is wet and lush so the southwest coast is dry and



brown. But it has less tourists and retains more of the Hawaiian presence and culture.

The Waimea Plantation at the west end of the town has 61 upgraded single-family cottages that were original employee lodgings from the Waimea and Kekaha Sugar Plantations. The 27-

acre site fronts on a black sand beach, but swimming is best kept to the pool because of the sharp drop-

off and the ocean currents. The cottages are historic, quiet and peaceful. Restaurants and shops in the town are within easy walking distance.

The principal wildlife in the area is the hybrid descendants of the Red Junglefowl. They are everywhere, frequently followed in the early spring by a long train of chickens. Hotels give away small packets of earplugs to shut out the inevitable cock crow at sunrise. I joked with the concierge that the Hawaiians had an instant source of chicken in a crisis. She said the meat is so tough one would need to run over it several times to soften it up! House Finches and warblers gorge on fruit from the Sapodilla tree. White plumeria and red ginger flowers combined with the sound of gentle waves breaking on the shore complete the aura of a tropical paradise.



Salt Pond Park a few miles to the east of Waimea has an excellent safe-swimming beach. An occasional



Monk Seal pulls out to snooze on the rocks or the sand. The species is endangered and heavily protected with portable “Seal not dead - Do Not Disturb” signs. There are only about 400 Monk Seals in all the main Hawaiian Islands. For bird photography, the Kawatele Water Bird Sanctuary to the west has constructed

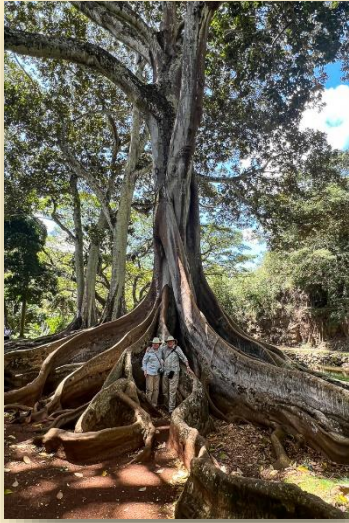
wetlands where one can find Nene and the Hawaiian long-legged Stilt.

The main tourist draw is the Waimea Canyon known as the Grand Canyon of Hawaii. The road north winds through the canyon to the misty Na Pali coast. It's heavily visited by tourists who have taken the short drive from Poipu and the southeast, but the drive is not to be missed, nevertheless. A boardwalk at the Koke State Park leads to the Alakai Wilderness Preserve where the more energetic birder can find rarer species endemic to Hawaii.



South Coast, Poipu and National Tropical Botanic Gardens

Laid-back tourist stuff is almost inevitable in any trip to Hawaii. On Kauai that means a stint at Poipu in the southwest that is saturated with multi-story hotels charging extra heavily for rooms with a “partial” view of the sea. Dinner reservations at restaurants need to be made two or three days in advance. In that respect, Kauai has changed dramatically since we were last there. But there is relief in the short drive along the shoreline to the National Tropical Botanic Gardens. It combines the history and botany



of the area in a combined bus and walking tour that includes the massive Moreton Bay Fig Trees featured in the film Jurassic Park. Not to be missed!

Thoughts on the Hawaiian Culture

According to the 2021 census about 10% of the full-time Hawaiian population are native and Pacific Islanders, or about 148,000 souls. (On Kauai the native population is 3% in Princeville and 18% in Waimea). The tourist industry adds up to another 170,000 visitors

per month, the same number or more at any time than the indigenous population. Tourist exposure to the Hawaiian culture is mostly limited to beaches, hula shows and luaus. A visit to the local farmer's market, museums, preserved historic areas, etc. will get you a bit closer. In most cases I found the Hawaiian people to be friendly and proud of their heritage as portrayed in Hob Osterlund's video. Unfortunately, the Cook Memorial on the Big Island where he was killed was vandalized in January 2022 with the words "You are on native land" scrawled in red paint. Understandable, but the displacement of native inhabitants by colonial settlements worldwide was inevitable if tragic in some cases. About 45% of Hawaii's economy comes from tourism and that's not about to change.

Epilogue

Will I go back? If I played golf, which I don't, I would head for the North Coast. I'm not a beach lover or a fan of crowds so I'd give Poipu a pass. My principal reason to return would be wildlife photography which likely would include other islands. Unless La Nina abates, and the Moli come home to Kauai.

The complete Photo Gallery for this story is here:

<https://www.alistairmontgomeryjourneys.com/kauai-hawaii>