

Rehabbed Habitat

A tiny atoll at the tip of the Hawaiian chain might just teach us how to take better care of our environment.

Written and photographed by Bill Harby

Romance—and comedy—are in the air. The two Laysan albatross are clacking their beaks at each other, yodeling, dipping and raising their heads together in ritual courting. These “gooney birds” don’t know they’re part of a unique experiment that may well serve as a model for how Hawai‘i can nurture and share its wildlife.

Surrounding these two love-struck seabirds are thousands more on this grassy field on Midway Atoll.

During the 1950s this field was crisscrossed with high antennae and guy wires. Midway, 1,250 miles northwest of Kaua‘i, was a crucial electronic link in the Distant Early Warning Line on guard against missiles from the USSR. Thousands of birds got garroted each year flying into the web of steel.

The atoll has known more than just the threat of war. During three days in June 1942—just six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor—the U.S. Pacific fleet defeated a Japanese armada near here. The Battle of Midway turned the tide of the war in the Pacific.



White terns (above and opposite), also known as fairy terns, are extremely curious. They'll follow you as you walk or bicycle, hovering an arm's length away, staring (glaring?) at you with their deep ebony eyes.

Today, a subtler battle is being waged on this 2.4-square-mile ring of sand-covered coral.

Beginning in November, the skies fill with Laysan albatross. These great soaring birds spend most of their lives at sea. They need land only to mate, lay eggs, and nurture their young.

For several months each year, Midway is a love nest and nursery to some 780,000 Laysan albatross—about 70 percent of the world population.

And that's just the beginning of the birds on Midway. Add 40,000 blackfooted albatross. Add many tens of thousands more red-footed boobies, masked boobies, white terns, sooty terns, redtail tropicbirds, bonin petrels, bristle-thighed curlews, brown noddies, ruddy turnstones—15 species of seabirds and shorebirds altogether. Plus canaries, a few hundred chirping descendants of a dozen brought here at the turn of the century by the wife of a manager of the Commercial Pacific Cable

Company. (The first trans-world cable message passed through Midway on July 4, 1903.)

More than two million birds call Midway home during the year. Plus endangered Hawaiian monk seals, and green sea turtles, which are free of the mysterious tumors that afflict turtles in the main Hawaiian Islands.

All these animals are why, in 1988, the atoll—two islands, a sand spit and the lagoon about five miles in diameter—became a national wildlife refuge.

Since before World War II, this had been a U.S. military outpost and refueling stop for both military and commercial trans-Pacific aircraft. But a shrinking federal defense budget and the diminished strategic value of Midway made it a burden to the Pentagon. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service saw an opportunity. In the first partnership of its kind for a national wildlife refuge, the feds joined forces with the private sector to create a dream destination for eco-tourists and military history buffs.

First, the Navy spent \$87 million cleaning up Midway. Most of the work was on Sand Island, where the air terminal and “town center” are. Using an innovative steam injection apparatus, they removed years of accumulated aviation fuel that had leaked into the ground from buried tanks. They gathered up scrap metal and made a landfill, now affectionately known as

“Rusty Bucket.” A three-hole golf course became a nesting area.

Then a company called Midway-Phoenix chipped in. The Atlanta-based corporation spent millions sprucing up Midway because it was awarded the contract to host visitors. Not incidentally, Midway-Phoenix also won the contract to sell fuel to all aircraft passing through, and to manage the international community of semi-permanent workers—the couple of hundred cooks, carpenters and maintenance people, largely from Thailand, Sri Lanka and the Philippines, who keep the island infrastructure humming.

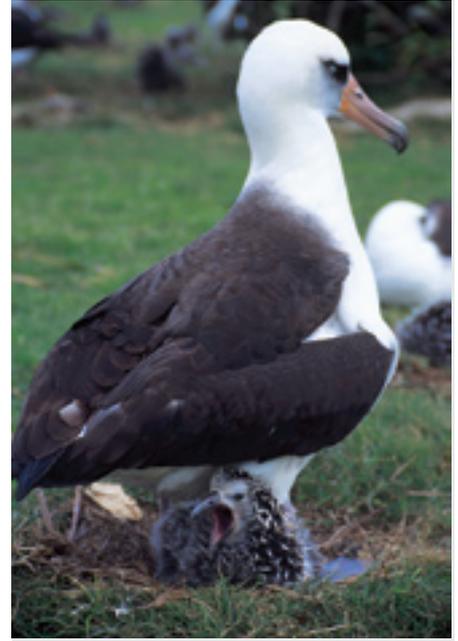
Now Midway is open for business. Guest accommodations are in spic-and-span, renovated, cinderblock buildings that were once “bachelor officer quarters.” The menus from the cafeteria and the improbable (but impeccable) French restaurant include fresh fruit and veggies from a hydroponic garden. Transportation is by foot. (Or you can rent a bicycle or a golf cart. There are no cars for public use on Midway, just a few utility vehicles for staff.)

You can walk all day exploring wildlife and historic sites. The Fish and Wildlife folks lead walks that introduce you to the natural environment and the history of Midway. A cement runway, pock-marked with bullet holes from strafing Japanese warplanes, is now used only by albatross. Their

ungainly, running take-off changes from gooney to Gudenov the moment their long wings lift them into effortless aerobatic ballet.

Outside a derelict Cold War fallout shelter, the salt breeze and sunshine now streaming in, a

Laysan albatross (top and bottom) lay just one egg each year. The birds are monogamous, but when one is widowed, he or she will take another mate.



solitary egg is perched on the end of a pipe. White terns lay in the oddest places.

On the powdery beach across the lagoon on Eastern Island, two Hawaiian monk seals snooze not far from a rusty cannon.

Green sea turtles gulp up jellyfish in the pastel shallows near a ramp used during the late 1930s by





Biologist Peter Pyle (top) works with The Oceanic Expedition Society to track survival rates of Laysan albatross chicks.

Across the lagoon from Sand Island, where Midway's human population lives, is Eastern Island. During World War II, Eastern was a busy airstrip for American bombers. Today, only birds use the overgrown runways.

Day visitors go by boat with Fish and Wildlife guides like Bob Dieli (right), who shows them relics from the war like this machine gun emplacement.



the Pan Am China Clipper trans-Pacific seaplanes.

The Fish and Wildlife staff does much more than conduct tours. They conduct research. How many turtles are there? Do any show signs of the tumors that threaten the population in the main Hawaiian Islands? How is the rare golden albatross doing? What native plants from the nursery are thriving where they've been reintroduced?

Helping the feds stretch their research dollar is The Oceanic Expedition Society. This San Francisco-based private nonprofit environmental research organization brings in volunteers to sites around the globe to do field work. Regular volunteers come from the national Elderhostel program. They're here on Midway, too—seniors who've paid their own way to help study seabirds, seals and the tribe of spinner dolphins basking in the lagoon.

The OES and Fish and Wildlife are also gauging the impact visitors have on Midway. Two examples: They have a "Disturbance Data Sheet" to record when seals are disturbed by humans (or sharks hunting for pups and fledglings in the shallows). They're also checking how the bonin petrels, which dig their nests under the sand, are faring beneath the increasing foot traffic.

The danger, of course, is that too many eco-tourists might love Midway too much. They might dirty the nest. How many footsteps along the trails are too many? How

many clicking cameras in the faces of courting couples are too many? How many divers in the lagoon and fishermen outside the reef are too many? By definition, a wildlife refuge is first and foremost for the wildlife.

But why should we care about a bunch of gooney birds on a speck of sand over 1,200 miles away? Not just because Midway is geologically part of our island chain. Hawaiians have an old saying familiar to many of us today: Ua mau ke ea o ka 'āina i ka pono. The life of the land is perpetuated in righteousness. If it works on Midway—creating an eco-tourism destination that teaches respect for a healthy environment—then it can work elsewhere in Hawai'i.

Midway Moments

- 25-30 million years ago, volcanic Midway first broke the surface of the sea on the same spot where the Big Island is today. It has since drifted 1,400 miles northwest on the Pacific Plate. The volcano has now entirely eroded back into the sea, leaving only the sand-covered coral ring that formed around it.
- In 1859, Capt. Nick Brooks became the first known discoverer of Midway. There is no archeological evidence that ancient Hawaiians ever visited the atoll.
- Midway became a U.S. possession in 1867 under the Guano Act.

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Death is part of life on Midway—some of it inevitable, some avoidable. The plan is to eventually bury all telephone lines. As decayed carcasses show, seabirds often mistake bright plastic lighters for food, so Elderhostel volunteers comb the beaches collecting all the lighters they find.

- Boris Karloff performed in the theater here.
- On June 8, 1969, Presidents Nixon and Thieu brought their entourages (and 41 Lincoln Continentals) to Midway for one day to negotiate American troop withdrawals from Vietnam.
- In 1997, 11 Hawaiian Monk seal pups were born on Sand Island—a record for this location since biologists have been keeping track.

Medicine on Midway

Midway has one physician and two nurses to staff its clinic. Lance Ray, a former Navy flight surgeon, was the family doctor here from January 1997 through last June. It was quite a change from Seattle, where he, his wife and two boys lived before, and Honolulu, where they live now.

His busiest week, Ray says he saw 18 patients, but on average, about 10 patients a week came to the clinic—usually an assortment of twisted ankles, the flu and lacerations from encounters with machinery, along with the occasional dislocated finger from banding a reluctant bird, or a puncture wound from a seal bite. He also saw injuries and illnesses from passing ships.

Then there was the bird. An albatross was brought in with a tumor the size of tennis ball on its throat. The Fish and Wildlife guys feared it might be the kind of



tumors turtles in the main Hawaiian Islands get. They wanted a biopsy. “The bird seemed pretty cooperative,” recalls Ray, “so we put some towels around the body and tape around the beak and novacaine around the tumor. It only took about a half-hour and he seemed to be doing fine when we finished.”

He sent the tissue to the lab in Honolulu for biopsy. He listed the patient as Al B. Tross. “The pathologist enjoyed that,” says Ray. “He didn’t even charge us for looking at it.”

The tumor turned out not to be a threat to the turtle population. But poor Al didn’t make it. **IS**

