

MIDWAY ATOLL, MARCH 2009

A personal trip report by John Brodie-Good

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9th March

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 minimise 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 division 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 disaster as the atoll was opened for tourism including fishing and diving, but the first tourists showed little heed for the tropical seabird colonies that 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 that 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 though 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 through 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 that 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 fire truck, whose main job was to clear 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 buggys awaited us and we drove the few minutes to the former officers’ accommodation block, our home for the next seven nights. Laysans were just everywhere, whilst flying around within inches of the buggys were what were clearly Bonin Petrels! A nearly full moon shone down on the assembled masses and I mean masses. This place is just surreal and it’s dark!

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 have reached down and touch them if I had wanted. Some clearly had chicks. Some chicks were sleeping on their own, their parents being out at sea. A few presumably added eggs could also be seen in the little nests.



Laysan Albatross

We had already received a quick briefing from one of the staff; stay on the roads and if you use a torch, then 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 additional short walk before turning in? Is this really real?

10th March

Time differences woke me at 05.00, and just after 06.00 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. 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. There were pairs, trios, and small groups of six to eight. 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 Plovers 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 with waters an incredible glowing pale turquoise, whilst Laysans and a few Black-footed Albatrosses glided past with small flocks 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 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, the seals 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 'end December, start January' for three weeks. The initial result of the 2008 count was a 20% decline but the scientists view seemed to be a natural fluctuation, in 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 headed 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 curlews 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. 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 13.30 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 an American Wigeon were completely eclipsed by a pair of re-introduced Laysan Teal that 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, elsewhere 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, 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.

11th March

Despite a stiff breeze and threatening skies our trip over the water to the uninhabited Eastern Island was on. At 08.00 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 helped to 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 runways here were breaking up very badly. They probably will 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.



Short-tailed Albatross

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 shuttled 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 shown by Sooty and to a lesser extent Short-tailed Shearwaters. 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.



Christmas Shearwater

We slowly walked up to the old main runway and reconvened as a group. A pair of Grey-backed Terns was noticed on the ground and immediately flew around us, calling. Gorgeous, with very pale grey upper wings and a 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 that 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, not 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, there were fishing floats that looked like long clothes pegs, and I even found a toothbrush. There were 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 buggies 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 the bird got up and flew across the road and dropped down again amongst a group of Laysans on the other side. It was 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 was particularly enthralling, doing a kind of funky chicken thing and throwing back their heads 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, most 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 x 1 mile) was covered in adults and chicks, and most of the adults were non-

breeders, how many were 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.



Black-footed Albatross

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 instead to continue to Honolulu and its major medical facilities. The pool held the Wandering Tattler (winter plumage) and I started heading back to the barracks. A flock of at least 1000 Pacific Goldies was roosting on the tarmac by the enormous old hanger. I'm sure there's a lot more around today and there were small flocks on Eastern Island this morning too. Spring migration?

After dinner and sunset, the Bonin's started spiraling 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.

12th March

A 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 I made 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 its reef. I decided to go to Frigate Point to try and shoot Red-Billed Tropicbirds and so headed off.

The big flock of Pacific goldies was again roosting on the tarmac by the big hanger and I checked the lagoon by the water tanks but there was 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 often see terrible landings, with birds rolling over and over and finishing in a big heap. I did witness two takeoff disasters that ended in bushes but they just recomposed themselves and walked off, as if hoping no one was looking.

The beach path by the Clipper House was used as an albert runway, the sand totally patterned by their feet. At the western end of the live runway was an area of naupaka, a native shrub that 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 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 arrive 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 seemed 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 whizzed 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 were seen 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 and after some breaths on the surface dived 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, even though 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 feet rule applied still and took a few shots from considerably less than that but the animal didn't even know I was there.



Red-tailed Tropicbird

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 couldn't resist more Laysan photos, especially with the turquoise water behind them. The first of the night's Bonin Petrels was inside the harbour walls, the first time I had seen any 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 alberts 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.

13th 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 were seen. I took some more record shots and one bird seemed to show a white nape. Onward 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 that 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 1980s when radio ariel wires caused deaths daily.



Bonin Petrel

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

14th 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 08.00 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 albatross 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 its 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 its hook. Perhaps it was discarded into a river which then ran into the ocean? We also noticed at least three dead frigatebirds suspended in bushes.



Christmas Shearwater

No 'STA' today but one of the 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. We again removed 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 damages the seabirds' feet as well as going straight thru my crocs on occasions.

'Captain Russell' had just opened the boat's throttles up again when he slowed right down to a slow dawdle back across. We were surrounded by a party of the Atoll's Spinner Dolphins that 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. They were 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 that still had the winter plumaged tattler, a few Pacific goldies 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, flies 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 I made a vain attempt to photograph the gathering Bonin Petrels in the fading daylight, they were just too fast (and too 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.

15th 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 there was no food until 09.00 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 08.20 out on the ocean was a

nice bonus. Otherwise it was fine just to enjoy the alberts whizzing 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. It was interesting to learn that they often 'adopt 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 so they could lose body heat. If you were out in a golf cart you had to check underneath every time you parked it as the chicks would move 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 11.00 and 15.00 and the skies were full of their raucous calls and arial 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 had the most fantastic pink flush to their body plumage, hard to capture with a camera. Breck had studied 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 wasn't 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 still no new waders.

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!



Grey-backed Tern

After lunch I took a cart ride back to the point and 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 such numbers. A Grey-backed Tern flew east low over the ocean, a few Great Frigates flew overhead, and twos and threes of Sooty Terns passed 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, its 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 delightful. Before dinner I sat on the bench outside our 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 landed in a dead ironwood tree above us for the night. Cycling back lots of mice ran across the tracks and Bonins whirred around our faces.

16th 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 were seen 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 colourful fish and sea urchins. Midway's coral is amongst the most northerly in the World and was less impressive than other famous dive destinations, although the whole Hawaiian chain boasts a long list of endemic fish.

An amazing hybrid Laysan/Black-foot appeared by our accommodation. Superficially a pale black foot but bigger (much bigger than Laysan) with a Laysan's bill and head pattern, 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 50,000. It would be interesting to meet one at sea. Unfortunately I didn't see his underwing.



Hybrid Laysan x Black-footed Albatross

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

Species List

Birds

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

Turtles

(Pacific) Green Turtle