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Newsletter of E.J. Peiker, Nature Photographer and www.EJPhoto.com
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Midway Atoll Special Edition
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Laysan Albatross - D300, 500mm

Midway Atoll
(April 18 – April 26, 2011)

Ever since attending a one-day seminar by Barbara and John Gerlach in 1999, I have wanted to go to Midway Atoll in the subtropical region of the central North Pacific Ocean. During their program they showed pictures of what were then called Fairy Terns and Laysan Albatross. The Fairy Tern's current and correct name is White Tern. For a while I did not think that I would ever be able to get to Midway since the company that was operating guest services there pulled out in 2003. Nobody, other than researchers and Fish and Wildlife Service employees were able to go to Midway between 2003 and 2009 when guest services were reestablished. Today, a series of permits is required to be able to go to Midway. Joseph Van Os Photo Safaris has all of the permits for photography groups visiting Midway during the peak chick-rearing season. I was fortunate to be able to go on one of the trips with Van Os. The group consisted of 14 photographers. The farthest travelers were from Belgium and Holland and I was the

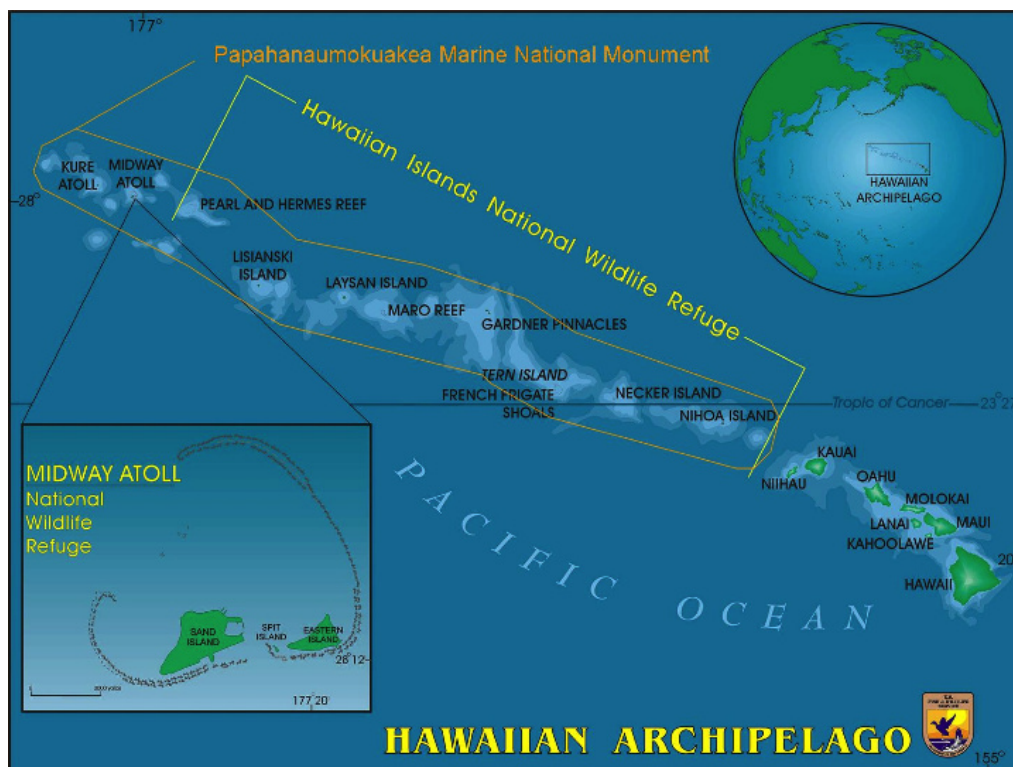
closest, being from the Phoenix area. Below you will find the daily diary of the whole trip. Past and present tense may be mixed throughout as I wrote some of this nearly real time while other parts were written at the end of each day.

Midway Atoll is 1200 miles west-northwest of Honolulu, Hawaii and is just above the Tropic of Cancer at 28 degrees north latitude. It is slightly closer to Japan than the continental USA. Midway's islands are the second oldest remaining above the ocean surface in the Hawaiian Islands archipelago. Only Kure Atoll is older and farther west. Midway Atoll is a reef-encircled area that has three islands. The largest is Sand Island. This is the island where the old Navy barracks have been refurbished into simple accommodations for those lucky enough to visit. The second largest is Eastern Island. This is where much of the military activity in World War II took place. Finally there is the very tiny Spit Island. Midway is in the Samoa Standard Time Zone, which is 11 hours behind Zulu or Greenwich Mean Time (UTC -11). This is 4 hours earlier than the West Coast of the continental USA and 7 hours earlier than the East Coast.

The recent tsunami, caused by the very large earthquake off the coast of Honshu Island in Japan, had a devastating effect on Eastern and Spit Island with the latter being completely washed over and the former being largely washed over. More than 100,000 birds lost their life. This was not reported in the news media on the US mainland.

Midway is the site of the decisive World War 2 battle fought in June of 1942. The sinking of four of Japan's most advanced aircraft carriers turned the tide in the war toward the US. Today, even though it is part of the Hawaiian Island chain, it is not part of the State of Hawaii and is considered an unincorporated US territory. For this reason, a Passport is required when visiting Midway Atoll.

Today, Midway Atoll is part of the National Wildlife Refuge system. The Midway Atoll

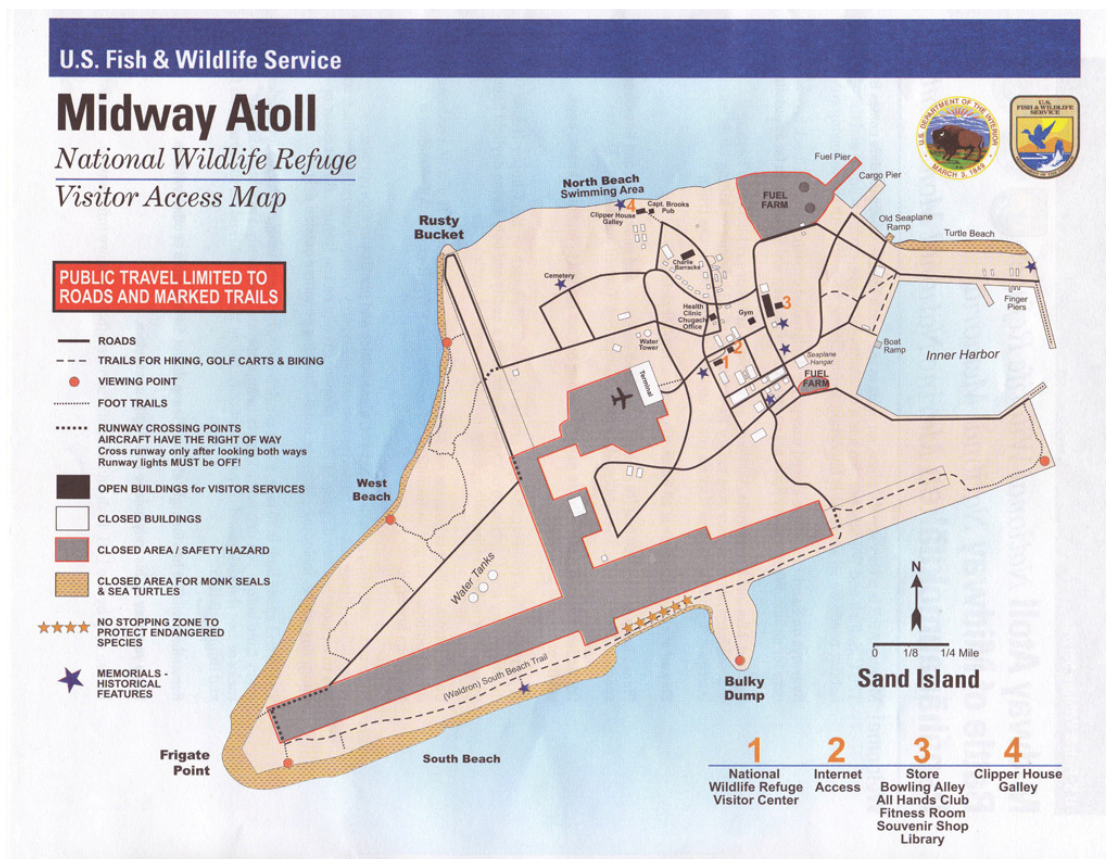


National Wildlife Refuge is part of the much larger Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument which encompasses all of the northwestern Hawaiian Islands west and northwest of Kauai and Niihau from Nihoa Island to Kure Atoll and all land and water between them. This is a total of about 1200 miles long and 150 miles wide – larger than all states except Alaska, Texas, Montana and California.

April 18

Day one of the adventure started with a US Airways non-stop flight from Phoenix to Honolulu followed by a taxi ride to the other side of Honolulu International Airport where I boarded a Bradley Pacific chartered aircraft to take the group of 14 photographers to Midway. The aircraft, a Gulfstream G2, has an interesting history. It was President Barack Obama's aircraft that he used during his presidential campaign. It was also the plane the Janet Jackson took to the Super Bowl where she had her infamous "wardrobe malfunction". As is the case with all Gulfstream Jets, it was beautifully appointed and more comfortable than any airliner could ever hope to be. One person that was not with our group of photographers was also on the flight. She is a biologist that is going to work with the Laysan Ducks since they were severely impacted by the tsunami. I got to spend some time talking to her on the flight and learned more about the ducks. After 3 hours at 41,000 feet (the plane had moving map and data displays in the cabin) we landed at night on Sand Island in Midway Atoll. All flight operations are done at night on Midway to minimize the risk of bird strike with Albatross which would almost be assured if daytime operations were to be allowed.

After a short get together of the group and some information from the refuge staff about Charlie Barracks, our home for the next 8 days, everyone went to sleep.



April 19

Breakfast was at 6:30 AM followed by about a 2.5-hour orientation program. First the island's doctor talked to us about medical safety and then the refuge ranger, Laurel, showed us several films and explained the rules of the refuge to us. I was drafted by Joe Van Os to be the second golf cart driver during the trip. He drives the first 8-person cart and I drive the second one. After the orientation we drove around Sand Island to familiarize everyone with it. This was followed by lunch and a couple of hours of free time. I used most of this time to photograph Laysan Albatross and even a couple of Laysan Ducks right outside Charlie. The sheer number of Albatross on Sand Island is mind-boggling. They are literally everywhere. I had to get out of the golf cart several times and physically pick up Albatross chicks off the road and move them. We were taught how to properly do this in the orientation.

In late afternoon we reconvened and drove to the southernmost part of the island, a place called Bulky Dump and photographed Laysan and Black-footed Albatross in flight as well as on the ground. Bulky Dump is a small peninsula on the south side of Sand Island. This was followed by dinner.

We went back out after dinner but a front had moved in making it very dark so we did not photograph. After getting back to Charlie, some of us watched an interesting documentary about the Battle of Midway.

April 20

After a full 8 hours of sleep, I woke to heavy overcast. Fortunately while eating breakfast, the skies parted and it got bright, but also hot and sticky. The morning was spent at Rusty Bucket, on the northwest part of Sand Island, photographing Laysan and Black-footed Albatross. I also happened upon a Black Noddy and a Hawaiian Monk Seal. The Monk Seals are highly protected and one cannot get closer than 150 feet of an adult or 300 feet if a pup is present. I simply use the 50 meter marking on my 500mm lens' distance scale as a gauge for adults. If focus falls inside 50 meters, I know I am getting too close and must back off. I leave the area if there is a pup.

In early afternoon, the Red-tailed Tropicbirds were out in full force doing courtship displays in the skies over the Swimming Area Beach on the north shore. One would think the light in full sun would be too harsh for flight shots at midday at 28 degrees latitude but the



Laysan Albatross - D700, 24mm



Red-tailed Tropicbird - D300, 200mm

sand on the beach is so white that the sun's reflection lights the underside of the birds, thereby evening out the contrast. One can actually see the belly turn dark and shaded when they fly over vegetation.

After a short nap, we went to Turtle beach and photographed the Green Sea Turtles sunning themselves.

Unfortunately, due to

their endangered status we are not allowed on the beach that they sun themselves on so the photos were made with big lenses from a long distance. After that, we went back to Bulky Dump for more Albatross. I concentrated more on birds perched in nice areas than flight shooting this afternoon.

We had dinner at the usual place, the Clipper House Galley and went to the little store on the island for some refreshments and T-shirts. This was followed by some sunset photography for those in my golf cart and then a screening of the 1976 Hollywood movie "Midway" which had some serious historical inaccuracies. The previous night's documentary film was so much better.

April 21

On the way to breakfast, the single Laysan Duck that sits on the railing right outside the restaurant each morning to greet us, multiplied into three. I went a little early armed with a D700, 70-200, and 1.4x to get some shots of the single one but now had my choice of subjects. One eventually jumped down to a nice spot just off the path and proceeded to model



Sunset at Rusty Bucket - D700, 500mm

including wing stretches. What a great way to start the day, having one of the rarest duck on earth model for you.

We started the day officially after breakfast trying to photograph Albatross running on the beach to gain speed for takeoff but the wind was just a bit too calm so we moved on to the eastern most part of the island where we got our first glimpse of Eastern and Spit Islands across the channel. In the trees along the shore were many white terns that were busily mating. An earlier storm wiped out much of the first clutch so they were trying again. One pair in particular went at it for several minutes followed by a very intimate nuzzling and preening session. This was also my first encounter with Brown Noddy.

As we were finishing up, the Fish and Wildlife Service boat was going out to Eastern Island and Spinner Dolphins met them and were swimming in front of and behind the boat.

After lunch, a few of us stood in the shadows of the restaurant roof photographing Tropicbirds that were constantly flying by.

Later in the afternoon we went to Rusty Bucket on the northwestern tip of the island. Others were photographing Albatross again but after 2.5 days of mostly Albatross I decided to seek out other subjects. I found a cooperative Wandering Tattler and a White Tern that was carrying a fish in its mouth.

We ended the day, after dinner, back at Rusty Bucket for a beautiful sunset. The sky took on a purple hue after the sun went down and many photographed Laysan Albatross perched against the beautiful sky using the flash to light the now dark subject with the gorgeous sky behind.



Laysan Albatross - D700, 200mm

April 22

Friday started out hot and muggy and the Laysan guard duck that has been present on a fence post outside the restaurant was once again there to greet us. I have made it a habit to take a camera to breakfast to get shots of him. After we ate we went out and photographed Albatross against a yellow flower background and then went back out to the eastern tip of the island where I spent all of my time on Brown Noddy.



Pacific Golden Plover - D700, 500mm

I ventured out on my own after lunch to find Pacific Golden Plover in breeding plumage. There is simply no way to get anywhere near them in a group but alone I had great success. Fortunately it got cloudy so shooting at midday wasn't a problem.

For our late afternoon shoot, we went back to Bulky Dump on the south side of the island since the waves were much larger today due to an oncoming storm. We photographed Albatross

wave riding. One Albatross misjudged a wave and got hit by it. He shook it off after a few minutes and took back to the air. Unfortunately the light got pretty bad and it started to rain making flight shooting difficult. Due to rain and clouds, there was no after dinner shoot. I did get an opportunity to have a talk with Michelle, the Laysan Duck biologist flown in to help with their recovery from the tsunami. This is when I learned the devastating news that only 4 of the approximately 300 Laysan Ducks that were resident on Eastern Island before the tsunami have been found. While there are certainly a few more that haven't been found or flew to Sand Island, the rest are presumed dead. Fortunately the 150 or so ducks on Sand Island are unaffected.



Great Frigatebird - D700, 500mm

April 23

Today we went to Eastern Island, the second largest island in the three island Midway Atoll. Eastern Island is what the Japanese bombed at the outset of the battle of Midway. This is where the main Navy airfield was. Today it is deserted with no humans there at all. Until the tsunami, even the old runways had been covered over with sand and vegetation. However the tsunami washed all that away and the asphalt runways are once again in plain sight. After getting off the boat, the tsunami damage is immediately obvious in two big ways. It swept over a large percentage of the island except for a few higher ground areas. The first thing you notice is that there are many adult Albatross but almost no chicks in the tsunami stricken areas. And second is the incredible amount of plastic garbage everywhere that was swept up by the wave and captured when it washed



Short-tailed Albatross - D700, 500mm + 1.4x

over Eastern Island. I did an informal survey of garbage that displayed any writing and the vast majority was Japanese in origin. This is all primarily from ships being allowed to dump any and all refuse in the ocean. When one goes to higher ground, and we are talking maybe 5 feet higher in elevation at the most, there is no garbage and quite a few chicks.

We started by visiting Red-footed Booby and Great Frigatebird nesting areas.

It was a lot of fun photographing these birds at eye-level in large shrubs. The Frigatebird males proudly displayed their inflatable bright red pouches and some of the Booby had incredible blue breeding plumage on their bills and faces. On the way to this location we spotted a Wedge-tailed Shearwater in the open. After photographing in this area on the southeastern side of the island all morning we made our way towards a known Short-tailed Albatross nesting site with a chick that was spared by the Tsunami. We have to stay quite a distance from this nest but were thrilled to find one of the adults with the chick. The Short-tailed Albatross was nearly hunted to extinction for feathers in the early 1900's and the total number dropped to just 40 birds. The Refuge Ranger, Laurel, has not seen an adult here since December and most of the staff has never seen it at all and we were fortunate enough to see it and get some pictures from a distance before it went back out to sea. The chick is the first one known to be born on Midway. Quite a treat!

In the early afternoon we made our way back to the northeastern side of the island and found an additional two Wedge-tailed Shearwater. We also stopped to photograph Gray-backed Tern, more Red-footed Booby, White Tern, and we found another hybrid



Red-footed Booby - D700, 500mm

Laysan x Black-footed Albatross. A short boat ride back in late afternoon ended our photographic day. The weather was exceptional for Eastern Island with a bright overcast and breeze, which kept the temperature down on this isle without any cover for shade and provided for light that one could create good photographs in all day.

After dinner I got a Rolwing

treatment from two of the participants on this trip that own and operate a business that does this sort of connected tissue massage. It really helped my arm and shoulder quite a bit after several long days of carrying heavy photo gear.

April 24

It's hard to believe it is already Sunday, Easter Sunday, and there are only two days left on Midway Atoll. Before the official day started, I went out on my own and got nice shots



White Tern with Fish - D300, 500mm

of Pacific Golden Plover and Bristle-thighed Curlew. The group started the day photographing White Terns in the woods since it was overcast – shooting in sunlight in the woods makes for objectionable dappled light. It has gotten much drier and colder.

After a mid-morning brunch, we moved on to Rusty Bucket Beach and did our Earth Day project; cleaning up the junk that washed up

onto this beach. We collected many 55 gallon sized plastic bags full of plastics and other foreign materials as well as many large items. In the process I stumbled upon a Hawaiian Monk Seal with baby. The rules on getting close to these are very strict so I made a quick retreat and that section of beach did not get cleaned.

The afternoon was spent at Bulk Dump photographing Albatross in flight against the bright aquamarine colored water. After dinner we were hoping for a great sunset but it did not materialize. Now there is only one day left.

April 25

It is almost incomprehensible that today is the last day on Midway Atoll! Where has the time gone? I am not looking forward to re-entering the human race and all of the petty politics and corruption after being in a place like this.

After having several talks throughout the week with the biologist that flew over on the plane with us, she asked me if I could come out with her to the wetlands to get some documentary photos for training of Fish and Wildlife personnel. I, of course jumped at this opportunity and split off from the group for a half day to do this. What a great opportunity to see and photograph Laysan Duck behavior and get shots that are normally not possible for visitors coming to Midway. I then spent about an hour and a



Laysan Duck - D700, 280mm

half processing the shots and getting them back to her. Some were actually used in a presentation to FWS employees on the island this afternoon.

I met back up with the group at lunchtime. After we ate we went on a historical tour of Sand Island and got to see some of the old buildings from when the Navy had an Naval Air Station here. The Navy left Midway in 1996 and turned it over to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Packing, followed by dinner, and then waiting for our 10:00PM charter flight on the same Gulfstream G2 that brought us here, ended the time on Midway Atoll. The flight back to Honolulu went up to 45,000 feet. This is the highest altitude I have ever been at. Airliners rarely operate above 39,000 feet and never operate above 41,000 feet.

April 26

A day of hanging out in Honolulu followed by an overnight non-stop back to Phoenix.

Final Thoughts

Midway Atoll is an incredible experience. The entire atoll is covered with Albatross. A total of 1,022,980 individual breeding Albatross plus several hundred thousand non-breeding birds and chicks reside on the three islands. It is impossible to be anywhere on the islands and not have many Albatross in view. Their chatter is audible 24 hours per day. There are many other exciting species for the bird photographer as can be seen in the species list below.

For the bird photographer, Midway is a gold mine of photographic opportunity. Great bird photos can be made at any focal length from the shortest wide angle lens to the longest



Laysan Duck - D700, 500mm

telephoto lens. My shots were primarily done with a 70-200 f/2.8 lens and a 500mm f/4 lens, sometimes with a 1.4x teleconverter. I used both full a frame FX Nikon body and a cropped frame DX Nikon body. Flash came in handy on several occasions including spur of the moment pop-up flash.

It was incredibly fortunate that the timing of our trip matched that of the Laysan Duck specialist. I learned a lot about these small Teal from her. I knew more about ducks than the most photographers before this trip but now I know much more and also know that there is so much more to learn.

While Midway is a great photographic destination, it also leaves one with sadness. Nowhere else have I ever seen the level of impact that humankind is having on our oceans than Midway. The water is absolutely beautiful aqua blue and the sand is pristine white. But junk from shipping washes up regularly on these shores. The Japan tsunami absolutely littered these islands, especially Eastern Island. The beautiful Pacific Ocean has so much garbage in it from shipping. It is nearly incomprehensible that ships are allowed to dump any and all refuse into the ocean.



Laysan Albatross Chick Sleeping - D700, 200mm

Would I want to come back? A resounding yes! I didn't want to leave. Silence at home will seem strange at first since on Midway, you always hear Albatross chatter 24 hours a day.

If you have read this far, thanks for your time and allowing me to share the birdlife treasure that is Midway Atoll with you.

List of Photographed Species - April 19 through 25, 2011 On Midway Atoll:

(S = Sand Island, E = Eastern island)

- Black Noddy (S)
- Black-footed Albatross (S, E)
- Bonin Petrel (S)
- Bristle-thighed Curlew (S)
- Brown Noddy (S)
- Common Canary (S)
- Gray-backed Tern (E)
- Great Frigatebird (E, S)
- Hybrid Laysan x Black-footed Albatross (E, S)
- Laysan Albatross (S, E)
- Laysan Duck (S)
- Pacific Golden Plover (S)
- Red-footed Booby (E)

Red-tailed Tropicbird (S, E)
Ruddy Turnstone (S)
Short-tailed Albatross (E)
Wandering Tattler (S)
Wedge-tailed Shearwater (E)
White Tern (S, E)
White-tailed Tropicbird (S, E)
Green Sea Turtle (S)
Hawaiian Monk Seal (S)



Wandering Tattler - D300, 500mm

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Sea Turtle Beach - D300, 500mm, 8 vertical frames stitched