



MIDWAY ATOLL National Wildlife Refuge

GOONEY GAZETTE II

FOMA-Friends of Midway Atoll
Newsletter Spring 2007

Dedicated to the preservation, education and history of our incredible national treasure - Midway Atoll

A MONUMENTAL TASK: FOMA VOLUNTEERS PULL TOGETHER ONE WEED AT A TIME

by Caleb Slemmons, Volunteer.



Photo: Caleb Slemmons

The newly designated Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Marine Monument is heralded as one of the most remote and pristine ecosystems on earth. By virtue of its geographic isolation few could dispute its remoteness, and it certainly is pristine compared to the main Hawaiian Islands. Pristine yes, but not untouched. Many of the islands within the Monument, and particularly Midway Atoll, still bear prominent reminders of its past.

One unexpected reminder is a bright, yellow flower native to the Southwestern US, called golden crownbeard (*Verbesina enceloides*). The source of the introduction is still uncertain, but it could have been unintentionally introduced in fill material brought in by the US Navy or the Commercial Pacific Cable Company. Today, an estimated 19 percent of the Midway's land area (almost 280 acres) is infested with this aggressive, invasive weed. There is also considerable concern that golden crownbeard (GCB) may negatively impact valuable nesting habitat for both seabirds and the endangered Laysan duck. For the millions of seabirds that spend a majority of their time at sea, only to return to the small speck of land in the middle of the Pacific to nest, habitat is critical!

However, controlling and restoring an infestation of GCB is a formidable task. It takes years of effort and lots of sweat.

Enter the Friends of Midway Atoll volunteers. Beginning in mid-November, through a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation with support from the Biological Conservation Assistance Program, three FOMA volunteers began the "monumental task" of fighting back against GCB! These volunteers are the first of a continuing supply of support for Fish and Wildlife Service's efforts to control GCB and restore native plant communities. Since mid-November FOMA volunteers, along with Fish and Wildlife Service's regular volunteer program, have hand cleared an estimated 9 acres of GCB. Efforts to date have been prioritized to focus primarily on moderately-dense infestations and restoration areas for the endangered Laysan duck.

A very important part of the work that the volunteers are doing is propagating and outplanting native plants to aid in restoration of cleared areas. So far, volunteers have helped to grow over 4,500 native plants in the Refuge greenhouse for outplanting.

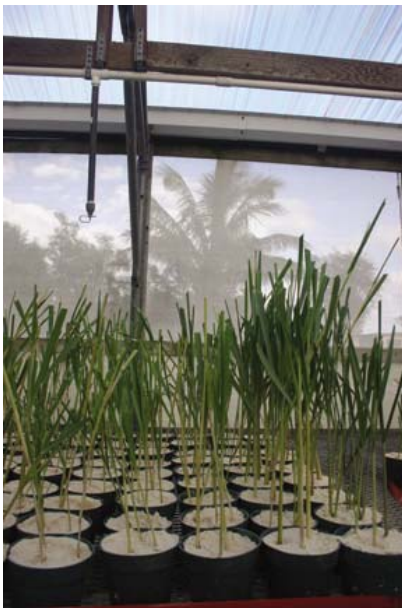
Cont, Monumental Task

Bunchgrass (*Eragrostis variabilis*), which is a species widely used by wildlife at Midway, has comprised the bulk of the plants grown and outplanted thus far. In addition, they have planted around 1,300 native plants within restoration areas on Sand, Eastern and Spit Islands. Other native outplantings have included goosefoot (*Chenopodium oahuense*), beach morning glory (*Ipomea pes-caprae*), beach naupaka (*Scaevola sericea*), and the endemic Popolo (*Solanum nelsonii*), Anaunau (*Lepidium bidentantum*), and beautiful smelling Maiapilo (*Capparis sanwicheiana*).

Along with GCB control and habitat restoration efforts, volunteers have also been involved in a variety of other work which has provided them a well rounded experience at Midway. The volunteers have assisted with albatross banding and monitoring, marine debris pick-up and are always glad to lend a hand in other miscellaneous tasks. Overall, volunteers have filled an important gap in aiding in Fish and Wildlife Service's ambitious plan to monitor albatross reproduction and survivorship. They have also provided the muscle to help clean-up marine debris on Sand and Spit Island beaches. In December, volunteers helped haul up a tangled mess of netting and ropes from the beach. They focused on nets and ropes as they pose a significant threat of entangling sea turtles and monk seals that seek respite on Midway's white, coral-sand beaches.

From cleaning up cluttered beaches to cleaning up infestations of GCB, the FOMA volunteers are pulling together. Though the task is monumental, volunteers are working hard to protect and improve habitat for species that call this remarkable place home.

Bunchgrass Cloning



Bunchgrass Photo:
Caleb Slemmons

One of the key aspects of restoring an area with golden crownbeard is replanting with native species once the invasive is removed. Bunchgrass can be grown by seeds collected from prior year or it can also be cloned. For cloning, healthy stalks of bunchgrass are collected, the roots cleaned and dipped in rooting hormone and potted in clean sand. In two to three weeks the plants have established roots and are ready to be outplanted.

Manager's Report: February, 2007

By Barry Christenson, Refuge Manager

Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, the Battle of Midway National Memorial, and now the Northwestern Hawaiian Island Marine National Monument: Lots of titles for such a small plot of land and water so far from everywhere else. More than any other of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, Midway has remained a center of activity for over one hundred years. 2006 and the early weeks of 2007 have shown just how true that statement is.

Clearly the most significant event for the refuge in 2006 was the Presidential Proclamation of the Monument. It is hard to summarize just how much of a "big deal" this was to use the President's own words. Although the Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA are working almost daily with Interior, Commerce, and the Council on Environmental Quality (a White House office) to set the broad management guidelines under which the Monument will be managed, it is clear that things will change here at Midway. We will see more interest by other agencies (primarily NOAA at this time) in working here, but most importantly we will be managed as part of the Monument, not just an individual refuge. Midway Atoll will also be the "window" to the Monument which is entirely consistent with our goal of reopening to the public with a small, but viable and ongoing, visitor services program.

And speaking of the visitor services program, I hope that all of our Friends of Midway Atoll members knew that the draft Visitor Services Plan was available for review and comments were taken through February 6. Lots of people did hear about the plan as we received over 6,000 comments, including some very well thought out ones from FOMA. If you did not see the plan, it is still available at our website, www.fws.gov/midway, for your review, but comments can no longer be submitted.

As I write this we are eagerly awaiting the first albatross hatching of the year – the black footed albatross should be first (almost any day now) but we had some early Laysan nesters as well so they should not be far behind. Last week the final members of the 2006/2007 albatross counters group finished up and headed home after three weeks at the refuge. They had a successful count and worked hard during their stay at Midway. And although not visible to the eye, the count is down a lot from last year – 88,196 nests fewer to be exact. Black footed albatross were actually up from last year so all the decline came from fewer Laysan nests. This drop in numbers is not immediate cause for panic, however. It may simply mean that a larger than normal number of pairs decided not to nest this year following last year's record number. The fact that the simple count number, although useful, does not entirely account for all members of a population in which many individuals do not breed every year is the reason that we have implemented a new statistically based reproductive plot methodology. Now in its second year, this method will calculate, once all the birds in each plot have been banded, the percentage that has chosen to nest each year as well as the annual reproductive success and fledging rate. Our volunteers are working with Marc Romano who is an employee of the Service's Migratory Bird Office to collect these data.

As I reported last time, we have been making tremendous progress towards our goal of updating the core Midway infrastructure. As you can see from the attached photos, the old overhead powerlines are now gone from most of the island. There are still two short

but by the birds. Sooty terns are now back and flying over Eastern. Greater frigatebirds are courting again as are the red-footed boobies. And our lone Short-tailed albatross nearly found a "friend" as a juvenile short-tailed was observed twice on Sand and then on Eastern, but not with our solo male. Perhaps those sightings bode well for more visits in the future with a chance of a future pairing.



So much happens here throughout the year it is sometimes hard to know what to write as I can't possibly summarize everything. Many of you may have heard about the minor oil release/ship grounding that happened over the New Year weekend. That started as a routine medivac that became anything but routine when for some reason the ship ended up next to the abandoned/wrecked water barge near the channel entrance. In that process it punctured three holes in its hull in an area of one of its fuel tanks. There was a very minor amount of fuel released but no ecological damage to the reef or any birds or seals. We were very lucky as it could have been much worse. The injured sailor was successfully taken to Honolulu and treated so it all worked out in the end, but for a while the island was buzzing!

sections left but they too will be gone in 2007. Removal of these lines will greatly improve our electrical system reliability but even more importantly, they will remove the bird strike hazard that killed hundreds of birds each year. The overall upgrading of the power generation and distribution system is now functionally complete and we will be working on smaller projects for 2007. This year we plan to replace our aging phone system with a new fiber optic based voice over ip system – which to people like me means our phone calls are internet based in some way. This will also include moving and rehabilitating our satellite dish as part of the overall communications upgrade. The other project scheduled for 2007 is minor improvements to our septic/wastewater system with a short remaining section of overhead power line put underground and new electrical pumps installed for more efficiency. And last, but far from least in terms of importance, we are still hopeful that the 2007 budget will provide the funds we need to build a new fuel farm. Our existing 4.2 million gallon system is in very poor condition and needs to be replaced before we can take our next resupply or we are at risk for a leak due to the poor condition of the lines, headers, etc.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument Management Plan will be rewritten and finalized in 2007. Although I do not know the final schedule, this effort will also incorporate in some manner the Visitor Services Plan and may also serve as the Comprehensive Conservation Plan for Midway Atoll and the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuges. As this effort moves forward I will keep FOMA informed as this will once again provide



FAA has already invested heavily in improvements to our airport with new equipment but now will start replacing and repairing the core airport infrastructure. This spring they will begin construction of a new airfield operations building and later this year will begin work on the new runway lights and aircraft guidance lights. Our new Non-directional beacon (an aircraft guidance radio beam) and weather station were installed in January. So there is a lot happening here this year.

an avenue for people with a strong and lasting interest in Midway to offer comments on its future direction and role as part of the Monument.

I interrupted writing this article for a three week trip to the mainland and Honolulu and now there are albatross chicks everywhere. What a great time of year. It is so amazing to watch the natural cycles throughout the year where here we mark the seasons not by weather,

I would like to thank all of you in FOMA who give of your personal time to work on projects that benefit the refuge and wildlife. THANK YOU!

About the Midway Volunteers:

Tonya Rasmussen From: Haines, AK

As an active volunteer in my own community of 2,500, I jumped at the chance to come to Midway and volunteer. A local conservation organization I volunteer with is just starting to work on invasive plants in our area. We hope to bring awareness to the invasive plants in our community. I'm interested in the study and conservation of wildlife and I am looking to get my masters in Biology so I can spend all my time outdoors.

First impressions: Midway is amazing! There is no way to explain how it feels to be here. Who gets the chance to live in an albatross colony? Everyday I can walk outside my door and see 1000's of albatross. I can hear them mooing and clacking outside my window. In the evening the sky is filled with Bonin petrels. They are so cute on the ground they look like little web footed blind mice hobbling around. The white terns hover over you making space invader sounds...while their chicks cling to precarious perches awaiting food. Birds are everywhere! I love it! They all have little funny habits that endear them to your heart...who wouldn't love the anthropomorphized view of two Laysan albatross in love gently nuzzling and preening each other while they await the hatching of their fuzzy offspring. This is a very special place that should be preserved and shared.

Favorite Midway moment: Every moment: Kayaking in turquoise waters, snorkeling, watching a Laysan albatross lay her egg, playing beach volleyball, banding albatross, beach debris clean-up, watching Lost on Thursday nights, being the only one on the beach, eating Pong's (Chugach cook) Thai food and hanging out with all the great people on Midway.

Gretchen Johnson From: Honolulu, HI

As a perennial northwestern Hawaiian islander I was thrilled to come out to Midway for the winter and help remove the invasive GBC and aid in Midway's restoration. I have worked at French Frigate Shoals, Lisianski and Laysan Island and have visited all the other Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. I have seen the devastation GBC has tolled on Pearl and Hermes and am thrilled to try and combat GBC here at Midway. The ability to turn back the tide to native flora, to provide a healthy native habitat for native fauna is a chance I could not surpass.

First impressions: While there are buildings, large infrastructure, and a little village of people I cannot help but still feel the amazement as the wildlife clatters, whinnies, and moos all around me! To see a field full of albatross as they dance and tenaciously incubate their eggs is pure joy for me. Its inspiration, aspiring awe, and pure amazement and freedom as the birds soar, the dolphins spin, and turtles swim.

Favorite Midway moment: After finishing our first pull of GCB, the albatross quickly moved into their newly opened space, it was a wonderful feeling and instant gratification of the importance of pulling GCB is. A fantastic feeling!

Caleb Slemmons From: Homer, AK

Invasive species have been a common thread of interest for me and I jumped at the chance to follow it to the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. In addition to my current position at Homer Soil and Water Conservation District, I have also participated in invasive plant control efforts in Ohio, Virginia and Utah.

My background is primarily in plant ecology, so getting the opportunity to help band and monitor the albatross nesting here at Midway was a novel and enriching experience for me.

First impressions: Of course, I was amazed by the sheer number of birds but being

able to get within close proximity to the albatross was a very unique experience for me. The lack of predators here allows you to get up close and personal with the birds and they generally seem to regard you with little concern.

Favorite Midway moment: I really enjoyed outplanting native plants on Spit Island. It was never occupied and much of the native flora remains intact there. We planted some of the rarer native plants such as popolo (*Solanum nelsonii*) and it was very satisfying to be part of working to replenish its natural populations at Midway.



back row: Steve Siegel, Rud Wasson, Richard Johnson, Beth Flint, David Patte
middle row: Cindy Waddington, Jenny Johnson, Rachel Neville, Keith Swindle, Dick Wass, Sally Marston. kneeling: Ryan DiGaudio, Jim Waddington, Elizabeth Patte, Carol Wass, Timmy Wasson, Brenda Zaub

Volunteers cont.

The volunteers would like to thank FOMA, BCAP, and FWS for supporting this work at Midway. A special thanks to Christy Finlayson for extending us the opportunity to experience this special place and John Klavitter, our fearless leader. Thanks also to Becky Grimm for putting up with us and being a “special” verbesina crew member.



Photo Credit-Steve Siegel

WHAT YOU CAN DO FROM HOME TO PROTECT SEABIRDS

If you eat seafood, only purchase seafood caught in a sustainable manner. Long line fishing is a significant cause of death for albatross. Carry a pocket seafood guide to help you when purchasing sea food. <http://www.mbayaq.org/cr/seafoodwatch.asp>

Reduce your use of plastics. Midway is filled with albatross carcasses filled with plastic that was mistaken by albatross as a source of food. An additional benefit of using less plastic is that plastics are made from fossil fuels and by reducing your use, you will already be taking a step toward the next thing you can do to help Midway from your home.

Commit to doing something to reduce global warming. The elevation of Midway varies, but all three of the islands lie close to sea level, with the airport sitting at an elevation of 13 feet. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that human induced global warming will cause a significant rise in sea level in the next century. Midway's low elevation makes it, and its albatross colony, particularly vulnerable.

Things you can do to reduce global warming may include driving less or driving a more fuel efficient vehicle, replacing conventional light bulbs with compact fluorescent lights, or purchasing power from sustainable sources (or asking your utility provider).

If you live in Hawaii and other areas with seabirds, shield your lights and use curtains at night to keep lights from disorienting seabirds.

Aloha FOMA friends! by Cindy & Jim Waddington

Jim and I arrived home yesterday around noon and we are laundering clothes and preparing to fly to Kaho'olawe (via Maui) early early on Monday morning for 4 days of planting. I wanted to send a condensed report before our departure.

First of all, the Kotobuki Maru incident, although it certainly caused a flurry of activity, did not seem as bad as it sounded in the news accounts. The day after the collision, the coast seemed clear after checks of beaches and wildlife were conducted...definitely good news. Jim and I were very busy as team leaders of bird counters so we did not receive first hand reports as the incident was unfolding...Barry and John were, as you can imagine, very occupied with ascertaining the extent of the damage and contacting the various agencies to conduct any necessary clean-up and repair. There was a lot of second-hand news about the event at meals. One of our team members was Dick Wass who is the manager of the Hakalau Wildlife Refuge on the Big Island...he was called into action to dive under the boat to survey the extent of the damage to the hull. I think everyone was relieved when the ship was finally cleared to leave Midway and make its way to Honolulu.

We had a great team of bird counters although we were fewer in numbers than in the past so unfortunately the count was not completed before 10 of us (including Beth Flint) left on our scheduled flight. There are 7 counters staying for an additional week who are finishing the count (coming out on Jan. 12) as well as doing habitat restoration work. The Laysan numbers, as of Thursday afternoon, are down from last year's record numbers. The Black-foot numbers are about even with last year's.

Jim and I worked at the store while Greg was on leave and that was an interesting and fun experience. We received lots of input and suggestions and I will share this with Ellen and will cover this at our next meeting. So far, we have two new members and some of the other bird counters expressed interest in joining. It was brought up that FOMA would be reimbursing (at least partially) bird counters for their meals. I had a couple of bird counters wonder why FOMA would include this in their budget...they felt that being on a bird count is sort of like winning the lottery and why would we reimburse meal money?! They felt that they would rather have their meal money go towards some pressing needs of the refuge. So some of these folks may be contacting me before meal reimbursements are sent out to the individual bird counters. To reimburse bird counters' meals is a nice and generous gesture but I tend to agree that bird counters do not expect to be reimbursed and that all bird counters feel that it is such a privilege to be helping with the bird count, that they do not expect to receive compensation for food. By the way, we brought the store proceeds home with us and when we get back from Kaho'olawe, we will be sending checks totaling \$1781.50 to Bob!

All the bird counters enjoyed riding the new bikes...they are great!!

The volunteers would like to thank FOMA, BCAP, and FWS for supporting this work at Midway. A special thanks to Christy Finlayson for extending us the opportunity to experience this special place and John Klavitter, our fearless leader. Thanks also to Becky Grimm for putting up with us and being a “special” verbesina crew member.

FIRST LADY ARRIVES ON MIDWAY

by: Barry Christenson

President George W. Bush designated the Northwest Hawaiian Islands National Monument on June 15, 2006, and is the single largest conservation area in U.S. history and the largest protected marine area in the world.



On March 1, Midway Atoll was honored to host First Lady Mrs. Laura Bush, Secretary of Interior Dirk Kempthorne, Dept. Secretary of Commerce David Sampson, and the Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, James Connaughton. Everyone on the island worked hard to prepare for this important visit and we were all set when their plane arrived at 1:00 am early that morning.

The day began with Mrs. Bush doing interviews with CNN and the Honolulu Star Bulletin on the porch of the Clipper House. We then toured Eastern Island and discussed the Battle of Midway as well as the numerous albatrosses and other birds. Mrs. Bush and the other visitors planted bunch grass at our Laysan duck wetland which luckily had 8 birds swimming in it that morning. We were also fortunate to see our lone Short-tailed albatross which really caught Mrs. Bush's attention. And, of course, we all saw and discussed the many carcasses of last year's chicks which clearly showed their consumption of small plastic pieces. The issue of marine debris was central to their tour and discussions throughout the day.

After Eastern Island the group went to the Clipper House for lunch and Mrs. Bush posed for a photo with all of our Thais workers. They were very pleased and excited at the opportunity.

The afternoon was divided between a Historical Tour of Sand Island lead by Deputy Refuge Manager Mike Johnson and discussions about our various wildlife projects. Each visitor had a chance to band an albatross chick and then feed one of our captive care young monk seals.

The day ended with a reception for Mrs. Bush and the others at Captain Brooks. We all had a wonderful time and it nicely wrapped up a memorable day. We will write more about the visit and include pictures in the next newsletter.

FOMA PLAQUE PRESENTED TO FIRST LADY

by: Christy Finlayson



The visit from Mrs. Bush on Thursday was an exciting, positive experience. I presented her with a certificate, stuffed gooney bird, and etched mirror (with a tote bag to carry these items) on behalf of FOMA at the social the evening that she departed. I was very impressed with the group's genuine interest in Midway's wildlife and pressing issues (especially plastic ingestion and invasive species). The community here on the atoll really seemed to come together wonderfully to prepare for the visit and, from my perspective, did a wonderful job showing off Midway's assets, which at the same time, exemplified Midway's needs. I was able to speak with Mrs. Bush on 3 occasions - she was charming and I really believe she is genuinely interested. For our Summer Newsletter I will send more details of our discussions and potential follow-up soon - I think it's important that we follow up with questions such as "What next?" specifically regarding some of Midway's needs.

(When we receive photos from the White House photographer of the event I will send them along - we were not permitted to take any photos ourselves. Photos were taken as I presented the certificate to Mrs. Bush and also when I addressed the group in the field while we were voraciously pulling verbesina.

COUNTING BIRDS AT THE EDGE OF THE EMPIRE

By Steve Siegel, Bird counter

Many of us have seen a mountain, a forest, a stream, and know the feelings such special places invoke. Many of us have seen birds fly overhead too, or have heard a song bird sing. We tap **into** these shared experiences to describe places of awe inspiring beauty. But comparisons don't work well when describing the sense of all encompassing wonder invoked by the bird population at Midway. Describing the feeling of being surrounded by so many birds may be a little like explaining the ocean to someone who only knows water as something out of a faucet.

A sign left from the Navy days at Midway describes the Atoll as sitting at "the edge of the empire." The 2006-2007 team of 17 volunteers who arrived at Midway on December 17 to count the Laysan and black-footed albatross populations included people who have made a career of working around birds. Experiencing life at Midway brings out a childlike sense of wonder. One after another, we all wanted to describe our feelings.

I couldn't walk outside without smiling. Keith Swindle has seen over 1,700 species of birds described life around us as "a fairyland." Valerie Elliot has traveled from the Arctic to Antarctica and placed Midway among the best places she has seen. Brenda Zaun, the "albatross lady" of Kauai for her work as a Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, stood in amazement watching the birds in the water. "We never get to see them there!" For bird counting veteran Jenny Johnson, the connection to Midway was the most personal. Between 1958-60, Jenny's father was stationed at Midway and she describes the albatross among her childhood friends. Each visit may literally bring her close to those same birds. Nesting near Bravo barracks sits a Laysan albatross banded before Jenny's childhood days at Midway.

The Numbers

Amongst the wonder of it all, the bird counting trip to Midway serves a vitally important purpose. Midway hosts the world's largest nesting population of nesting albatross. Warned by the decline in every species of albatross in the southern hemisphere, the Service began bird counts at Midway in 1992 as a tool in monitoring the health of Laysan and black-footed albatross populations. Supervisory wildlife biologist Beth Flint led the first count in 1992 and returned this year to lead her fourth count at Midway.

Counters this year found 398,529 nesting pairs of Laysan albatross, a decline of nearly 89,000 pairs from the 2005-2006 count. More encouraging was the count of 24,487 nesting pairs of black-footed albatross, the fourth straight increase in their numbers and a record high. With each nest representing a pair of birds, nearly

850,000 birds were counted. Service biologists, while disappointed in the reduced number of nesting Laysan albatross, said the numbers are not yet a cause of concern. Last year was a record nesting year and some yearly variation in nesting attempts is normal.

The Letters

Counting such a huge number of birds and tracking numbers from year to year requires consistency in procedures honed to maximize the value of the data collected. But staying true to protocols didn't hinder the creativity of count leaders as they divided the volunteer group into three teams. **Team leaders Jim and Cindy** Waddington carefully selected for their team the Wasses and Wassons, if only so they could call themselves team WaWaWa. However, once convened, the team seemed to prefer the more businesslike wvw dots. Not to be out-punned by their dot making colleagues, I was assigned to the group that became the Orange Jedi, self-described wielders of paint sticks through some of the most difficult sections of the atoll. The third team dubbed themselves the Holy Moli's, Moli being the Hawaiian word for albatross. The Holy Moli's approached counting with a religious zeal leading to numbers unsurpassed by any of the groups.

Challenges

We wasted no time establishing our our work routines. As counters do every year, we armed ourselves with **clickers to keep count of the birds**, cans of orange marking paint, and paint sticks **used to hold the cans near the ground**. We learned to walk in staggered rows, spraying the ground near each active nest with an orange dot of paint **to prevent double counting**. One active nest, two birds, **click and spray the orange paint**. Team members learned who was best at marking end lines to distinguish areas counted from ground yet to be covered, and who was best walking in the middle, keeping the right pace and distance from the next counter

Photo credit: David and Elizabeth



to ensure no birds were missed. By the end of the first day, people were tired. But no matter how tired, we were able to enjoy a constant part of Midway life: the food prepared by chef Pong Wichasawatdi and others employed by Chugach, the company under contract with the Service to help maintain facilities on Sand island.

through them. We frequently lost site of team members as we walked through rows of the naupaka, and it wasn't always feasible to spray an orange dot near each nest. Communication became essential in ensuring that each nesting pair of birds was counted.

The most difficult part of counting albatross was, ironically, a result



Photo Credit- David & Elizabeth

During the early days of the count, volunteers felt the repetitive motion of squeezing the trigger of the paint stick. Blisters and callouses became a topic of conversation. Soon glances were made at shoes, accompanied by grins as they became increasingly orange from misfires. Next came the encounters with *verbessina*, the invasive plant that dominates huge sections of Midway. *Verbessina* makes nesting a challenge for birds who return to the same area to nest year after year, and challenges counters who must fight through thickets as high as ten feet to find and count the birds. By the end of the first week, the wear and tear of the work was taking its toll. Beth recommended the over 40 crowd take regular doses of Vitamin I, explaining to those of us looking confused, Vitamin I is ibuprofen.

Negotiating the native naupaka plants presented another set of challenges. We would crawl under the branches of these densely think plants, try to climb over them, and often just tried to plow

of conservation actions taken by the Navy and the Fish and Wildlife Service. The Navy, in cooperation with the Service, eradicated the rat population on Midway. Among the beneficiaries of removing the rats are Bonin petrels, birds that build often fragile underground burrows. The Service in recent years has reduced lighting on Midway, an action that also benefits petrels, as the lights tend to confuse them. **While there is no reliable estimate of the petrel population on Midway, it is clear the population is growing.**

More petrels means more burrows. No matter how carefully we would try and avoid a misstep, every bird counter stepped through burrows. As our feet sank, so did our hearts as we quickly began digging out the burrow, hoping no bird was injured.

The Diversity of Life

The challenges of counting were easily overcome by the wonders of the atoll. Hundreds of thousands of albatross and tens of thousands of petrels were **only the beginning**. On Christmas day, participating volunteers identified 29 species of birds. By the time of the Christmas bird count, we had all seen frigate birds hovering overhead, or tried to capture a photograph of angelic looking white terns as they flew near to investigate us. Less common were gulls, repeatedly seen under siege by a flock of those very same, angelic looking terns.

The rarest of the birds seen at Midway is the Laysan duck. **Just**

to help establish habitat for the ducks. What a feeling it was to see the seeps fully vegetated and, more importantly, full of ducks. Nesting was successful beyond anyone's guess, and there are now over 100 Laysan ducks on Midway. John Klavitter, the Refuge biologist, says, "It just gives me chicken skin thinking about it!"

The Saga of the Golden Goonies

The sorry saga of Midway's long term resident short-tailed albatross contrasts with the prolific ducks. A single short-tailed albatross has been returning to Eastern island for 13 years. Surrounded by both Laysan and black-footed albatross, it sits near decoys and a



Photo Credit- David & Elizabeth

over two years ago, these ducks were only found on Laysan island. The Service decided, in two installments of twenty ducks each, to relocate ducks to Midway in an effort to establish a second population for this highly endangered species. The result is one of the Service's great success stories. Bird-counters participated in the relocation effort two years ago by moving grasses from the fuel farm at Midway to the newly built seeps

sound recording of its kin. Taller and with a golden head, the short-tail stands prominently among the many birds surrounding it. Yet its interest appears only in the decoys it can be seen preening. Short-tailed albatross are highly endangered and, like the ducks, the Service is trying to establish a population on Midway.

On January 2, Rachel Neville identified a young short-tailed

albatross while counting birds near the runway on Sand island. The sex of the bird was unknown, but the discovery generated a **flurry of excitement and speculation. Would John Klavitter attempt to play matchmaker? The answer was yes, and just in time for all the volunteers to share in the excitement. Early on January 5, 10 of the 17 counters would be returning home. The Service made plans to capture the newly discovered bird on the 4th, and release it near the short-tail on Eastern island.**

Bicycling and photography were incorporated into our work routines, and there were chances to walk on the beach or swim before dinner. Every activity was another way of experiencing the incredible array of life offered to us.

Making News

Over 1250 miles from Honolulu, it was easy to escape from the



Photo credit: Ryan DiGaudio

The effort never left the ground. The bird on Eastern left flew away before the newly-found bird was captured and, by the morning of the 5th, the new bird was also gone. The remaining bird counters stayed on Midway until the morning of January 12, and on a daily basis looked for the return of the “golden goonies” with the hope that a new population could finally begin to establish itself on Midway. Alas, it was not to happen.

More Than Birds

Birds may be everywhere on Midway, but beneath the end-to-end rainbows we saw was more than the vast numbers and variety of birds that first catch the eye. Spinner dolphins repeatedly swam near the boat as we traveled to and from Eastern island. Once we even saw dolphins from the Clipper House as we ate lunch. Manta rays were seen in the harbor. We frequently saw and learned to avoid the endangered monk seals and sea turtles resting on the beaches, we watched as captive monk seals were fed as part of a NOAA Fisheries effort to improve the troubling survival rates of these amazing animals, and sea turtles swam near the pier as we watched. There were opportunities to snorkel and see an amazing variety of sea life during our Christmas and New Years holidays.

rest of the world. Many of us lost track of the days, content to adjust to the flow of counting and island life. Rarely did news from the outside world make it to our conversations and when heard in the context of white sand beaches, turquoise waters, sea turtles, and birds, birds, birds...it was a jolt.

Even Midway, as remote as it may feel, is connected to the rest of the world. The albatross travel thousands of miles before arriving on Midway. Plastics are evident in the bodies of the birds and marine waste washes ashore. National Public Radio ran a story about the impact of lead paint on birds at Midway. Most notably, however, were the multiple scares that began with a wounded Japanese fisherman.

Over a day's journey from Midway, a distress call was received from a fishing vessel. A hook was lodged near an artery in a fisherman's throat. **The vessel** received permission to come to Midway so the fisherman could be flown to Honolulu for medical treatment. The Coast Guard was notified and sent people to help respond to the accident. Matters became more complicated when the ship moved off course **and was damaged** on its approach to the Atoll. An oil leak was feared.

The ship finally docked and remained at Midway for two days. The fisherman was flown to Honolulu and we were told was going to be all right. Booms were placed around the boat to prevent oil from spreading, and rat traps were placed on the pier to limit the risk of rats infesting the island. Service employees among the volunteers sprang into action assisting Refuge personnel in a variety of ways. Dick Wass used his diving expertise to inspect the hull of the boat; David Patte helped draft a news release; Keith Swindle escorted fishermen onto the island so they could contact family. The incident highlighted the special challenges faced by the limited Service staff at Midway and the vulnerabilities of even the most remote of refuges.

Island Life

Even as we responded to incidents from the “outside” and enjoyed the diversity of life on Midway, we also became part of the flow of life on the island. The All-hands club became the focal point for all-island celebrations on Christmas Eve and New Year’s, and Captain Brooks pub the meeting place for evening board games and presentations by members of the group who shared their expertise with the others.

Our seemingly normal activities were accompanied by our own peculiarities. Scientists are easy to poke fun at as they pocket the leg of a dead bird so they can keep its band, or preserve a bird by placing it in the refrigerator in their guest room until it can be delivered elsewhere. I fared little better, collecting a “bolus,” or pellet regurgitated by an albatross, for use dissecting in a classroom at some later date.

Perhaps what seems odd elsewhere is simply accepted as the norm on Midway. Rud Wasson, the mild mannered obstetrician from Minnesota, was fascinated by birds talking to their eggs. Rud observed we could learn from this behavior. He has often advised young parents to talk to their unborn children as a form of bonding. On Midway, however, he was also seen scolding one bird who was imitating the nesting habits of others, “Stop talking like you have an egg. You don’t!”

Richard Johnson took things a step further. A land developer, Richard enjoyed evaluating the nest building skills of the albatross. He claims to speak to the albatross and offer his generally complimentary assessments in their language. We weren’t able to confirm his fluency, however.

The Final Week

Perhaps our conversations with the birds was a sign that the Service,

in its wisdom, used good judgment in determining the length of our volunteer stay. On Friday, January 5, 10 of the 17 member counting team departed on the Gulfstream 1. Before leaving, the count of birds on Sand island was completed, and those who had never been to tiny Spit island counted the albatross there. We all spent a half day removing *verbascina*, and the remaining seven of us were left to finish the bird count and do additional habitat restoration work.

David Patte started the morning for those of us remaining with the announcement, “we had to throw them off the island.” By the next day, sentiments were different. We began our counting commenting, “We keep on dancing, but our partners are gone.” Happily, the dance was completed with an extra push and the help

of other Midway volunteers who joined the count. At exactly 4:15, as we discovered an empty beer bottle painted orange that Richard had previously left to mark our finish line, the count was declared complete, much to the joy of all.

The remainder of the week we turned our attention to **r e m o v i n g invasive plant species.** One of the many positive stories at Midway

is the impact of restoring native habitat. Preliminary assessment of the count numbers showed that even though there **are less** nesting albatross this year, the numbers are higher in areas where habitat improvements have been made.

We removed *verbascina* in areas identified as a priority by John Klavitter and we learned to clone bunch grass. The most satisfaction may have come from some of the larger scale work we did, **tackling hairy abutilon, or as we called it, “Hairy Brute,” a large, invasive plant spreading through the Henderson Hill area on Sand island.** With chain saws running and a team effort to remove what we could and poison what remained, a huge swath of habitat was freed for the albatross to again enjoy.

As we sat taking a break from the heavy lifting of cutting and removing the plants, nothing was quite as satisfying as watching nesting birds stand and stretch their wings, possibly for the first time in weeks, enjoying their new, open nesting space. The image of those happy birds and the improvements that continue to be made at Midway are among the many happy memories we took home with us as our plane departed.

Rud & Timmy Wasson-volunteers



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From FOMA President **DARLENE MOEGERLE**

Notice of Annual Meeting

The FOMA board will hold their annual meeting via conference call on May 15th at 3pm EST. 2007. If you have input please contact Darlene Moegerle. Please send an email and she can provide more information. darlenem@parallax.ws

Rachel Neville and Beth Flint



Exciting News on Visitor Service Plan!

The USFWS Visitor's Service Plan can be viewed on line : Refuge website, [http://www.fws.gov/midway/VSP MidwayVSPindex.html](http://www.fws.gov/midway/VSP%20MidwayVSPindex.html).



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