

HAWAII

Tuesday 13th March – Saturday 24th March 2012 (12 days)

Leaders: Mark Van Beirs and local bird-guides

Group Size Limit: 10

Tour Category: Easy for the most part, but one Moderate grade hike and one fairly Demanding hike



Akohekohe or Crested Honeycreeper (Tony Disley)

Halfway across the Pacific Ocean, north of the equator, lies the Hawaiian archipelago, consisting of 122 islands and spreading 2400 kilometres across the Pacific from Kure Atoll and Midway in the northwest to Hawaii in the southeast. The term Hawaii usually refers to the eight main islands: Oahu, Hawaii proper (also known as Big Island), Maui, Kauai, Molokai, Lanai, Kahoolawe and Niihau.

Captain Cook brought the islands to the attention of the rest of the world in 1778, but Polynesian explorers had settled these volcanic peaks long before him. In the mind of most Europeans, Hawaii stands for the white sandy beaches of Waikiki, beautiful hula-dancing, flower-covered girls, the battle of Pearl Harbor, breaching Humpback Whales, surfers riding immaculate waves and its melodic language, full of vowels and repeated syllables. Few people realize that the 50th State offers many unique natural phenomena, including

the world's most active volcano (Kilauea) and the world's tallest mountain if measured from its bottom on the sea floor (Mauna Kea), as well as extraordinary volcanic mountain scenery, luxuriant forests, extensive lava flows and semi-deserts, remote beaches, cascading waterfalls, pounding surf and turquoise waters. Hawaii is a place of great contrasts: altitudes range from sea-level to 4205m and annual rainfall from more than 10m on Kauai to only a few centimetres on some of the leeward beaches of the Big Island!

For naturalists the main attraction of Hawaii lies in the extremely high percentage of endemism in the local fauna and flora (amounting to about 90%). Hawaii boasts an endemic bird family: the Hawaiian Honeycreepers or Drepanididae, the finest known example of the process called adaptive radiation, wherein a varied array of species evolved from a single ancestor. The

Hawaiian Honeycreepers range from tiny, drab-coloured, nectar-feeding, warbler-like birds to large, brightly-coloured, thick-billed seedeaters; others creep along trunks and feed with peculiar decurved bills or pick at the bark. Since man settled in the islands the honeycreepers and other native birds have fought a losing battle (starting with the extinction of a number of flightless birds soon after the Polynesians first settled), as most of the lowland forests were destroyed and introduced alien plants and animals proved to be serious pests. Worst of all was the unfortunate introduction of mosquitoes in 1826, as they provided a vector for avian malaria. The endemic species were unable to cope and many species have become extinct. The survivors (about 20 species) of this catastrophe are mainly found above 1300m elevation, where mosquitoes are less numerous, but even so most of the honeycreepers are endangered (some critically) so time is of the essence if one wishes to see Hawaii's surviving endemics.

During our tour of Hawaii we will make a special effort to try to see as many of the surviving endemic species and other Hawaiian specialities as possible.

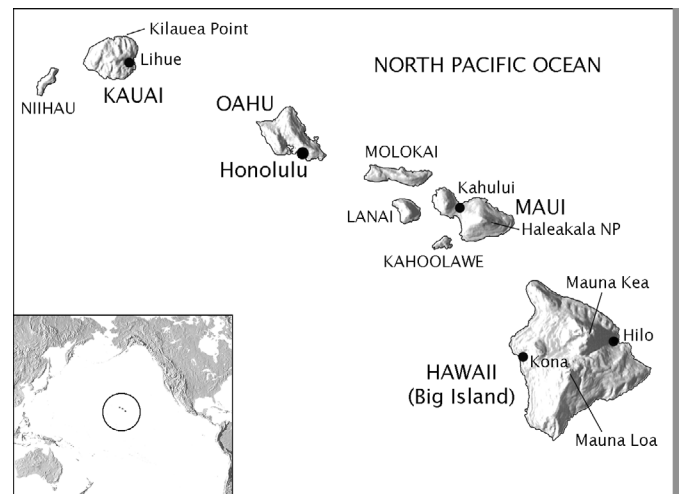
Our birding will begin on the island of Oahu,

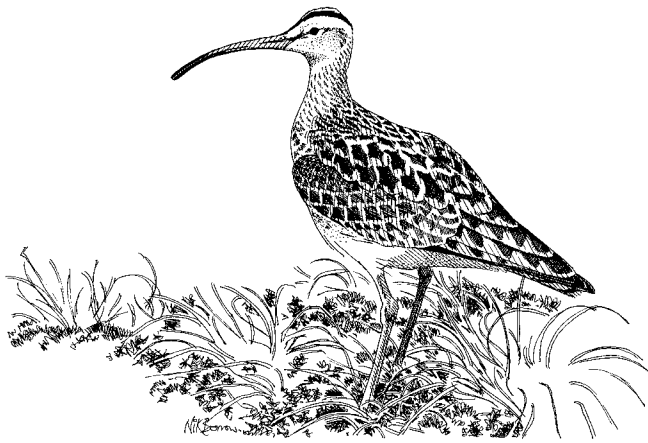
the third largest island of the chain and the most populated one, with bustling Honolulu as its capital. Hawaiian Duck, Hawaiian Coot, Hawaiian Stilt, Bristle-thighed Curlew, Common Fairy-Tern, Oahu Elepaio and Oahu Amakihi are the main attractions here.

Next we will take a short flight to Hawaii, which is also called 'Big Island'. This is the youngest of the islands, with several very active volcanoes producing impressive lava flows, while exciting endemics like Hawaiian Hawk, Omoa, Palila, Hawaii Amakihi, Iiwi, Apapane, Akiapolaau, Hawaii Creeper and Akepa reside in the remaining forests.

Maui will be our next port of call. This is the second largest island and is formed by two mountains connected by a low isthmus. The crater of the world's largest dormant volcano harbours the endemic Nene or Hawaiian Goose and the nesting sites of Hawaiian Petrels, while lower down the woodlands are home to Hawaii Amakihi and the endemic Maui Creeper, and even the rare Akohekohe and Maui Parrotbill.

Finally we will travel to Kauai, the 'Garden Isle'. Kauai has a central mountain range which receives more than 10m of rainfall a year, making it one of the wettest places on earth! This is





Bristle-thighed Curlew (Nik Borrow)

probably the 'birdiest' island and we will concentrate on the forested mountains of the interior, which are the perfect habitat for a series of endemics including Kauai Elepaio, Puaiohi, Anianiau, Akekee (or Kauai Akepa), Kauai Amakihi and the rapidly declining Akikiki (or Kauai Creeper). Along the coast we can expect Laysan Albatross and White-tailed and Red-tailed Tropicbirds, while a pelagic trip may turn up Newell's Shearwater and Hawaiian Petrel.

Birdquest has operated tours to Hawaii since 1998.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins this evening in Honolulu on the island of Oahu where we will spend two nights.

Day 2 Early this morning we will head for Laie Point, where a short seawatch should turn up our first Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and perhaps Christmas (or Kiribati) Shearwater, which nests on one of the offshore islets. Nearby we will visit several ponds and marshes around Kailua and the James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge. Breeding species in these wetlands include the Koloa or Hawaiian Duck

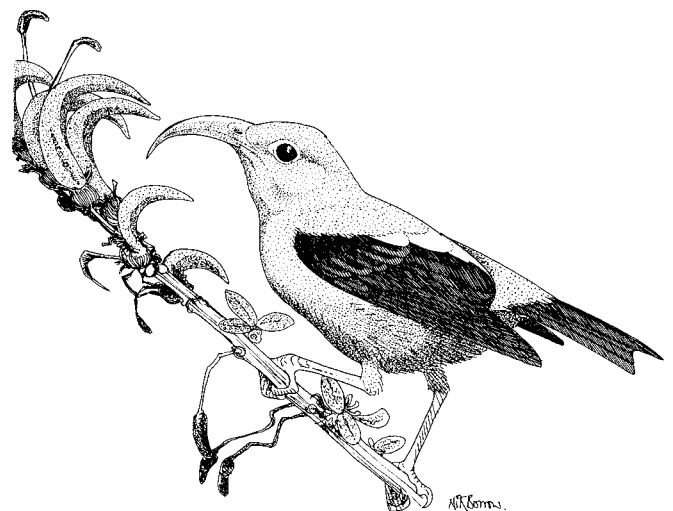
(which looks like a small dark female Mallard), the endemic Hawaiian Coot and the endemic race of the Black-necked Stilt (a form with more black on the sides of the neck and face than in Black-necked, sometimes split as Hawaiian Stilt), as well as Black-crowned Night Heron, Cattle Egret and the introduced Red Avadavat. The wetlands also attract migratory wildfowl such as Blue-winged Teal and Lesser Scaup. Most importantly, we should encounter the rare Bristle-thighed Curlew, as small numbers winter regularly in the area. Next we will visit a scrubby valley which holds the highest concentration of the Oahu Elepaio (the different forms of Elepaio, which are closely related to the monarch flycatchers, are now increasingly regarded as distinct species). In addition, we should see two introduced species: the smart White-rumped Shama and the multi-hued Red-billed Leiothrix. Finally we will take a stroll around Kapiolani Park, close to the world-famous tourist Mecca of Waikiki Beach. Common Fairy-Tern breeds here in the tall casuarina trees and the park is also a very good place to find common

introduced birds like Spotted and Zebra Doves, Red-vented Bulbul, Common Myna, Northern Cardinal, Japanese White-eye, House Finch, Yellow-fronted Canary and Java Sparrow. Wintering Pacific Golden Plovers often feed on the lawns.

Day 3 Early this morning we will drive on the Tantalus/ Roundtop loop, only a short drive from downtown Honolulu. This scenic drive provides magnificent views over the city and is the most accessible location to see Oahu Amakihi (a recent split from Hawaii Amakihi). A short morning flight will then take us to Hilo on the island of Hawaii, also known as Big Island, for a three nights stay. Later we will commence our explorations.

Days 4-5 During our stay on Big Island we will explore several different areas. At the famous Saddle Road we will concentrate on the kipukas, which are islands of older forest surrounded by fairly recent lava flows. These nearly pristine fragments of forest hold several species of Hawaiian honeycreeper, a dark form of the Hawaii Elepaio and the Omoa or Hawaiian Thrush, an unobtrusive species, whose loud song can be heard all around. In addition, we are

likely to encounter the rare Akiapolaau with its unique and amazing bill as this area is undoubtedly the best place to find the species. We will also explore the mamane-naio forest on the leeward slope of Mauna Kea at an altitude of about 2300m. This is the home of the endangered Palila, a striking finch-like Hawaiian endemic that feeds almost exclusively on the pods of the green mamane. Hawaii Amakihi is abundant here and we should also find an attractive pale form of the Hawaii Elepaio. If the weather is good, and providing time permits, we will drive to the summit of Mauna Kea (or 'White Mountain'), the highest mountain in Hawaii at 4205m, to enjoy the spectacular panorama. The summit area is nowadays occupied by a large astronomical observatory with telescopes from a series of world-famous universities sited there to take advantage of the extraordinarily clear air. The finest place for birds in the entire island is Hakalau Forest National Refuge, which covers 13000 hectares of fine montane koa-ohia cloudforest on the eastern slope of Mauna Kea and was established solely for the management of forest birds and their rainforest habitat. Access to this



liwi (Nik Borrow)



Akiapoloau (Nik Borrow)

wilderness area is restricted, but we will have permission to visit this superb area. During our visit we should be able to add two Big Island endemics, Akepa and Hawaii Creeper, to our list. The localized Hawaiian Hawk can sometimes be observed flying over, but if need be we will drive along the Stainback Highway to maximize our chances for this rather unpredictable bird which can only be found on the Big Island and which often rides the thermals. Other species we may find during our explorations of Big Island include Short-eared Owl and introduced Erckel's and Black Francolins, Kalij Pheasant, Wild Turkey, California Quail, Yellow-billed Cardinal, Saffron Finch and African Silverbill.

Day 6 Provided we have seen all the key birds on Big Island, we will make a visit to the spectacular Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

The park was established to preserve two active volcanoes and comprises a wide variety of scenic wonders and different habitats. We will visit famous spots like the Thurston Lava Tube, Crater Rim Drive (which circles around the main crater of Kalauea Volcano) and Chain of Craters Road (a spectacular drive from the crater down towards the more recent lava flows on the coast). Scanning the sea here may produce Black Noddy and we may be able to see an active lava flow, an unusual experience. Later we will take an afternoon flight to Maui for a three nights stay.

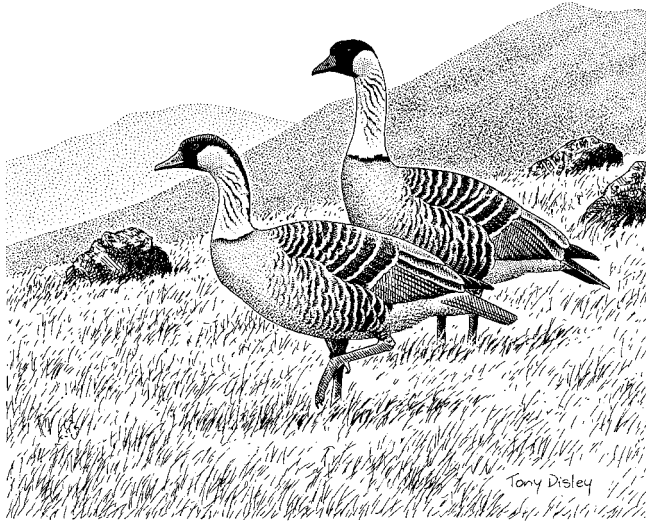
Days 7-8 Haleakala National Park is one of the oldest national parks in the United States. The drive up to the crater is very scenic and introduced Chukar often frequent the roadsides, while Eurasian Skylarks will be in song flight above the pastures. We will first make our way to the summit at 3055m, as the crater tends to fill with clouds as the day progresses. The magnificent panoramic view from here into the immense crater reveals a seeming moonscape where the famously photogenic silversword (a plant somewhat reminiscent of Africa's giant lobelias) grows, while in the distance the looming bulk of Big Island can be seen far to the southeast. At the park headquarters the Nene or Hawaiian Goose can sometimes be found. This odd-looking goose had nearly become extinct by the 1940s, but was saved by a worldwide conservation effort and can be found also on Kauai and the Big Island. Further down we will visit an area of eucalyptus, pines and acacias, where we should encounter several species of Hawaiian honeycreeper, including a Maui endemic, the Maui Creeper. In addition, we should see

the secretive Japanese Bush Warbler. Provided we can obtain permission (so far we have always succeeded), we will spend much of our time exploring the rarely-visited Waikamoi Preserve where we have a reasonable chance of seeing Akohekohe (or Crested Honeycreeper) and, if we are really in luck, even the extremely rare endemic Maui Parrotbill. We will also check the Kanaha and Kealia Ponds that have over the years attracted an impressive list of rare shorebirds, gulls, terns and waterfowl. A nocturnal visit to the crater should allow us to hear and maybe see the rare Hawaiian Petrel, which nests far inland in this inhospitable terrain.

Day 9 After a morning on Maui another short flight will take us to Lihue on Kauai, the oldest and greenest of the main islands, for a three nights stay.

Days 10-11 During our time on this very birdy island we will visit Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge (better known under the name Kilauea Lighthouse), which is the best place in the Hawaiian Islands for seabirds. Here we will find a huge colony of gorgeous Red-footed Boobies and their nests can easily be discerned in the trees on the steep forested cliffs. Small numbers of the enormous Laysan Albatross breed here too and the population is still on the increase. Both these species have no fear whatsoever of man and can often be observed at very close range whilst manoeuvring in the wind along the cliffs. Recently the Hawaiian Goose or Nene, Hawaii's State bird, has been reintroduced here and good numbers can now be found. We can also expect to see Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, Brown Boobies, Great Frigatebirds and White-tailed and Red-tailed Tropicbirds. We may well discover some Green Turtles amongst the

impressive breakers or even the threatened Hawaiian Monk Seal. We will also pay a visit to an agricultural area, where the main crop is taro. Mudflats and freshwater ponds abound and these provide a habitat for migratory shorebirds. Much of our time on Kauai will be spent exploring the richly forested mountains. As we make our way along the winding road into the interior we will enjoy spectacular views of Hanapepe Valley and the Waimea Canyon. The latter is one of Hawaii's great scenic wonders and is often called the 'Grand Canyon of the Pacific'. White-tailed Tropicbirds constantly glide on the updrafts in the canyon. At the end of the road, amidst extraordinary forests, we will search for endemics like Kauai Elepaio, Anianiau, Kauai Amakihi (which has a noticeably larger bill than other amakihis), Apapane, Iiwi and Akekee. Introduced species like Common Pheasant, Red Junglefowl (Hawaii's first introduced bird) and Melodious Laughingthrush (or Hwamei) can also be found in these forests. Our hike will take us to the edge of the Alakai Wilderness Preserve, a huge almost impenetrable forest, often immersed in cloud, where the sun rarely penetrates. The trail is rather slippery at first, but as we descend gradually becomes much better and eventually becomes a well-made boardwalk. As we continue lower down towards Kawaikoi Stream we will diligently search the moss-encrusted trees for the rare Akikiki or Kauai Creeper. This rapidly declining and critically endangered Kauai endemic acts like a nuthatch and can be difficult to locate, but this area is the best accessible spot to find this enigmatic species. Another speciality of these beautiful moss-encrusted forests is the uncommon Puaiohi, one of Hawaii's few surviving thrushes, which is



Nenes or Hawaiian Geese (Tony Disley)

now reduced to only 100-150 individuals. We will also visit an area where Grey-rumped Tattler and introduced Northern Mockingbird, Western Meadowlark and Chestnut Mannikin (or Black-headed Munia) can be found. On one day, weather permitting, we will take a pelagic trip in order to get close views of Newell's and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, and Hawaiian Petrels. There is always the chance of turning up some rare *Pterodroma* petrel, or migrants such as skuas (or jaegers).

Day 12 After spending much of the day on Kauai we will return to Honolulu where the tour ends in the early evening.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels/motels

are of normal Birdquest standard, although our preferred accommodation on Maui (delightfully situated and very comfortable) has only a few rooms and some chalets have two rooms sharing a bathroom. Road transport is by minibus, car or 4x4 vehicle. Roads are mostly good.

Walking: The walking effort is mostly easy, but there are two optional fairly hard walks.

Climate: Rather variable. It is typically warm or hot at lower altitudes, but at high altitudes we can expect cool weather. Some rain is highly likely.

Bird Photography:

Opportunities are worthwhile.