

Trip Report: Kaua'i, December 18th - 20th, 2007 (David Southall)

This report captures highlights from a three day trip that Emma and I made to the island of Kaua'i, Hawai'i en route from Houston to Sydney. Our first day was spent driving up the dramatic Waimea Canyon and then hiking the Pihea and Alaka'i Swamp Trails in the Koke'e State Park and Alaka'i Wilderness Reserve. We then spent two relaxing days on the north shore during which time we swam and snorkelled at various beaches, visited the Kilauea and Hanalei National Wildlife Refuges and enjoyed excellent food in several gourmet cafes and restaurants as we dodged rain showers in the relaxed and attractive villages of Kilauea and, especially, Hanalei.



'Apapane on Pihea Trail in the Alaka'i Wilderness Reserve



Nēnē and goslings in the Kilauea National Wildlife Refuge

Our six hour hike through along the Pihea and Alaka'i Swamp trails was blessed with generally benign weather; initial blue skies evolved into mist, drizzle and eventual steady rain. Not bad, given that Mt. Waialeale, reputedly the wettest place on earth with ca. 45 feet of rain a year, was only 10 miles away! The trails were moderately muddy (apparently, as the wet season progresses they will become significantly worse) with some particularly steep and slippery sections in the first mile climbing from the Pu'u o Kila lookout, where we parked our car, until reaching the Pihea Vista lookout. Good walking shoes/boots are definitely recommended, although the boardwalk sections along parts of the two trails were well maintained and made for easy hiking. The trails meandered up and down at about 1200m altitude and passed through wonderful, moss laden forest that gradually became more reminiscent of elfin forest found at ca. 2500 - 3000mm in the Andes. The Alaka'i Swamp (actually an elevated bog) contained a mixture of bushes, grasses and elfin trees.



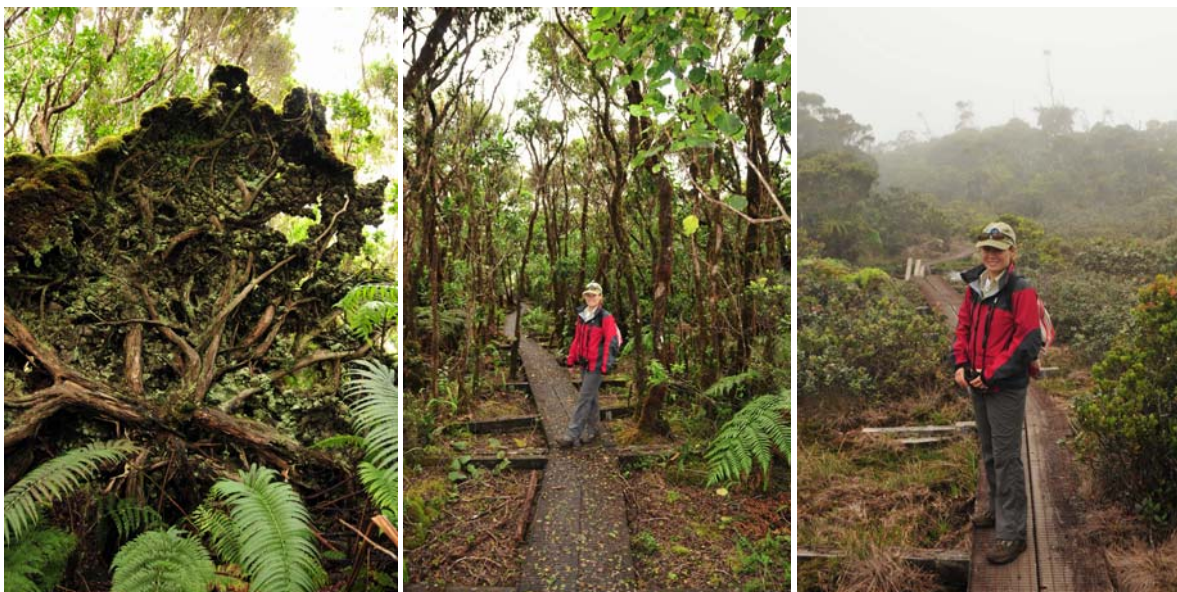
Lower section of Waimea Canyon; The Kalalau Valley

This forest is the final strong-hold of some eight remaining endemic Kaua'i forest bird species of which we encountered four during our hike. Stunning red 'Apapane were common as they fed from the similarly bright red flowering trees (a total of some 20-30 individuals were seen along the Pihea trail), as were the more subdued Kaua'i 'Elepaio and Kaua'i 'Amakihi (a total of some 10-20 individuals of each were seen along the Pihea and Alaka'i Swamp trails). 'I'iwi, with their stunning Cock-of-the-rock like plumage and bright orange, de-curved bill, were more elusive and only some six individuals were seen along the Alaka'i Swamp trail.



View over the Pihea Trail; Kaua'i 'Elepaio on Alaka'i Trail in the Alaka'i Wilderness Reserve

The only non-endemic species we saw along the trails were Japanese White-eyes, which seem to have penetrated into the forest at least to the junction of the Pihea and Alaka'i Swamp trails. Given the quality of the forest it was surprising to us that we only found five species of birds - in an equivalent intact South American forest one would relatively easily encounter many more birds and multiple mixed flocks. We presume that this is an indicator of not only the isolated nature of Kaua'i - and hence the lack of forest birds initially populating the island - but also the reduced carrying capacity of the forest in terms of insect life and flowering species, not to mention the multiple extinctions of endemic bird species that have occurred as a result of habitat reduction, mosquito borne disease and nest predation by e.g. rats (that other hikers on the trails saw that day) and other introduced species.



Scenes along the Pihea and Alaka'i Trails in the Alaka'i Wilderness Reserve

The public road through the otherwise closed Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge proved to be a good vantage point for observing several more endemic species in the taro fields at the heart of the refuge, including Nēnē (an attractive and confiding goose) and Hawaiian Duck (much more timid), plus several endemic wetland subspecies. Apparently the Nēnē population has grown to over 1500, with about half of these on Kaua'i - concentrated around the Hanalei NWR and Kilauea NWR, where we saw many goslings. Apparently, due to inter-breeding with Mallard Ducks on other islands, Kaua'i is home to the last remaining population of genetically pure Hawaiian Ducks, although worryingly we also saw at least one female Mallard in the Hanalei NWR in addition to several pairs of Hawaiian Ducks.



Nēnē; Hawaiian Duck in the Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge



Taro fields in the Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge



Secret Beach; Moloa'a Bay

The Kilauea NWR is spectacularly located on the north shore and encompasses a peninsula jutting into the Pacific, complete with lighthouse. In addition to being the roosting and/or breeding territory for many seabird species, this is also a good whale watching spot in the winter months. Although we saw no whales on our visit we did see several new seabirds, and were able to enjoy great close-ups of Laysan Albatrosses as they rode the stiff breeze back to their nesting sites on the reserve, and of Red-footed Boobies as they took off from their roosts in the trees on the cliff across the bay. High altitude aerial combat manoeuvres by pairs of Great Frigatebirds were another highlight. Meanwhile, on the ground, the resident Nēnē (including one male who had survived two golfing injuries on nearby Princeville Golf Course!) were busy shepherding many goslings around the reserve's juicy lawns. The information centre inside the reserve was a good place to buy wildlife-related gifts and books about Kaua'i and Hawai'i in general, and the many staff and volunteers around the site were very friendly and informative.



Kilauea National Wildlife Refuge; Great Frigatebird; Aerial jousting by a pair of Great Frigatebirds



Red-footed Booby; Laysan Albatross

In addition to the endemic forest species of the Alaka'i Swamp area, the endemic wetland birds and the native seabirds, the lowlands of Kaua'i are populated by a modest variety of introduced species - from Asia, Africa, North and South America. Some of these species have been reported on the island since the initial colonisation by Polynesians (the Moa or Red Junglefowl) others were introduced by settlers in the mid 19th century (such as the Common Myna which was introduced in 1865 from India to control army worms in pasture land¹ and is now ubiquitous across all of the lowlands) whilst others are more recent additions (e.g. African Silverbill that was first reported in Hawai'i in the 1970s). We encountered many of these often colourful species along roadsides, in beach-side vegetation or sharing wetland habitat with the island's original avian inhabitants and have included them in the observation listing at the end of this report.

With respect to the future of the native birds, and in particular the endemic species, it is interesting to note that neither of the books² we consulted list the high altitude forest species that we saw - the 'Apapane, 'Elepaio, Kaua'i 'Amakihi or 'I'iwi - as endangered species, yet the Nēnē and several other wetland birds we saw are listed as endangered. Given that the high altitude species are concentrated in one key area of forest, and that about 50% of the bird species originally found in that same forest have already become extinct, it appears arguable that all the remaining endemic species found in that small forest would justify vulnerable if not endangered status.

¹ The Birds of Kaua'i, Jim Denny, p. 68

² The Birds of Kaua'i, Jim Denny and Hawaii's Birds, Hawaii Audubon Society



Western Meadowlark; Red-crested Cardinal; Java Sparrow

With respect to logistics, we stayed at a new B&B near to Moloa'a Bay called The Palmwood Inn, where our host Eddi looked after us in great style. Although quite expensive, we found that the rural setting close to the north shore, the contemporary asian décor, gourmet breakfasts, free snorkelling gear and homely atmosphere made this an excellent option. A car is essential and from The Palmwood a day trip to Alaka'i is perfectly feasible (about a 2 hour relaxed drive to reach the start of the trails) whilst the north shore beaches, NWRs and gourmet cafes are only 5 to 30 minutes drive away.



Photographing 'Apapane on Pihea Trail in the Alaka'i Wilderness Reserve

1. Trip Bird List³

(Confirmed personal sightings only for DJS – excludes birds heard only; Nomenclature based on Hawaii Audubon Society’s “Hawaii’s Birds” and/or Denny’s “The Birds of Kaua’i”)

Locations where species seen: A=Alaka’i Trail through Alaka’i Wilderness Reserve; HNWR=Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge; KNWR=Kilauea National Wildlife Refuge; N=North shore beaches near Hanalei; P=Pihea Trail along Kokee State Park ridge line and through Alaka’i Wilderness Reserve; R=Roadside and open fields around Kaua’i island; W=Waimea Canyon State Park and Koke’e State Park roadsides.

Native Forest Birds:

‘Apapane (*Himatione sanguinea sanguinea*) [AS] *
‘I‘iwi (*Vestiaria coccinea*) [AS]
Kaua’i ‘Amakihi (*Hemignathus kauaiensis*) [AS]
Kaua’i ‘Elepaio (*Chasiempis sandwichensis sclateri*) [AS] *
Pueo = Short-eared Owl ssp. (*Asio flammeus sandwichensis*) [R]

Native Wetland and Shore Birds:

Ae’o = Hawaiian Stilt = Black-necked Stilt ssp. (*Himantopus mexicanus knudseni*) [HNWR] *
‘Alae ‘ula = Hawaiian Gallinule = Common Moorhen ssp. (*Gallinula chloropus sandvicensis*) [HNWR]
‘Auku’u = Black-crowned Night-Heron (*Nycticorax nycticorax hoactli*) [HNWR]
Kōlea = Pacific Golden Plover (*Pluvialis fulva*) [W; HNWR; R] *
Koloa Maoli = Hawaiian Duck (*Anas wyvilliana*) [HNWR] *
Nēnē = Hawaiian Goose (*Branta sandvicensis*) [KNWR; HNWR] *
‘Ūlilī = Wandering Tattler (*Heteroscelus incanus*) [N]

Native Seabirds:

‘Ā = Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster plotus*) [KNWR] *
‘Ā = Red-footed Booby (*Sula sula rubripes*) [KNWR] *
‘Iwa = Great Frigatebird (*Fregata minor palmerstoni*) [KNWR] *
Koa’e kea = White-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaeton lepturus dorotheae*) [P; KNWR]
Mōlī = Laysan Albatross (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) [KNWR] *

Introduced Birds:

Mallard Duck (*Anas platyrhynchos*) [HNWR] *
Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) [R]
Chestnut Munia = Chestnut Manakin = Black-headed Munia (*Lonchura atricapilla*) [HNWR]
Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) [R]
Erckel’s Francolin (*Francolinus erckelii*) [W]
House Finch (*Carpodacus mexicanus*) [KNWR]
House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) [R]
Hwamei = Chinese Thrush (*Gallurax canorus*) [R]
Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*) [P; R]
Java Sparrow (*Padda oryzivora*) [R] *
Moa = Red Junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*) [W]
Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) [W, R]
Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottus*) [R]
Red-crested Cardinal (*Paroaria coronata*) [W; R] *
Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) [R]
Spotted Dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*) [R]
African Silverbill (*Lonchura cantans*) [HNWR] *
Western Meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*) [R] *
White-rumped Sharma (*Copsychus malabaricus*) [HNWR; R] *
Zebra Dove (*Geopelia striata*) [R]

Combined total: 37, with 26 confirmed “first time ever” species for DJS ...

³ First sighting ever for DJS; * = photo available from trip