

Hawai'i Wildlife & Birding | Trip Report

February 15 – 22, 2020 | Written by Greg Smith



With Guide Greg Smith, and participants Erik, Candy, Elysabeth, Holly, Tom, Karen, Joyce, Ginger, Richard, Sydney, Gerold, and Holly



Sat., Feb. 15 Molokai

Molokai's east end looks dry from the air. And flying over it, the landscape looked almost very desert-like. In fact, it is dominated by kiawe (mesquite - *Prosopis pallida*) from South America, that has taken over this arid and relatively degraded habitat of the eastern end of the island. Molokai means "twisting and turning of the ocean waters" in Hawaiian, and it comes by its name because of the rough waters of the nearby Kalohi Channel. There is a very wide and shallow shelf around the island, and the waves break far off shore.

Some of us arrived early, while others arrived today, where they were met at the airport and taken to the Hotel Molokai to meet up with everyone else. After a short initiation by cruise staff, we were bused to the well-appointed Safari Explorer, a 36-passenger yacht finished with glossy woodwork, and a quiet, luxurious lounge. After getting settled in our rooms, we were treated to a sumptuous dinner, and then a discussion on tomorrow's activities.



Sun., Feb. 16 Halawa Valley

We stayed docked overnight and disembarked in the morning after breakfast for an overland drive to Halawa Valley on the eastern tip of the island. This is a very lush location, as it is exposed to the water-laden trade winds. We were greeted by Phillip and his son Greg, both of who practiced traditions that were handed down thru the generations.

Our more intrepid travelers headed upslope to hike to one of the two large waterfalls in the upper Valley. With stream-crossings and attendant White-rumped Shamans singing along the entire route, they made their way along the trail that had been cut from a second growth forest. We learned that these trees are all relatively new to the area, with many of them orchard trees that have re-seeded since the 111-foot high tsunami wiped the valley clear in 1946.

The rest of the group stayed with Greg where they learned more about the Hawaiian culture, including how to make and eat poi. And given that we were learning all this about ten feet from Greg's kitchen, the wild boar lau-lau's were an added dining experience.



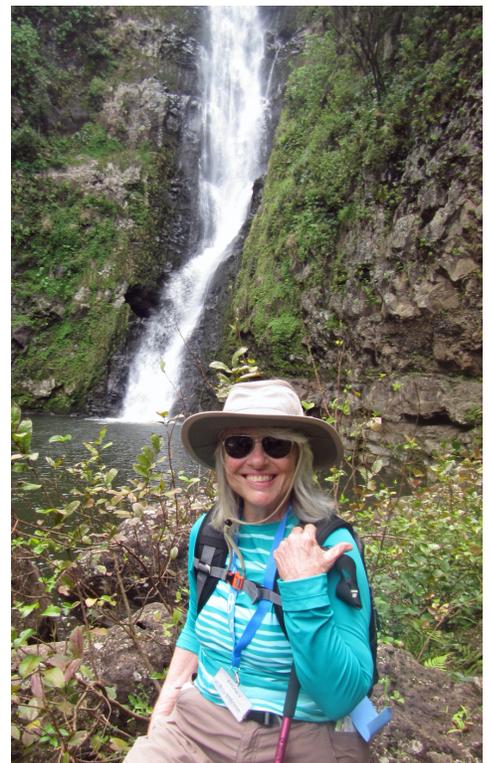
When the hikers returned, we all headed back to the vehicles and enjoyed a leisurely drive back to the Safari Explorer. An hour later we were showered up and heading to a local museum for an authentic Hawaiian meal that 26 different dishes. And while we ate, we had two local musicians and a hula dancer provide us with entertainment.

Mon., Feb. 17 Waking up in Lanai

Just before breakfast we were alerted to a group of bottlenose dolphins off of the bow. Given that we were on the leeward side of Lanai, it was relatively easy to pick out these individuals as they lazily surfaced and moved towards the island. A couple of White-tailed Tropicbirds soared above the coastal cliffs as we headed into breakfast, being a good omen for our day.

After breakfast, we spent the morning snorkeling near Shark Tooth Rock, where the size and diversity of fish was gratifying. This was essentially our "checkout" snorkel so the ship's staff could give us directions on how best to take in the underwater world. We had folks that ranged from having never snorkeled to others who were very comfortable in the water. The water was seventy-five degrees and felt easy and warm.

The afternoon was spent ashore where years ago Dole pineapple owned much of the land. Pineapple was the mainstay of the island and most everybody lived in the company town on the far rim of the extinct crater at a cooler elevation. The island is now privately owned, but the company town is still where most of the residents live. Some of us wound our way away from the harbor up to the main town and spent some time in the museum and a couple of art galleries that were surrounding the town square. The rest chose to visit the cat sanctuary,





where hundreds of feral cats have been moved to live out their lives in quasi-luxury. This community-based project effort is hoped to benefit the beleaguered native bird population. And in the Puu Pehe (Lover's Rock) area of the island that we visited in the late afternoon, they now have burrow-nesting Wedge-tailed Shearwaters.

Birds for this landing included Pacific Golden Plover, Wandering Tattler, Red-crested Cardinal, Wild Turkey, and House Finch.

Tues., Feb. 18 Maui

We could see Maui the evening before as we left Lanai. And when we awoke, we were anchored close to shore just south of Lanai. We had a 6:30 AM skiff cruise to go out and look at humpback whales that use this section of coast for giving birth and breeding. There were spouts all around us and we could see distant breaches, the whales form for power displaying.



We got to see competitive groups where multiple males would compete for the opportunity to mate and create next year's young. They would surface on top of one another trying to be the biggest and the baddest, swim in crazy ways that left the surface of the water boiling, and just be a little on the wild side as they seemed to forget about the female temporarily. We aren't allowed to get with 100-feet of the whales, but that didn't mean they couldn't swim towards us...



After both skiffs emptied us back onboard, the sighting of the trip took place! We had a female with one male escort come up to our anchored boat and spend seventeen minutes swimming just below the surface of the water in a circle under and around the back of the boat. She spent a lot of time on her back and on her side as she languidly gave us the show of a lifetime. Point and shoot cameras along with cell phones were the best way to get pictures and videos of her entire body as her escort stayed on the bottom discreetly, and maybe shyly, watching what was going on overhead. Just an amazing experience!



We finished the morning at the site of a demolished wharf where we did a little snorkeling. Again, the water was warm, but what was different here was that there were Hawaiian green sea turtles everywhere we looked. Small ones, large ones and lots of brightly colored tropical fish.



The afternoon was a wildlife cruise thru these whale-rich waters. We got to see lots more humpbacks and some rough-toothed dolphins. Both Brown and Red-footed Booby were seen, as well as Black Noddy and Laughing Gull. This was probably our wildlife highlight day of the trip.

At dinner, Captain Gavin came to speak with us about the next day, but even more so, he wanted to discuss the sea conditions of the Alenuihaha Channel between Maui and Hawai'i. For the entire trip we were on the leeward side of the islands, with the islands protecting us from the trade winds that blew from the east. We had been entirely oblivious to the fact that on the windward side of the island these winds were whipping up the ocean. Conditions were such on the channel that our four-hour crossing was going to rock 'n' roll a little, and that conditions were going to deteriorate even more so the next two days. The Captain let us know that we weren't going to spend our second day on the waters off of Maui, but would instead cross the channel tonight and get into the leeward side of Hawai'i a day early.

Wed., Feb. 19 Pu'u Ohau | Kaloko-Honokōhau National Historical Park

We finished our crossing of the channel and anchored off of Pu'u Ohau in the sweet, calm seas of western Hawai'i. Morning overcast made it easy for both those that wanted to kayak and those that wanted to do a skiff ride. The seas were flat as the kayakers took off for the morning. A few of us wanted to bird the coast where we got good looks at Wandering Tattler and White-tailed Tropicbird.

But the highlight of the skiff ride was a nesting colony of Burrowing Parakeets. The parakeets had escaped while sitting in cages on the tarmac at Kailua-Kona Airport. They used former gas pockets on the face of old lava flows that abutted the ocean for nesting. We had about eight individuals peering out of the caves as we peered back. Good looking birds and a fortunate encounter for all of us on the skiff.



The afternoon was spent ashore at Kaloko-Honokōhau National Historical Park on the south side of Kailua-Kona. We all skiffed to a boat launch ramp and disembarked for a little shore leave. This historic park was an ancient Hawaiian village site with plenty of historic structures and fish-rearing ponds. A short walk inland gave us House Finch, Yellow-billed Cardinal and Japanese White-eye were all readily seen. A number of us back tracked to the beach, where we got to view Hawaiian Coot, Lesser Yellowlegs, Ruddy Turnstone, and Sanderling. It was certainly our most productive location for seeing different bird species, plus we had about a half dozen green sea turtles hauled out on the beach resting.

Thurs., Feb. 20 Honaunau Bay – The City of Refuge

In times before the arrival of people from other parts of the world, Hawaiian culture had plenty of rules and plenty of punishments for those that made the wrong choice. But they also had what was essentially a get out of jail card! And the City of Refuge on the Big Island was that card. If the perpetrator was able to make it to this place without being caught, they could ask to be rehabilitated and then returned to society. And this is where we would snorkel for the morning...

We had many, many different species of fish (yellow tang, Whitely's boxfish, the black form or longnose butterfly fish, pink-tailed triggerfish and humuhumunukunukuapua'a to name a few. Some of the coral had succumbed to a bleaching event in 2014/15, but there was still plenty of living coral. This was the best snorkel of the trip, and it was hard to get us all out of the water!

The afternoon was the deep-sea cruise where we went looking for wildlife that spent most of their lives in the deeper water offshore. Six thousand feet was deep enough, and we got to see rough-toothed dolphin, Red-footed Booby, Black Noddy, and Laughing Gull. This was a treat and it also allowed us to rest up for our night snorkel off the coast of Kona this evening.

Frid., Feb. 21 Milolii Bay | Kailua-Kona Town

We headed pretty far south down the west coast of Hawai'i and when we awoke, we were off of Milolii Bay. A palm-lined coast with lave flows bordering to the north and south. Here we had a chance to do a little birding on a skiff, or to get out on the kayaks again. And with the skiff, we got to see foraging Ruddy Turnstone and Wandering Tattler. And on the grounds around some of the houses were the winter resident kolea (Pacific Golden Plover...). A very tranquil coastline this morning for all of us before we cruised north to Kailua-Kona town.



And while we spent the afternoon in town, some paddled their way in the coastal waters on an outrigger canoe, while others visited some of the historic structures in town. It was nice to be onshore again and see Zebra Dove, Java Sparrow and some of the other introduced species that called these islands home.

Then it was back to the Safari Explorer for our farewell dinner and a staff-created slide show of our past week. Another stellar meal and a very calm night on the waters...

Sat., Feb. 22 Disembarkation

When we woke up the next morning, we were heading into Kawaihae Harbor, about thirty miles north of the airport. We said our goodbyes to the crew and staff and hopped on a bus for the drive to the airport. It was another classic Hawaiian day and a fine finish to our trip. Mostly everybody was staying longer, and the airport was the ideal spot to pick up your rental car and explore the land-based part of the Big Island...

Photo Credits:

Group, Greg Smith (GS); Molokai poster, GS; Halawa Bay, GS; Phillip & Karen Halawa, GS; Coral & Angelfish, GS; Lanai sunset, Holly Greening & Gerold Morrison (HG); Gang on the Safari Explorer, HG; Pa'ina at Auntie Noe's, HG; River crossing to Mo'o Falls, HG; Red-billed Cardinal, HG; Holly and Hawaiian green sea turtle, HG; Short-finned Pilot Whale and Brown Noddy, HG; Richard and Sydney kayaking, HG; Sydney at Mo'o Falls, HG; Saffron Finch, HG; Maui rainbow, HG; Housefinch, GS; Male Humpbacks Dukeing it out, GS; Female Humpback on back, GS; Female Humpback head, GS; Burrowing Parakeets, GS; Hawaiian Green Sea Turtle, GS; Yellow-billed Cardinal, GS; Humuhumunukunukuapua`a, GS; Milolii Bay, GS; Zebra Dove, HG; Hawaiian Island sunset, HG; Back to the skiff, HG.