



MIDWAY ATOLL
National Wildlife Refuge

Gooney
Gazette II



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

Friends of Midway Atoll Newsletter

June 2011

Tsunami Hits Midway

by: Pete Leary, Midway Atoll Wildlife Biologist

Saturday March 21st

It's been a long couple of days here on Midway. Starting out with the preparation for the tsunami, on Thursday night. We moved most of the vehicles, heavy equipment, and our big safeboat up to Radar Hill, which is our highest area here. After that, we all evacuated to the 3rd floor of "Charlie Barracks" where we waited to see if anything happened. This is the first time I'm glad I wasn't able to move into my house yet, since I am currently living on the 3rd floor already. We had all 67 island employees/visitors up here watching the news on BBC and watching our tide gauge data over the internet. We saw that we had about a 5 foot rise in the tide gauge level, but were glad that we couldn't see any water when we looked out the windows.

After looking at a bit of the washover on Sand Island, and setting a crew to work on digging albatross chicks and petrels out of the debris, Greg and I took the boat over to Eastern Island. On the way, we passed thousands of albatross adults and petrels that had been washed into the water and lost their ability to stay dry. Their feathers were messed up by being tumbled over the island and through the vegetation. We pulled some into the boat, but needed to get to Eastern Island, so we had to hope that most of them would paddle to shore. Eastern Island was mostly washed over, so 10's of thousands of chicks were washed away. I'll have to look at our count numbers from Dec. to figure out how many chicks were in the affected areas. There were dead fish by the hundreds up in the middle of the island. The short-tailed albatross chick must really



The 3rd floor of Charlie Barracks wasn't the most comfortable place for 67 people. But it was safe.

continued page 2, Tsunami

be wondering what kind of place it lives in because it was washed away from the nest for the second time this year already. This time, it was about 40 yards away from the original nest.

It was easy to spot because all the other chicks were washed away in a previous storm. I didn't want to pick the chick up, because it was already stressed and upset, but the parents may not have found it that far from the nest. I put out a sheet of plastic and when it stepped onto it, I gave it a sled ride the 40 yards back to its nest. I hope that's all the excitement that it has for the rest of the season.

There were a lot of chicks and adults buried in debris (mostly dead vegetation). Greg and I were digging out stuck birds all day. We took our volunteers and some people from the visitors group over yesterday and dug out another hundred or so birds. We also found 2 turtles that were washed quite a way up onto the island, which were then carried back to the beach and seemed glad to get back in the water. At least we didn't find any injured Hawaiian monk seals or Laysan ducks. The seals were back resting on the beaches on Friday. Although we lost a lot of wildlife, all of the people who are here because of the wildlife are safe.



Two of the visitors brought one of the turtles back to the beach on Eastern Island. Thanks Anna and Connie. PHOTO: PETE LEARY



This was the biggest fish that I saw washed up on the beach. It is an Ulua (Giant trevally) that is about 3 ft long. There were at least 15 different species of fish on the island. PHOTO: PETE LEARY

continued from page 2, Tsunami



There's no way to know how many Bonin petrels were trapped in their burrows. We saved this one, since its head was still sticking out. PHOTO: PETE LEARY



Water washed pretty high near the cargo pier, and hopefully this little Laysan albatross chick will get fed and be able to preen that mud off. PHOTO: PETE LEARY



There are two Laysan albatross chicks and one adult stuck in this pile. We got them all out. PHOTO: PETE LEARY



A piece of the pier on Eastern Island washed up onto the gun. PHOTO: PETE LEARY



The boat dock in the harbor has finally seen its last days. PHOTO: PETE LEARY



All of these chicks would have been washed into the harbor had the naupaka bushes not been there to seine them out. PHOTO: PETE LEARY



Here are 5 Laysan albatrosses and one Bonin petrel that we brought to Eastern Island.
PHOTO: PETE LEARY



These 2 have about given up. We pulled them into the boat and put them on Eastern Island. It'll take a couple of days to dry out though.
PHOTO: PETE LEARY



Here is where the short-tailed albatross chick ended up. It's a tough little bird. PHOTO: PETE LEARY



I could have taken hundreds more of these pictures, but I wanted to concentrate on digging them out. . PHOTO: PETE LEARY

Tsunami Experience on Kure Atoll

By Jim and Cindy Waddington

After sailing for 7 days aboard the NOAA ship Oscar Elton Sette from Honolulu, we arrived on 200 acre Kure Atoll, 58 miles northwest of Midway, for a 7 month volunteer stint on August 11, 2010. Our primary job was habitat restoration (aka weeding), and the propagation of native plants. On the island with us were two State of Hawaii employees and a biologist collecting monk seal data.



A former Coast Guard LORAN station, Kure has a few amenities such as a building to house personnel, and a cistern to catch rainwater. However, there is no plumbing and limited solar electricity. Essentially it was a “luxury” camping experience.

The Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, which includes Midway and Kure, had been subjected to a tsunami threat the year before when an 8.8 earthquake off the coast of Chile had threatened the islands. So each field camp was required to have a “tsunami plan” in place.

It was a good thing, for on the evening of March 10, 2011 we learned that a 9.0 earthquake had rocked Japan, and a tsunami was headed our way. With no internet access and only a satellite telephone and email connection, we had no idea how devastated Japan was. We only knew that we had a few hours to prepare for the tsunami waves... and that we would be first in the Hawaiian chain to experience them.

Because of our tsunami planning, we had already stored emergency supplies in a container next to the house. In the container was food, about 10 gallons of drinking water, life jackets, and wet suits. The plan was to take the supplies up on the roof of the house and wait out the waves there, 20 feet above sea level and about 700 feet from the high tide line. Because it was 11:30 pm, we also had tarps, blankets, a generator and computer with us on the roof. We tethered our Apex inflatable boat and a two person kayak to the roof in case we needed to abandon the roof in high water.

And then the five of us donned our life jackets and waited on the roof in total darkness.

Despite its small size, Kure is protected by a vegetated dune system that rings the island. So when the waves came at about 12:50 am, we could hear the unnerving sound of crackling vegetation but saw no water with our flashlights. The dunes kept Kure from being totally inundated. After about 3 1/2 hours we received the “all clear” and collapsed into bed.

The next morning revealed the extent of the devastation. The waves had come up about 300 feet above the high tide line. Hundreds of black-footed albatross chicks, which were nesting on the perimeter of the island, were killed or washed away. The ghost crabs wasted no time in gobbling up the carcasses. A picnic table on the beach was smashed to smithereens. Full storage containers were tossed around like building blocks. There was significant damage to the lagoon pier. The waves washed through a low point in the dunes and inundated the biologist’s tent with water and muck. The normally placid aquamarine lagoon was an ugly chocolate brown color, and the lagoon was full of debris.

Still, we felt very fortunate. There was no damage to the island’s limited infrastructure. Wildlife nesting in the interior of the island was largely unscathed. We spent the day assessing the loss of nesting seabirds and gathering entrapment debris (nets, ropes, lines) off the beach.

We were due to depart Kure in late March or early April. However, we were unexpectedly evacuated by NOAA on March 16, because one of their ships happened to be nearby. It was an abrupt end to our stay, but we were grateful to have survived a close call in such a remote location.



Jim and Cindy Waddington

America's 'Oldest' Wild Bird Survived Tsunami That Hit Midway Atoll

by Mark Memmott, NPR Correspondent March 23, 2011



Wisdom, feeds her chick. Photo Credit: Pete Leary, USFS Wildlife Biologist

Word is spreading that Wisdom, “America’s oldest free-flying bird,” survived the tsunami that roared east from Japan on March 11 and sent a 5-foot tidal wave crashing into the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge where she lives. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service announced this week that

“In the face of tremendous losses of Laysan and black-footed albatross at the Refuge — including an estimated 110,000 chicks and 2,000 adults — to the tsunami that overwashed portions of the Refuge, biologists are thrilled to discover that Wisdom survived, said Barry Stieglitz, Project Leader for the Hawaiian and Pacific Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex.”

Wisdom, as The Associated Press has previously reported, is at least 60 years old. The wire service says that “a Fish and Wildlife Service Biologist scientist first banded the seabird as she incubated an egg in 1956. She was estimated to be at least 5 years old at the time.” Wisdom has raised at least 30 chicks. No other bird that has been banded by U.S. or Canadian wildlife agencies is older — hence her claim to fame.

The “average life span” of a Laysan albatross is 12 to 40 years, the Midway Atoll refuge says. The World Wildlife Federation says albatrosses can live “up to 60 years,” which means Wisdom is a rarity.

Tsunamis drag newborn monk seal from mother

BY AUDREY MCAVOY | THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AIR STATION BARBERS POINT -- Tsunamis generated by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake off Japan earlier this month swept up a 1-week-old Hawaiian monk seal pup and separated her from her mother at a remote atoll northwest of the main Hawaiian islands, but a state wildlife worker managed to reunite the pair shortly after.

The pup was crying for her mother after tsunamis hit Kure Atoll nearly 1,400 miles northwest of Honolulu on March 11, said the atoll's field camp supervisor Cynthia Vanderlip, a biologist with the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources. But the mother was asleep about 150 feet away and didn't hear her pup's cries.

Vanderlip waited awhile, then carried the tiny seal to her mother. "The mom -- she growled at me for that. She wasn't very grateful. But they immediately nuzzled," Vanderlip told reporters Monday.

Another mother-pup pair wound up farther inland than they normally would be after the tsunamis, perhaps after being pushed ashore by the waves. But they were together.

The mammal is an endangered species, with only about 1,100 animals remaining in the wild. The seal's population is also dwindling at a rate of about 4 percent per year in part because juvenile seals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, which include Kure, have been struggling to survive. Scientists believe this is because the youngsters are having a hard time competing with other species for food.



Vanderlip said if the tsunamis had arrived just a few weeks later, more pups would have been in danger across the archipelago of small atolls making up the nation's single largest conservation area, the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. That's because the waves hit just before the peak birthing season. One pup was born at Kure just two days after the tsunamis.

Officials are still assessing the damage the tsunamis caused Kure and other parts of the monument. They plan to compare aerial photos and video taken from a Coast Guard C-130 plane last week with photos on file as part of their analysis. They won't be able to assess damage to coral reefs and other underwater habitats until divers visit the areas during a research cruise in the summer.

Midway Atoll, which is home to 1 million Laysan albatross seabirds, an old Navy base and an emergency landing strip, appears to have suffered the most damage. Scientists estimate a couple thousand albatross adults and 110,000 chicks were killed by the tsunami.

cont. back page, Tsunami

Announcing New Refuge Manager on Midway

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is pleased to announce the selection of Susan D. Schulmeister as its new manager for the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge within the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

The selection brings closure to an interesting family story. In the early 1980s, Sue worked as a biological science technician on Tern Island within French Frigate Shoals of the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge manager at the time was her husband, Bob. “Things have come full-circle,” Schulmeister said upon her Midway appointment. “Not long after we left Tern, Bob gave up management in favor of a career in refuge maintenance. I decided to pursue my long-time goal to be a refuge manager. Now he is retiring and I will realize my goal.”

Schulmeister assumed her new role on April 10, moving from her current position as a planner with the Service’s Division of Conservation Planning and Policy in Homer, Alaska. She brings with her a wealth of refuge management, planning and biological expertise working on a diverse array of islands within the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge and lands of the Kenai and Izembek refuges in Alaska.

“We are pleased to have someone who knows how to deal with the full range of complex issues involved in managing a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System,” said Tom Edgerton, Service Superintendent of the Papahānaumokuākea Monument. “And Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge is truly

unique among the more than 540 refuges in the System.”

Schulmeister will assume responsibility for managing the Midway Atoll NWR, which includes Sand, Eastern and Spit Islands, about 1,200 miles northwest of Kaua’i in the main Hawaiian Islands. Her wealth of refuge management experience, combined with her leadership background and extensive time living and working in remote settings, make her an ideal fit for Midway.

“My time working with seabirds on coastal refuges, planning for the World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument in Alaska, and coordinating with the military and other entities have prepared me well for the responsibilities I’ll have on Midway,” Schulmeister said.

Former Navy service and experience in the Aleutian Islands will also help her manage a still-standing, historic military infrastructure with which she is familiar. “Both Bob and I will be right at home in the remote,

close-knit and uniquely special part of the Papahānaumokuākea Monument that is the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge,” she said. “I am completely intrigued and excited about the challenges and opportunities this job will offer.”

Those challenges will include assessment, cleanup and recovery after the tsunami that struck the Refuge March 10-11, 2011.

Schulmeister replaces the former Refuge Manager Matt Brown, who left Midway in May 2010.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service.

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Officers:

President Darlene Moegerle
Richmond, IN.
darlenemo@parallax.ws

Vice President Avery Loy-
Kapalua Maui HI
averyloy@gmail.com

Treasurer Robert C. Fields
Beaverton, OR
bandjfields@comcast.net

Secretary Cindy Waddington
Honolulu, HI
jimncindy99@yahoo.com

Directors:

Ellen Cashman
North Andover, MA
ellcash@comcast.net

Dr. Fern Duvall II- Makawao, Maui
Fern.P.Duvall@hawaii.gov
Fern@corvusco.com

Dr. Scott Fisher- Pukalani, Maui
scott@mauicoastallandtrust.org

Michael Logan- Marietta, GA
mblogan@bellsouth.net

Teya Penniman- Haiku, Maui
teya@hawaiiantel.net

Linda Watters- Milwaukie, OR
lh2os@comcast.net

Midway Atoll Refuge Manager

Sue Schulmeister, Refuge Manager
sue_schulmeister@fws.gov

John Klavitter, M.S.
Deputy Refuge Manager

Friends Of Midway Atoll Newsletter
June 2011
katmidway@gmail.com

continued from page 9, Tsunami

On Kure, large coastal sand dunes blocked and slowed the waves, helping limit the carnage to three albatross adults and hundreds of albatross chicks. The dunes, which reach as high as 20 feet, have been growing over the past decade as state officials have removed invasive weeds and planted native naupaka shrubs.

In contrast, tsunamis washed over airplane runways and old seawalls along Midway's coasts. Laysan island's sand dunes were destroyed by a rabbit infestation.

Elizabeth Flint, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, said the tsunamis offered a preview of what could happen to the low-lying atolls as global warming lifts sea levels and causes storms to develop more frequently. Flint said she expects the high water events such as these to eat away at seabird habitats.

"This is a problem that we expect to have again, not because we're expecting another tsunami but because of changing climate," Flint said.

Notice of Annual FOMA Meeting. . . .
The Annual Meeting will be held on Tuesday, September 20 with a conference call at 4:00 EDT. For more information, members can call Darlene Moegerle at 765-935-4747.

FOMA Membership and Renewal Information

If you have a question about your membership, please send an e-mail to Darlene Moegerle at: darlenemo@parallax.ws or call her at: 765-935-4747

The address for your membership renewal payment is: Bob Fields 1030 N.W. 176th Avenue Beaverton, OR 97006

Friends of Midway Atoll
Kathleen Loy
310 Cook Pine Drive
Kapalua HI 96761