

A Week in Hawaii: Birding Maui and the Big Island

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by Robert Weissler

Recently, my wife and I celebrated our tenth wedding anniversary in Hawaii. Of course, since we are bird enthusiasts, we took the opportunity to explore the parks and countryside in search of interesting birds.

In preparation for the trip, I read through portions of the field guide "Birds of Hawaii and the Tropical Pacific" by Douglas Pratt. Fortunately, his new bird finding guide to Hawaii "Enjoying Birds in Hawaii" came out just weeks before the trip. Both books are excellent reference materials for planning and conducting a birding-oriented vacation. The bird finding guide includes descriptions of the productive locations with birds likely to be found in each and species accounts that identify the best locations and habitats to search for particular birds. We followed the book closely and found it to be an accurate account.

Our trip covered Thanksgiving week from the prior Saturday to the following Sunday for a total of 9 glorious days in the tropical Pacific. We spent four nights on the Big Island of Hawaii followed by another four nights on Maui. On the island of Hawaii, we stayed at the Chalet Kilauea at Volcano Inn in their so-called Hapu'u Forest Cabin, a cozy two-story wood-paneled condo with sliding glass doors and veranda looking out into an Ohia-Lehua and tree fern forest. Japanese White-eye were common around our cabin. Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and especially the Kilauea Caldera loop were nearby just a couple miles away. At the Observatory Museum, we had our first encounter with Nene, the endangered Hawaiian Goose... in the parking lot of all places! Further counterclockwise around loop, we saw White-tailed Tropicbirds in Halemaumau Crater (they nest in the walls of the crater despite the sulfurous air). The highlight of the loop for birding is the overlook at the Thurston Lava Tube. Here, we found the gorgeous crimson honeycreeper with the white rump, the Apapane, abundant. With careful observation, we also found the Hawaiian Thrush or Omao, a relative of the Townsend's Solitaire. Briefly, we also spotted overhead through the trees a Hawaiian Hawk, a Big Island endemic and the only native buteo of the entire island chain. Along the Kalapana coast near where the Chain of Craters road deadends in a recent lava flow, we spied Black Noddies making brief sorties from their cliff-side perches over the water. At Manuka State Park in the South Kona Forest Reserve, we found the hitherto elusive Elepaio along a two-mile loop trail. Common Amakihi were quite common on this trail.

On Maui we stayed in a more conventional resort hotel called the Aston Kamaole Sands in South Kihei. We couldn't help noticing the opulent resort complexes in nearby Wailea, but for a natural, quiet setting similar to what we experienced on Hawaii, the Kula Lodge looked like an attractive alternative.

When we picked up our rental car at Kahului Airport on Maui, I could not help but notice the presence of two 4-wheel drive Ford Explorers. Unfortunately, the place you really want 4-wheel drive is on the Big Island to drive up the Saddle Road and on a dirt road to a preserve on the slopes of Mauna Kea where Akiapolaau, Hawaii Akepa, Hawaii Creeper and another race of Elepaio could be found. On Maui, the remote East Maui wilderness and Waikamoi Preserve are not accessible by motor vehicle at all, so a 4-wheel drive is only useful for the coast road south from Hana, good for scenery but less so for birds. Regular hikes into Waikamoi Preserve are conducted on Thursdays; unfortunately, the Thursday I was there was Thanksgiving, so no hike.

However, the birding at Hosmer Grove right by the entrance to Haleakala National Park was superb. In the space of that small loop trail, especially looking out from the overlook, one could find Common Amakihi, Apapane, Maui Creeper, Red-billed Leiothrix, Melodious Laughing-Thrush, Northern Cardinal (the latter three being introduced birds) and the sickle-billed, brick red Iiwi. I also had a brief glimpse of the only raptor on Maui, an endemic race of Short-eared Owl. We also picked up a few introduced birds in and around Lahaina, namely the Red-crested Cardinal and the Gray Francolin. By our hotel room, we also managed to find Nutmeg Mannakins along with Common Mynas and Barred Doves.

All in all, while the species diversity on the Hawaiian Islands is lower than mainland North Americans are accustomed to, the lure of colorful endemic Hawaiian honeycreepers and other birds is exciting and their discovery rewarding. I look forward to going back to the islands, perhaps to spend time during Spring on Kauai to focus on sea-going birds and its own endemic forest birds.