

DESTINATION KAUAI, HAWAII – INFORMATION FOR TRAVELING BIRDERS, JANUARY 2009

by Petri Hottola



On the last week of January 2009, I had a pleasure to spend three and half days on Kauai, Hawaii, between flights from Nadi, Fiji (via Honolulu) to Los Angeles, the United States. Kauai is known as the ‘garden island’ of Hawaii, lush and crowded but not quite as crowded as the other main islands. Its highlands are claimed to have the highest rainfall rates on Earth and places such as the Alakai Swamp have become famous as the last resort of some Hawaiian endemic birds, possibly, though not very realistically, even the extinct **Nukupuu**. In hope that my brief experiences could help a fellow birder visiting Kauai, I have collected the following notes on key target species, sites and services on the island. According to my own experiences, there is not enough information in the Internet. I would have been happy to find more details on access and roads, for example. Additionally, the Kokee State Park authorities are not interested in replying email questions from foreign visitors. A number of Lumix 6 MP pocket camera photos have been included, to illustrate the conditions in the field.

The situation of the endemic Hawaiian birds is rather desperate. Most of them have become extinct, the first wave of extinction having occurred after the Polynesian colonization of the islands, and the second during the U.S. rule. Recently, mosquito-spread bird diseases have effectively wiped out most of the passerines on Kauai, many of them having been replaced by disease-resistant introduced birds from all over the world. It is a sad feeling to experience the eerie silence of the protected forests, the trees full of fruit which nobody eats anymore. Not so long ago, these forests were teeming with spectacular indigenous birdlife. Bird conservation measures have apparently been inadequate or too late, with only limited hope for the remaining species. No wonder that locating the endemic passerines may be a difficult task for a visiting birder, many of the remaining birds being restricted to more or less difficult to reach pockets on the Kauai highlands, with their oftentimes rainy weather.

At the same time, Kauai has become a kind of open-air zoo. The most numerous forest bird, **Japanese White-Eye**, comes from East Asia. There are others from Ethiopia, Europe, Brazil and the United States, to name few examples. Fortunately, the seabirds and wildfowl have survived better than the passerines. One needs a mere half-a-day to find the endemic non-passerine land birds, and to see the **Laysan Albatross**, whereas several days are required for the passerines, with no guarantees of a full list of the realistically available species. Personally, I failed with **Akikiki** and **Akekee**, despite spending two days in locations supposedly ideal for the two species. All in all, 48 bird species were recorded, including nine endemics: **Hawaiian Goose, Hawaiian Duck, Hawaiian Coot, Puaiohi, Kauai Elepaio, Anianiau, Apapane, Iiwi** and **Kauai Amakihi**. In the following comments on sites, the introduced and widespread species have been only selectively mentioned. Several of them are everywhere, in large numbers.



Fig. 1. The most numerous forest bird on Kauai – a **Japanese White-eye!**



Fig. 2. Another abundant introduction – a **Zebra Dove.**

Flights

A number of inter-island flights connect Lihue, Kauai, with other islands, and notably Honolulu, Oahu, with its international airline hub. A European customer may risk it and buy the local flights on the spot, after arrival. Prepaid tickets with seat reservations are, however, sold by one airline, GO! (Mesa Airlines). Incredibly, all the other companies decline European (and other foreign) credit cards, as if they were less reliable than the U.S. ones! Well, fortunately it is not a complete 'welcome to a anti-European Bedrock, with the Flintstones''scene. The GO! is there, and provides easy Internet booking and some of the best rates. The island-hopper flights are not expensive, at less than USD 40 between Oahu and Kauai, for example. In fact, they are too cheap for the commission-hungry travel agents, and that is why one needs to purchase the tickets by oneself. Well, some agents will do the job, if you pay five times the going rate. In Honolulu, the GO! terminal is rather far from the main international arrivals, more than one kilometer towards the far corner of the complex. My GO! flight to Lihue had an attendant entertaining us all the way, even though it was only 35 minutes. I guess many U.S. customers need the show to avoid a risk of momentary silence, which might lead to thoughts (the horror!). The word 'great' was repeated 234 times... or something like that.

Car rental

I rented my vehicle at Budget. They have a counter across the street at Lihue International Airport, Kauai. The only car with a genuine 4x4 was Jeep Compass, which did not have very good visibility, but was otherwise acceptable. Be not fooled by the various SUV:s. They may look like 4x4s but are just oversize 2x2s; it is all impression with no capability. One needs the real thing on the Alakai Swamp tracks, particularly after rains. For other destinations, a regular sedan is quite sufficient. I myself had reserved a 4x4 and the Budget people tried to persuade me to accept a 2x2 SUV for the same price, before learning how adamant I was. With the 2x2s, one is not even allowed to drive on gravel roads, according to the insurance contract.

The tarmac roads were in fine condition, even though congested and narrow in places. Nelles Map Kauai proved to be sufficient for orientation. There are many people on the island and moving around tends to be time-consuming, even though distances are short. At time of the car return, Budget customers were requested to provide a proof that they had filled the tank within two miles of the airport. This is not as easy as it sounds, as there are no petrol stations close-by. It took me an hour to discover one in Lihue. The station cashier tried to charge extra from a tourist, and she also produced the necessary slip only after repeated requests. A visitor needs to look after oneself and not to trust too much on the honesty of his/her hosts when dealing with these services.

Accommodation

Hawaii is quite overpriced, as a consequence of steady tourist demand and shortage of budget options. Whenever the Americans have they pitifully short vacations, they tend to spend a lot. Money is not the essence, time is. On Kauai, birders have stayed either at Kokee State Park cottages or at Garden Island Inn, Lihue. The former has a reputation of being affordable but cold, dirty and run down, with allegedly unfriendly service as a bonus. The Garden Island Inn is like a two star motel with four star rates, and further away from the forests of Kokee and Alakai Swamp (about 1,5 hours one way by a car, depending on traffic). At the end of the day, my choice was the Inn, which proved to be a comfortable option, with the minor exception of parking space, which was not always easy to locate. One needs to pay the first night beforehand, a custom characteristic of U.S. accommodation reservations. The location of the Garden Island Inn is quite practical, with fast access to highways and close proximity to services, the surroundings being nevertheless relatively peaceful.



Fig. 3. Garden Island Inn, Lihue. Grey is in as a car color in the States, at the moment.

Supplies

Bring lots of money if you arrive from the European Union, not to mention Asia. At the supermarkets of Kauai, groceries cost at least double the prices of the most expensive nations of Europe. This was explained by transportation costs which probably do make some of the difference, but the food is more expensive in the mainland U.S. than in Europe, too, despite the weak dollar. Needless to say, restaurants are not really an option as their prices are even higher. Somehow, the 'free market economy' has failed to deliver, despite the help of genetic engineering, lax health regulations and other short cuts. Even larger problem is the quality of the food, not to mention lack of detailed product information. The United States is not a place for tasty, healthy meals (= other than the tasteless, fatty/sugary/carbo junk food) for a reasonable price. Regular European style food-stuffs (British not included in the 'European') can be located in special gourmet sections of larger supermarkets, with triple prices. Once again, I survived on fruit, grilled chicken, self-made sandwiches, nuts and snacks. In fact, I survived quite well, gaining weight.

There is a convenient mall (Star supermarket etc.) close to the Garden Island Inn, few kilometers towards Waimea and left, at the end of a golf course. Supermarkets were easy to locate in all towns along the coastal highways. In case you do not mind risking an acute 'lard stroke', and do not miss flavors other than fat and salt, there are fast food joints in all the main settlements. A two liter bottle of Dr. Pepper goes well with a single serving, table size pizza, and/or a half a kilo hamburger with chips, with a pint of ice cream as a dessert. ..

Birding sites

Lihue Golf Courses

There are extensive golf courses close to the Garden Island Inn in Lihue, both towards the airport and towards the malls. I looked for **Java Sparrows** there, but saw only one close to the astonishingly tacky Marriot resort. This was a good area for **Rose-ringed Parakeets**, especially towards the Menehune Fish Ponds, late in the afternoon. The Lihue airfield had a lone **Bristle-thighed Curlew** and the golf courses had a number **Pacific Golden Plovers**, and several hundreds of the common introduced birds, such as **Chestnut Munias**, and the odd **Ring-necked Pheasant**...

Hanalei Wildlife Refuge

This well-known wetland with flooded taro fields is located west of Kilauea and Princeville, in the north of the island, after a signposted lookout and a one-way highway bridge (at the end of a long descend). Right after the bridge, turn left into the fields. The road is narrow; make sure to not to block the way of the locals, who may understandably become irritated by the (frequent) visitors. There are wetlands mixed with forest and homesteads for the first three kilometers or so. **Hawaiian Geese** were common (about 20) soon after the junction. The best spot for **Hawaiian Ducks** (about 50, most of them pure) was further on, on the left side of the road (Fig. 5). **Hawaiian Coots** (8) were, however, difficult to see in the deep but narrow channels. They were more easily spotted from the above-mentioned lookout overlooking the reserve. My only **Greater Necklaced Laughing-Thrush** was seen in a hill-side forest around midway of the side road. Other species included **Black-crowned Night-Heron**, **White-rumped Shama** and other common species such as both **Munias**.



Fig. 4. Nenés – a pair of introduced **Hawaiian Geese** at Hanalei fields, with leg-bands.



Fig. 5. This section of the Hanalei refuge, further along the road, had the largest numbers of wildfowl and the **Greater Necklaced Laughing-Thrush** at the back.

Waimea Canyon Road

There are two access roads up to Kokee State Park from Waimea. The first one, not signposted, is a rather narrow one straight through the town. The road appeared to be not quite as good for birding as the second option, even though it gave better views of the vast Waimea Canyon, one of the geographical wonders of the Hawaii. The second route, signposted to the right after (west) Waimea, had both **Erckel's** and **Black Francolins** (a recent introduction?) soon after beginning, early in the morning. A single **Java Sparrow**, a juvenile, was also seen on the road. A lone **Hwamei** flew across it further on. Higher up, the access roads meet in a T-junction. From there on, it is a short distance to the Kokee State Park headquarters, from where the best birding with endemic forest species starts.

Kokee State Park

The road between the park headquarters and the Kokee observation point has some good indigenous high altitude forest, especially towards the end, from where an alternative hiking trail goes towards the Alakai Swamp and Pihea Ridge. It is possible to park on grass next to the road, just about anywhere, and observe birds from the road. During my visits, the weather was rather variable, with foggy conditions occasionally making observations impossible. My only **Anianiaus** (2) and an **Iiwi** (juv/imm.) were seen there, after several hours of scanning of the numerous flowering Ohias (**Fig. 7**), which were also patrolled by dozens of **Apapanes**, not to mention the **White-eyes**.

Short grass opposite a large picnic site on the left, about half way up after the headquarters, had reliable **Erckel's Francolins**. Next to the observation point parking lot (at the end), a pair of **Kauai Amakihis**

provided excellent views. The fantail-style **Kauai Elepaio** was observed once. The star species and a major surprise was, however, a roadside **Puiaiohi** in a depression with ferns, late in the afternoon - probably thanks to the captive breeding program. The presence of the skulking species was first noticed because of its harsh 'sheerr' calls. Two days of unsuccessful 'hunt' for this species at Pihea-Alakai region, and I saw it at Kokee!

Habituated **Red Junglefowl** are very common at picnic and observation sites below and at the Kokee State Park headquarters, excluding the highest ridge. The large groups of 'roosters and hens' formed quite a colorful sight around visitors. Some were calling in the forest at the Pihea Ridge Trail, as well. The birds of the picnic sites were looking for handouts and appeared quite tame. This is, however, the only place in Kauai (and Hawaii?) where the introduced species may be counted as a lifer. The birds of the lowlands, even though at first sight similar, have interbred with the domestic variety. A few **Pacific Golden Plovers** also were seen on campsite lawns, quite high up on the mountains. The species is more common close to the sea. No sign of **Akekee** at Kokee, even though the species is supposed to be relatively common there, or at least used to be.



Fig. 6. The Waimea Canyon. There are introduced **Chukars** somewhere there, but I missed them. The slopes can be rather suicidal – do not walk too close to the edge!



Fig 7. A flowering Ohia, the favorite of several endemic bird species.



Fig. 8. An Erckel's Francolin, far away from its home grounds on the Ethiopian highlands.



Fig. 9. The habituated **Red Jungle-Fowl** make quite a show at Kokee State Park, around picnic sites.

Pihea Ridge Trail

At Kokee-Alakai region one has several forest hiking trails to choose from. At the Alakai Swamp Trail, one may apparently encounter mud and other obstacles, depending on water levels, off trail movements being restricted by the terrain. Among the other choices, the Pihea Ridge Trail appeared to be among the best for the endemic species, with a chance for **Akikiki**, with some luck (I failed). The very best locations probably are to the east from there, along the less known trails frequented by researchers and local experts. As an ignorant tourist with no support from the park authorities, I chose the Pihea Ridge Trail and focused on it.

After reading the Internet reports, which either complained on the gated Kokee Trail (and its partly degraded forest), or reflected on rough back-road experiences with local guides, I was expecting a gated road to Pihea Ridge. How long one needs to hike before reaching the primary forest? Would it even be possible to reach the Alakai Swamp or Pihea Ridge on foot, with the distances and terrain involved? What if it rains and I am ten kilometers away from the car, or a slippery trail? Is the place open at all in January? Does one need special permits to enter the trails? Will I travel to Kauai for nothing, only to face closed gates? All in all, I was prepared for a big disappointment, as the only information I got, the state park map in the Internet, had a gate in the beginning of the side road towards the ridge. Therefore, it was a great relief to find out that the road was open and fine for the Jeep. Even a fat birder like me could make it, by driving to the start of the trail.

Turn right on an unmarked gravel road, right after the Kokee State Park headquarters (Information Centre, parking lots) entrance, and negotiate your way to northeast through a number of private road junctions leading to houses or other park buildings. In the first Y junctions, choose the right forks. Eventually, some distance after a small bridge, the Alakai Swamp Trail (signposted) emerges on the left, with a

picnic/observation site and Waimea Canyon on the right. From there, it is only one-and-half kilometers or so to the beginning of the Pihea Ridge Trail, with another well-organized camp site. In January 2009, the condition of the road was better than anticipated, and described in the Internet. It was rough, eroded and slippery with mud in places but a piece of cake with a 4x4. I would not recommend taking a 2x2 down the track, even though a skilled driver may manage it if the weather stays good. The risk for damage or getting stuck is, however, relatively high for a sedan.

In the beginning of the Pihea Ridge Trail, one was forced to wade through a small stream, with consequent wet feet. Hopefully, the park's staff will eventually construct a boardwalk. There was also another section (100 m) of muddy swamp further away, dried up in January, but otherwise the trail was fine. On both occasions, I followed the trail up to a place where it descends steeply to a stream, and turned around there. About two thirds towards this location, there was a picnic shelter on the right. **Kauai Elepaio** was relatively common at Pihea Ridge, with more than ten individuals recorded during two visits, and several more apparently singing in the forest. My first one was seen right in the beginning, at the camp site. **Kauai Amakihi** and **Japanese Bush Warbler** were seen only once. **Apapane** were common towards the upper parts of the trail, where Ohias were aplenty. Other birds along the trail included a **Great Frigatebird**, **Red-tailed Tropicbird** and few **White-tailed Tropicbirds**, crossing over the island, and the introduced **White-rumped Shamas** and **Hwameis**. Fortunately, there was no rain at Pihea Ridge during the two days I spent there.

In January 2009, feral pig hunting season had started at the forest park and apparently only few people dared to hike on the trails. There were hunters and dogs by the Pihea Ridge Trail, but that was not really a problem, because they did a proper job in regard to safety. Pigs there were, and feral goats. In one occasion I was sitting on the trail, silently stalking four close-by Ohias in full bloom. Suddenly, a pig appeared in front of me, snorting while it clambered up the almost vertical hillside and poked its head from under a fallen tree, less than a meter away. I told it to stop before we collided, and down went the pig, fast as a greased lightning, squealing in panic after such a sudden encounter with its worst enemy...



Fig. 10. My Jeep Compass and a pig hunter vehicle with a dog cage at the Pihea Ridge Trail entrance.



Fig. 11. Hunting season had started in the state park, a day before the Super Bowl weekend.



Fig. 12. A forest view along the lower Pihea Ridge Trail.

Kilauea Point

This is a busy headland with hundreds of visitors occupying the site. The number of tourism attractions is limited on Kauai is limited and Kilauea Point is on the top of the list. Consequently, the reserve is primarily geared for 'mid-day dudes', rather than serious birders. They open the gates after the morning birding hours and close them before the conditions improve again, effectively spoiling any serious seabird observation attempts. There is a fence around the observation point, too high to allow scoping the sea unless one stands all the time, and there are no benches for prolonged observations. The idea is that one stays at Kilauea Point for fifteen minutes, takes a few photographs and buys souvenirs, with some information from the over-enthusiastic, unnaturally positive and welcoming wardens (I wonder what their medicine is? The world is a dark place...). They must make a lot of money out of the constant tourist flow, most of whom left without seeing the several **Humpback Whales** swimming and breaching right in front of the point, simply because their concentration span did not exceed ten minutes. They also needed somebody to point out where to look (= water). The whales were visible every fifteen minutes or so.

There are thousands of breeding **Red-footed Boobies** and many **Laysan Albatrosses** (around 60 were seen) which guarantee some great photography opportunities, even with a pocket camera. The **Albatrosses** breed in a separate, out-of-bounds enclosure, but frequently pass by at a close distance. During my visit, a nice surprise was a single **Black-footed Albatross**, which hanged around the **Laysan** colony. I was told that it had been there for a week. The **Black-foots** nest only 150 km southwest, on Kaula Island, but are seldom observed on Kauai. Other seabirds included both **White-tailed** and **Red-tailed Tropicbirds**, dozens of **Brown Boobies** and several **Great Frigatebirds**. **Hawaiian Geese** were also present, with 20 rather tame individuals. No **shearwaters**, **petrels** or **terns** were seen at the sea, despite hours of scanning (wrong season for most species).



Fig. 13. The Kilauea observation point, in-between showers of rain.



Fig. 14. Red-footed Boobies dot the hillside, a Laysan Albatross glides against the surf.



Fig. 15. A **Laysan Albatross** passing by, over the observation point...



Fig. 16. ...and a **Black-footed Albatross** follows it.



Fig. 17. An adult **Red-footed Booby**, white phase – by far the most numerous seabird at Kilauea Point.



Fig. 18. Would you like to become number 14 on this sign? Larson's Beach.

Koolau Road/Larson's (Kaakaaniau) Beach

A dozen of rural roads were explored between Princeville and Anahola. They all had plenty of the common species, but the best one was Koolau Road, especially close to Larson's Beach. Along the beach access road (gravel), there was a large fallow field on the left. This could be a good site for **Japanese Quail**. I did not score, but saw a **Short-eared Owl**, several **Western Meadowlarks** and three **Java Sparrows** there. By the beach, there is a small colony of **Laysan Albatrosses** on the right, in a pine forest on private land. They patrol the coast, together with **Red-footed** and **Brown Boobies**. Seabirding might be productive there, with a proper scope. **Monk Seals** are occasionally seen on the beach. Another good site is at Poipu, in the southeast. Parking is probably not safe at Larson's Beach, and I never left my car out of sight. There were a variety of 'local characters' hanging around the site. Do not attempt to swim there, even though the beach looks nice. There are some deadly currents (**Fig. 18**), literally.

HAVE A NICE VISIT ON KAUAI!