

Wildside Nature Tours  
Greg Miller's Big Year: Hawai'i Endemics  
November 1-13, 2017  
Trip report by Chris Brown  
Local Co-leader David Kuhn

Coinciding with the American Birding Association's decision to annex Hawai'i into its "countable" region Wildside was pleased to offer this exciting 13-day adventure touring the state's four main islands: Kaua'i, Oahu, Maui and Hawai'i, also known as the "Big Island". Along with experiencing the birdlife of each island we were treated each day to beautiful scenery, amazing food, and the unique and inviting Hawaiian culture. Our group was friendly and cheerful, and always willing to lend one another a helping hand.

#### Day 1, November 1, 2017

After our airport pickups in Honolulu and meeting up with folks who had arrived early we were checked into our rooms and out birding by mid-afternoon. Our first stop was in the hills north of Waikiki for the first of the two Oahu endemic bird species. After trying a few likely-looking spots we finally came across a family group of 'amakihi. 'Amakihi are small, chubby yellow-olive birds with relatively long and tapering gray bills. The family *Drepanididae*, to which the 'amakihi and Hawaii's other honeycreepers belong, are recent descendants of finches and are only found in the Hawaiian Islands. This species, the Oahu 'Amakihi is found only on this island in all the world, although very similar, closely related sister-species exist on other main islands in this remote chain. During our search for the 'amakihi we came across our first Red-vented Bulbuls, Japanese White-eyes, Red-billed Leiothrix, Common Waxbills and Scaly-breasted Munia, all common introduced species in the hills above Waikiki.

Having gotten our major target species for the day we decided to chase a mega-rare Little Stint in the Pearl Harbor area. This species, native to Africa and Asia had only been in the main Hawaiian islands four other times. We arrived at the Honouliuli NWR right around sunset and in addition to the stint we had our first Hawaiian Coots, an endemic species, Pacific Golden Plovers, Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, and Hawaiian Black-necked Stilts, an endemic subspecies. We got back to the hotel just a bit after dark, quickly washed up and walked a few short blocks to dinner near our hotel in Waikiki. After what has been a long day of travel for many of us, sleep will be easy.

#### Day 2, November 2, 2017

Today will be our grand tour of the island of Oahu. Our target species is the other local endemic, the Oahu Elepaio. Elepaio are small and superficially similar to a wren: they are little balls of fluff and feathers with a long tail stuck in, cocked up at an angle. Like the 'amakihi which we saw yesterday, elepaio species are spread cross most of, though not all, of the main islands. The reason these two groups may continue to be somewhat widespread is their seemingly higher tolerance for diseases like avian malaria and avian pox, which have decimated other species, even contributing to several extinctions of native species.

To seek out the Oahu Elepaio we hiked up a valley north and east of town in hopes of hearing one of these sweet little birds, which loudly and plainly sing their name "ele-PAI-o" as they hop and scurry through the understory, giving away their location. Continuing up the valley until the trail became nearly indiscernible we were about ready to try another spot for this spritely native bird, when bouncing from tree to tree came the little elepaio. They are charismatic and

inquisitive birds, often keen to check out sounds and people and this one was no exception. He was soon joined by his mate and they danced around, checking us out for a couple minutes, even coming quite close at times. After a minor mishap on the hike back down the valley all was well and we were on our way to Makapu'u Point, at the very eastern tip of the island. Here we scanned for seabirds, adding Red-footed and Brown Boobies to our growing list. A few Great Frigatebirds sailed by at close range while a Hawaiian Monk Seal loafed on a distant beach and Pacific Spinner Dolphins played in the waves.

Continuing northwest we stopped for lunch in the town of Laie, then continued on to Kahuku. We stopped at an old local cemetery with stunning ocean views and a flock of about a dozen Bristle-thighed Curlews, which seemed to be enjoying the vistas and the breeze as much as the rest of us while they rested perched atop the tombstones. At the Kahuku Aquaculture Ponds we saw Ruddy Turnstones, Sanderling, Dunlin and a rare-for-Hawaii Stilt Sandpiper. Also present were Northern Shoveler and Black-crowned Night-Herons. By this point it was time to begin making our way back towards Waikiki so we completed the circuit around the island, arriving at Kapiolani Park in time to see a few Saffron Finches, Yellow-fronted Canaries and Java Sparrows feeding on the lawns as a couple of the beautiful White Terns, locally common on the south shore of Oahu came in to roost for the night in the park's banyan trees.

It's been a whirlwind day, but we accomplished all of our goals on the island and we can feel good moving on to our next island, Kaua'i, in the morning.

### Day 3, November 3, 2017

After our morning flight to Kaua'i we stashed our luggage at the hotel and headed out to Kilauea Point Lighthouse. This is another gorgeously scenic location, and this one comes complete with a colony of Red-footed Boobies which, when we visited, numbered approximately 600 individuals. Wedge-tailed Shearwaters nest in burrows in the dirt where and a few of their young, down feathers still clinging in spots, waited for evening when their parents would arrive with food. A few pairs of nene, the Hawaiian goose, wandered the grounds with a Cackling Goose, possibly of the Aleutian subspecies, in their midst. We scanned the common White-tailed Tropicbirds for their Red-tailed cousins, which would be a lifer for everyone and a new species for the year-long list of Big Year birder Yve Morrell who had joined us on our tour. Try as we might we were unable to scan either the tropicbird or a Laysan Albatross into existence. We continued along, vowing to come back and try again during our stay on the island. A very kind and friendly docent even took my phone number to call should any albatrosses, which nest nearby, show up during the next few days!

We next visited Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge, where we had good looks at the endemic Hawaiian Duck, which are mostly genetically pure here on Kaua'i. Near the ducks were Common Gallinules, Pacific Golden Plovers, introduced Western Meadowlarks, and a few Chestnut Munia munched grass seeds at the edges of the taro paddies. The Red Junglefowl, from India, is the genetic source of our domestic chicken, but here they are thought to be genetically pure, uncontaminated by the blood of barnyard fowl. These roosters sport the all-important cold gray legs, a sign of a pure Junglefowl.

On our way back to the hotel we stopped at a spot which has Greater Necklaced Laughing-Thrush, Hawaii's most sought after, and most enigmatic introduced species. Although a lovely setting for a hike and filled with White-eyes, White-rumped Shammas, Common Mynas, Spotted

and Zebra Doves, we struck out on the Laughing-Thrush. We spent the night in Kapaa, where we will be based for our entire four-night stay in Kaua'i.

#### Day 4, November 4, 2017

Today was an early start to drive over to the west side of the island to visit the Alakai Swamp area in search of three Kaua'i endemics: Kaua'i 'Amakihi, Anianianu, and Kaua' Elepaio. The area around the Alakai Swamp is rural and rugged, and the drive to our birding site gave us a reasonable dose of excitement along pockmarked dirt roads. A nice easy-moderate hike lead us to good-looking native habitat at just the right elevation, where we fanned out, calling out to one another when something was found, grouping up to watch, and then fanning back out. This tactic worked relatively well, as before long we had all seen the elepaio well, and the 'amakihi, in glimpses. Additionally, the blood-red Apapane are still quite common in Kauai's native forests, and although they are declining rapidly on the island we were also awed by five crimson red 'I'iwi displaying to each other all at once in the top of a dead tree. We spent a few hours hiking up and down the trail hoping for a cooperative 'Anianiau, a yellowish honeycreeper quite similar to a warbler, but with a thicker, more wedge-shaped bill. Our local coleader David, a well-known expert in the vocalizations of Hawaii's native birds assured us that the bird was calling around us occasionally, but was not moving close enough to be seen.

Hedging our bets we decided to try a back up spot for the 'Anianiau and better looks at the Kaua'i 'Amakihi. Always have a backup, because they often pay off! Driving up to a parking lot atop a ridge, we hiked back down a bit until we again began hearing the three-part call note of the 'Anianiau. After a few moments of scanning and searching, we all had good looks at the 'amakihi. Suddenly, sharp-eyed Cynthia, in her standard sweet, quiet way says "I think I've got it!" Now, over the previous few days it had quickly become obvious that when Cynthia says she "thinks" she's got it, you'd better get everyone on the bird, because she's not wrong often! We followed the tiny 'Anianiau around until we had all gotten our fill, reveling in checking off another day's final target species. Standing atop the ridge we breathed the sweet Hawaiian air, something a bit like a sea breeze, meets mountain air mixed the aroma of a greenhouse. White-tailed Tropicbirds soared across the saddle of the mountains as we took in another of Hawaii's infinite number of scenic viewpoints. Driving back across the island we made stops along Waimea Canyon, called The Grand Canyon of the Pacific, in spectacular evening light.

#### Day 5, November 5, 2017

Today was a day of ups and downs. We woke to a standard Hawaiian-style light rain, suited up accordingly and headed out in search of Greater Necklaced Laughing-Thrush. Upon parking the car and getting our gear sorted out David noticed that one of the tires was low. Well, more than low, it was the flattest tire I've ever seen! No big deal, I sent the group along with David to search for the Laughing-Thrush while I changed the tire. To shorten a longer story, after wrestling about in the mud and rain I realized that the rental company had not included all the parts for the jack! By some stroke of luck a local, Rory came along at just about the time I was getting ready to give up and was able to rig a replacement for the missing part! Minutes later we were road-ready again. Although the group foray didn't turn up the Laughing-Thrush, it did yield the only Japanese Bush-Warbler of the whole trip! We would have missed that bird if it weren't for the flat tire!

Back on our way we birded local salt ponds and rocky shoreline, seeing our first Wandering Tattlers and African Silverbills, as well as more Nene and Hawaiian Stilts. In early afternoon we

arrived at the Kekala anchorage on the Na Pali coast for our private boat trip in the waters of the Kaulakahi Channel, between Kaua'i and its small neighbor to the west, Ni'ihau. Close to shore we were surrounded by the same boobies and frigate birds which we had seen on previous days, but once we got out of the island's wind-shadow the seabird spectacle really took off. We were first met by the relatively common Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, some coming close to the boat. Next, a stockier Hawaiian Petrel sailed close across the bow. We caught sight of a pile of birds on the horizon and worked our way towards it, eventually finding ourselves in a swirling mass of mostly Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, mixed with a small handful of Cook's Petrels, and one bird which may have been a Black-winged Petrel, but with the frenzy of activity and the rocking of the boat we could never be sure. This feeding flock, about 150 birds in all, was also attended by more boobies and a few frigatebirds in search of an easy meal. What a truly remarkable scene, and we were right in the middle of it! We made it back to the anchorage just after a stunningly beautiful sunset, which was a great opportunity to quietly reflect on the day's events. It was a day of ups and downs, and the ups, as they often do, outweighed the downs by a landslide. A pizza dinner en route to the hotel was in order after a long and satisfying day. Yes, Hawaii's pizza lives up to this Jersey Boy's discerning pizza-palette!

#### Day 6, November 6, 2017

Today was our final day on Kaua'i, and having found our targets already we were able to take it at quite a leisurely pace. We went back up to the Kilauea Lighthouse. Here we scanned the boobies and tropicbirds for anything unusual. We still had not seen a Red-tailed Tropicbird and the albatrosses had not yet returned to their nest sites. We watched some Nene. A Shama flew through the parking lot. Just as it seemed we were all ready to slip into complacency in the warm sun David announces that he has a Red-tailed Tropicbird in flight. We were able to get everyone on the bird, including some scope views before it disappeared around the rocks. Celebration ensued, for this was a lifer for pretty much everyone, and Yve's very last chance for the species during her Big Year! Truly exciting stuff!

After lunch we again swung through Hanalei NWR, this time in hopes of relocating a Tundra Swan, a very rare bird for Hawai'i, which had been seen off and on for a few weeks. We were unsuccessful, but saw more Hawaiian Ducks, and Gallinules. We decided to offer an early drop-off at the hotel for those interested in some down-time, while a couple hardcore souls tried one last time for the Necklaced Laughing-Thrush. While we enjoyed all the expected common species, we did not turn up our target, but we certainly tried hard enough. Finally it was back to the hotel for dinner and bed prior to traveling to Maui the next morning.

#### Day 7, November 7, 2017

After breakfast from our go-to Starbuck's location, we were at the airport for a smooth transfer to the Valley Isle of Maui. We arrived in time for lunch, and afterwards we drove into Haleakala National Park. The Hosmer Grove in the park is one of the best places on the island to see Maui's endemic birds and we had Hawai'i 'Amakihi (Maui's version of the 'amakihi we had seen on the other islands) just as we got out of the vehicles. We were also surrounded by 'I'iwi and Apapane, but the main attraction at Haleakala was not the Hosmer Grove, but the summit at 10,023 feet, where we took in the most jaw-dropping sunset from above the clouds. We had to be sure to dress warmly, because even though this is Hawai'i, windchill at the summit can be below freezing!

#### Day 8, November 8, 2017

Today was a bit of everything. We visited native forest in search of more endemics, getting our fill of the Maui Creeper, called 'Alauahio in Hawaiian, and a few of us even heard the peculiar croaking call of a distant 'Akohekohe, also known as the Crested Honeycreeper, although we never saw the bird. Next it was off to the south side of the island to visit Kealia Pond National Wildlife Refuge. Here we had our best looks at Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, as well as a few more common shorebird species.

#### Day 9, November 9, 2017

Today we said goodbye to Maui and moved on to our final island, Hawai'i, called the "Big Island". After landing in Hilo we grabbed a lunch of delicious local food and headed in the direction of Mauna Kea, stopping along the way when a pair of 'io, the Hawaiian Hawk, flew overhead. During a hike in a dry area on the slopes of Mauna Kea we were treated to great looks at the Palila, a chubby yellow and gray bird with a thick bill similar to that of a Pine Grosbeak. This bird is critically endangered, with only about 2,000 left, all on this mountain.

#### Day 10, November 10, 2017

Today was a very special day. We were able to access Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge, the most intact montane wet forest habitat we have visited on our tour, and one of the real gems of the trip. It really does feel different than the other forests we have visited, which generally have been encroached upon by alien species at best and strangled by them at worst. These stands of proud koa and shorter, gnarled ohia trees is the best place to see a number of Big Island endemics, and indeed the only place on earth to see the tangerine-colored Akepa. These were facts of which we were all aware, and it only built the excitement as we loaded into our specialty four-wheel drive fifteen-passenger van and began the twelve mile drive up a bumpy road to the parking area. Along the way we saw introduced Erkel's Francolin and Ring-necked Pheasants, and were serenaded by Red-billed Leiothrix and Eurasian Skylarks.

Eventually we arrived at the parking area, inside two different combination-locked gates. Scattered pairs of nene were feeding in the grass, and the now-familiar songs of Apapane and 'i'iwi filled the air as we put on our boots and filled backpacks and pockets with snacks. That's three Hawaiian endemics in the parking lot. In just a short hike we began hearing strange new calls and songs, which alerted us to the presence of the dark-colored and handsome 'Oma'o, a thrush related to the Solitaires. These birds are quite vocal and have a wide variety of songs and calls, all of them enchanting and wild. A female Kalij Pheasant perched at eye level, framed by ferns. The Hawaiian Creeper and Akepa, critically endangered and now found only in this forest eventually showed well, to the delight of the guests (and relief of the leaders).

After some grilling, a 'Akiapola'au, or aki' for short, with its bizarre multi-purpose hook/chisel beak eventually came close, another bird given away by its call note. This was a young aki', and was eventually joined by both parents. No one had seen such a bird, and we were all happy to stand and watch as they popped in and out of view behind the koa leaves. We would end the day with nine birds found only on the Hawaiian chain, including four found only on this particular island.

#### Day 11, November 11, 2017

Today was fun, if a bit damp. We began by heading to the sugarcane country northwest of Hilo, our base here on the Big Island in search of finches. We certainly found finches. Scaly-breasted

Munia and Common Waxbills by the score feeding on grass seed heads, with Java Sparrows, Saffron Finches, and Yellow-fronted Canaries mixed in.

Taking the old coastal highway, now a scenic route, back into town we swapped out our specialty van for two smaller SUVs and were back on the road in the opposite direction: southeast to Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park. Since it was raining, as it often does on this side of the island, we decided to drive to the ocean at the end of Chain of Craters Road and work our way back. Hawaiian Black Noddies, an endemic subspecies of tern nest in the inaccessible volcanic cliffs overlooking the sea, and about 40 were still in the area, resting in a nearby sea cave.

We worked our way back along Chain of Craters Road, stopping here and there to walk along the other-worldly shapes in the cooled lava and testing the acoustics of one of the craters. We walked the ominously-named Devastation Trail and admired the small balls of cooled lava strewn in piles from lava fountains in 1959, and walked through 600 foot-long Nahuku, Thurston Lava Tube, a natural lava tunnel with ceiling between 10 and 30 feet tall, with more 'Oma'o calling around us. The final thing on our Must-See list was the Jagger Museum, which overlooks the active caldera. Within the caldera is Halema'uma'u Crater, with its 70 foot wide lava lake, home of the Goddess Pele herself. The lava lake hides just below the crater's rim, and though the lava itself is only visible in the form of occasional splashes, the glow at dusk from the lava is reflected and spread by the hazy plume of steam and sulfur dioxide which is constantly belching skyward. A few White-tailed Tropicbirds still rood the turbulent air within the caldera, where they nest, in season. All of this made for an honestly awe-inspiring experience, and therefore a great final stop of the day.

#### Day 12, November 12,2017

Because we had seen all of our potential Big Island endemics, and because our group seemed interested in some of the introduced game bird species we had not yet seen on other islands, we decided to spend much of the day in the drier, more open country of the leeward slope of Mauna Kea. Before leaving town we drove through a local park and saw our first mongooses as well as Yellow-billed Cardinals. We drove out the Saddle Road in search of Chukar, turning up our first Northern Mockingbirds, another bird introduced for its song, and had nice scope views of singing Eurasian Skylarks.

Continuing west towards the Waikoloa Village area, we stopped at various spots to scan for Chestnut-bellied Sandgrouse, an introduced game bird species similar to a dove. Our efforts yielded Gray Francolin, and other exotics which he had already encountered. After lunch at Big Island Brewhouse in Waimea we continued the northern Big Island circuit, stopping next at Kalopa State Park, near Honoka'a. The usual suspects very around but our attention was quickly draw to the loud, clear song of the Chinese Hwamei, also known as the Melodious Laughing-Thrush This is another introduced species, and is related to the Laughing-Thrush we had worked so hard for on Kaua'i, and we watched as a pair sang and foraged in the interior of some vegetation. Being back on the north shore, it wasn't long before the rain picked up again, and we retreated to the safety of the vehicles, happy to be able to add a new species near the end of the trip; quite a feat when luck has been on your side (with only a few notable exceptions) for two weeks!

Our final stop was a scenic visit to Akaka Falls State Park, home to several beautiful waterfalls, and named after one which is over 440 feet tall. On our way back to the hotel it was nice to

reminisce about almost two weeks of exploring the world that sustains these feathered jewels, Hawaii's endangered endemic species, and learn why they need our support.

Day 13, November 13, 2017

Today we flew from the Big Island back to Oahu for our flights back to the mainland. We will remember this trip fondly, as it was full of unique birds, stunning scenery, comfortable weather, good food and great laughs. There's nowhere like Hawai'i, and each of us can now say that we have been immersed in it's unique habitats and culture. Mahalo nui loa for joining us, and Aloha always.