

Quick Reference to Seabirds and Shorebirds of Midway Atoll NWR

Seabirds - Dedicated Parents

Long before the first human set foot on Midway Atoll, seabirds swarmed over these tiny remote islands each year to nest and raise their young. The Laysan albatross sacrifices coordination on land for its long, narrow wings which efficiently help it speed across its open ocean home. To survive in salty surroundings, seabirds developed specialized glands that concentrate the salt from their blood and eliminate it from their bodies. Scientists call members of the albatross, shearwater, and petrel families "tubenoses", for the prominent "nostrils" on their bills.

Midway's seabirds mate for life, and may spend 40 years with their monogamous partner. Due to the great amount of energy and time required to nurture the young from egg to fledgling, both parents strive together to raise just one chick each year. The mates take turns sitting on the egg and tending the chick, often going for two weeks without food. While one incubates, the other scours the sea for sustenance.

Shorebirds - Mighty Migrators

In contrast with seabirds, shorebirds spend "winter vacation" on Midway and most of their lives on land, taking to the open ocean only to migrate between nesting and wintering grounds. Midway offers them a rest stop on their route between nesting areas in Alaska and Siberia and wintering sites in the South Pacific, and some stay for several months. Ethical Wildlife Viewing

Though certainly tolerant, abundant and easily observable, Midway's birds still need protection from unnecessary disturbance, especially during nesting. Please watch them from a distance, and if a bird changes its behavior because of your presence, back away, and move on. How to Use the Checklist

This checklist gives a brief description of the bird's most likely to appear on Sand Island or in the lagoon, an interesting fact about each species, the islands in the atoll where the bird nests, and the months of the year when adults (A) and chicks (C) dwell here.

Albatross

Laysan Albatross

Description: large bird with white body, black back and wings, and dark eye markings

Midway supports the largest Laysan albatross colony in the world, with 388,000 mated pairs, or about 70% of the world's breeding population.

Nests: Sand, Eastern, Spit

A: Oct - Jul C: Jan - Aug

Black-footed Albatross

Description: large dark gray bird with white around bill and under eye

Unlike the Laysan albatross, it prefers windswept, sandy spots away from human habitation. With 22,000 pairs, Midway boosts the second largest nesting population in the world.

Nests: Sand, Eastern, Spit
A: Oct - Jul C: Jan - Aug

Petrels and Shearwaters

Bonin Petrel

Description: dark gray back and wings; sooty gray head and neck; white forehead and underparts

Nests in underground burrows that can be one meter deep and three meters long. Nicknamed the "nightbird" due to its nocturnal habits.

Nests: Sand, Eastern
A: Aug - Jun C: Mar - Jun

Wedge-tailed Shearwater

Description: upper parts dark brown to brownish gray; throat and underparts white

Nocturnal bird that nests in shallow burrows or on the surface. Feeds on larval fish driven to the water's surface by predatory fish like skipjack tuna. Its eerie, moaning call haunts many seabird colonies.

Nests: Sand, Eastern
A: Apr - Nov C: Aug - Nov

Tropicbirds

Red-tailed Tropicbird

Description: all white with red bill and two long, thin, red tail feathers

Its shrill screams earned it the name "bosun bird" from sailors who felt it sounded like a bosun's whistle. Midway supports the largest nesting population in Hawaii of these aerial artists whose courtship displays include mid-air wheeling, gliding, and circling.

Nests: Sand, Eastern, Spit
A: Year-round C: Mar - Oct

Boobies

Red-footed Booby

Description: large white bird with black wing tips, bluish bill, and distinctive red legs and feet

Smallest of all boobies, it plunges 30 feet down into the ocean in search of food, preferring flying fish and squid.

Nests: Eastern
A: Year-round C: Mar - Oct

Frigatebirds

Great Frigatebird

Description: large black bird with long, slender wings and deeply forked tail. Males have bright red inflatable throat patch

So highly adapted for flying, it cannot swim or walk; only perch and fly. Although it can catch its own prey, Hawaiians named it "Iwa" or thief, since it forces other birds to drop their prey, which it takes for itself in mid-air.

Nests: Eastern
A: Mar - Oct C: May - Nov

Terns and Noddies

Gray-backed Tern

Description: back, wings, tail gray; underparts white; head and eye stripe black; narrow wings and deeply forked tail

Lays a single egg on the ground in loose colonies on the fringes of sooty tern colonies.

Nests: Eastern, Spit
A: Feb - Oct C: Jun - Oct

Sooty Tern

Description: upper parts, legs, and bill black; underparts and forehead white; black eye stripe; long, narrow wings and deeply forked tail

Spends first five years of life in flight. Skims water, takes food on the wing, and rarely sits on the ocean. Depends on tuna to chase its prey to the surface.

Nests: Eastern, Spit
A: Feb - Oct C: Jun - Oct

White Tern

Description: pure white with blue and black bill and large dark eyes rimmed with black feathers

Curious bird that lays a single egg directly on a tree branch. Sharp-clawed chicks hold onto their precarious nest sites.

Nests: Sand, Eastern
A: Year-round C: Mar - Aug

Brown Noddy

Description: dark brown with gray-white forehead and crown; long, narrow wedge-shaped tail

Ground-nesting bird named for its courtship display, which includes head nodding and fish transfers from one mate to the other.

Nests: Sand, Eastern

A: Apr - Dec C: Jun - Oct

Black Noddy

Description: similar in appearance to brown noddy except smaller and darker; white on forehead and crown more distinct

The largest colony of black noddies in the Hawaiian Island chain nests in trees of Midway Atoll.

Nests: Sand

A: Year-round C: Jan - Aug

Plovers

Pacific Golden Plover

Description: gold, black, and white spotting on wings and back; white stripe over eye and down neck; short black bill

A powerful migrant capable of flying almost 2,800 miles non-stop, from Alaska to Hawaii, over open ocean.

A: Year-round, but abundant in spring and fall

Sandpipers

Bristle-thighed Curlew

Description: larger brown bird with long, down-curved bill, rusty-colored tail

Hardy bird that nests on the barren tundra in mountainous regions of Alaska.

A: Year-round, but abundant in spring and fall

Ruddy Turnstone

Description: small bird with bold black and white pattern on wings, black "necklace"

Named for its feeding behavior, it uses its strong neck and bill to turn over stones in search of prey.

A: Year-round, but abundant in spring and fall