

War and Peace at Midway Atoll Refuge

By Joan Jewett

Seventy years ago, when Ed Fox and John Miniclier were 20-year-old Marines on Midway Atoll, their eyes were trained on the sky. But they weren't looking for birds.

They were watching for enemy aircraft and they saw them, plenty of them, during the Battle of Midway in June 1942, when Japanese bombers and U.S. planes clashed in a conflict that turned the course of World War II in the Pacific in America's favor.

This past June, back on Midway Atoll's Sand Island for the first time in seven decades to commemorate the anniversary of the historic fight, the men were awed by flights of a different nature: those of seabirds as they searched for food to bring to their young. Most remarkable to the men were the Laysan albatross that make up the world's largest nesting colony of their kind. Nowhere else on the planet will you find as many Laysan albatross chicks—340,000 this year—as on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge.

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Laysan albatross make up nearly one-third of the 3 million seabirds that breed on Midway Atoll's three islands. Another 18 seabird species also nest on the refuge, including red-tailed tropicbird, Bulwer's petrel and endangered short-tailed albatross, whose recent nesting success is the result of a recovery partnership between the Service and Japanese biologists.

In other words, Midway is a bird's—and a birder's—paradise. At times, the air is thick with birds and the cacophony of their calls.

While birds are now the focus of life at Midway Atoll Refuge, it wasn't always so. Fox and Miniclier recall the military had low tolerance for the birds, which were viewed more as a nuisance than a treasure. Consequently, there were far



In 1942, when retired Sgt. Ed Fox, left, and retired Col. John Miniclier fought in the Battle of Midway, birds were mostly a nuisance. Now, Laysan albatross and other avian species are a focus of life at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. (Joan Jewett/USFWS)

fewer birds when the two veterans were last there.

"I'm amazed by how they could reproduce so fast," said Fox, who lives in Springfield, MO. "Maybe it's a symbol of an era of peace."

Miniclier agreed. "I think what's happened here is pretty spectacular."

Fox and Miniclier returned to Midway, courtesy of the Pacific Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex, to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the historic battle. Fox, who fought at Iwo Jima after the Midway conflict, joined the Army after the war and became a cinematographer, retiring as a sergeant. He later was a public information officer for the U.S. Forest Service. Miniclier spent 35 years in the Marines, retiring as a colonel. He lives in Mount Dora, FL.

Even though there were fewer birds in 1942, the men remember one that is no longer around: the Laysan rail. Small, flightless birds that, Fox says, "ran so fast you couldn't even see their legs," the last Laysan rails were seen on Midway in 1944. The species is considered extinct.

The transition of Midway Atoll from a military base to national wildlife refuge started in 1988, when the Service took over wildlife management. In 1996, the Navy turned the place over completely to the agency. Since then, wildlife has reigned supreme. Corroding cannons serve as perches, and former military buildings provide shade. Laysan albatross chicks the size of geese lounge wherever they please—the middle of roads, in front of building doors—and won't move for anything or anyone. They know who rules. The ground is strewn with resting birds.

Surrounded by all this life, Fox choked back tears and said, "I never thought I'd get to come back." He praised the Service for transforming a place of conflict and death to a place of peace and so much life.

"I really can't think of a better use of the place," he said. "The refuge is a great monument to the people who passed here." 🦅

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