

Albatross Nest Census Volunteer Positions at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge

About the annual nest census:

The Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge & Battle of Midway National Memorial accepts volunteer applications from individuals to participate in the annual albatross nest census. The census occurs between mid-December and mid-January. The Refuge is located within the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, approximately 1350 miles northwest of Honolulu. Midway Atoll is the site of the world's largest albatross nesting colony and is home to numerous other globally important species such as the federally endangered Hawaiian monk seal and Laysan duck. The Refuge is also designated as the Battle of Midway National Memorial, honoring the sacrifice of those who fought in the Battle of Midway on June 4-6, 1942. The Refuge contains physical monuments and historical properties.

Background:

The work conducted by the nesting albatross census team (or "Bird Counters") on Midway Atoll provides vital information found in few places on earth to researchers, managers, conservation groups, and the global community interested in preserving and protecting oceanic seabirds and their nesting habitats. Since 1991, the annual census of Black-footed Albatrosses or Ka'upu

(*Phoebastria nigripes*) and Laysan Albatrosses or Mōlī (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) on Midway Atoll has provided accurate information regarding the numbers of nesting albatross pairs on the three islands at Midway Atoll. This long-term dataset has become increasingly valuable since nesting sites on other Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (Kamole, or Laysan Island, and Lalo, or French Frigate Shoals) have not been easily accessible in

recent years. Methods are essentially the same as they have

been since the census began but, as the habitat and the other species at Midway have changed through the years, techniques have been adapted to collect better quality data and above all else to avoid harming any wildlife. The motto of the National Wildlife Refuge System, "Wildlife First," extends to the spirit and execution of this census. Data collection never comes before safety to wildlife. Census crew leaders live and breathe this philosophy, and will give counters on the team instructions on how to conduct the census with this in mind.



Photo credit: Dan Clark USFWS

Duties:

Although it is an incredible and sometimes “life-altering” experience to be in the largest nesting albatross colony on earth at the time when the highest numbers of birds are present, the annual census is hard work. Be aware, the census is not a walk in the park! Long gone are the days when Midway was a manicured paradise. This is now a wildlife refuge, and most of the atoll’s land areas are managed as natural environments. The land in most areas is difficult to traverse. Doing “the count” requires good physical fitness, a strong work ethic, and self-discipline. Participants must also have the ability to work closely with others on a team and follow instructions from the team leaders. A mixture of crew leaders, some experienced counters, and some new to the albatross census will be selected to participate, helping to ensure an accurate count while giving the opportunity for qualified, new individuals to experience the “Midway magic.” Specific details about the counting methods are explained in subsequent correspondence for those selected to participate.

Volunteer counters are expected to work 8:00 am – 4:30 pm, six days a week, with the only other full days off during the census being Christmas and New Year’s Day. If the census is completed prior to the planned departure date, volunteers will be expected to work on other tasks assigned by FWS staff. Volunteers are also welcome to help conduct the Christmas Bird Count (counting all species other than albatrosses).

Requirements:

All volunteers must be:

- fully vaccinated against Covid-19
- physically fit with no limiting physical conditions or chronic illnesses;
- able to hike 6-10 miles per day over sandy, rocky, uneven substrate **in hot sun as well as cold/cloudy/rainy conditions** (often through dense vegetation) **while wearing “burrow shoes.”** Burrow shoes are typically large pieces of plywood strapped to one’s shoes, to spread the weight and reduce risk to the large number of Bonin Petrels that burrow in almost all areas of Midway. These are not suitable for anyone with knee or hip issues;
- able to confidently ride a bicycle several miles both day and night, sometimes in strong winds;
- able to lift 25 pounds and carry a day pack containing paint cans and supplies all day;
- willing to transit open water in a small craft (under the control of a certified operator) and climb a ladder from a boat onto a pier, or make a “wet entry” by wading across coral rubble;
- prepared to work closely with others in a positive, synergistic manner, follow directions closely, and be flexible as field and weather conditions dictate;
- punctual and report for work when scheduled.

Volunteers selected must possess a strong work ethic, be familiar with field work in all weather conditions, be positive self-starters, be willing to adhere to team leader directions and census protocols, and be able to effectively (and harmoniously) live and work closely with a small group of diverse people for the duration of the census.

The Refuge is a remote site, accessible only by contracted aircraft on a very limited basis. Because of the isolated nature of this work, health and safety are of utmost importance.

Emergency medical evacuation from the Refuge may take at least 24 hours. **Applicants are required to carry air medical evacuation insurance such as that offered by the Diver's Alert Network (www.diversalertnetwork.org) or Emergency Assistance Plus (www.emergencyassistanceplus.com).** Midway Atoll is a small community where volunteers work and live in close proximity to FWS employees and contractors. Census volunteer housing is barracks-style shared rooms with their own bathroom/shower. Sensitivity to working in close proximity to protected wildlife and adhering to protocols and directions from FWS staff and team leaders to protect those species is a must.

Census volunteers selected are required to commit to working the entire census duration and will not be able to arrive or depart Midway Atoll other than the dates selected by the Refuge.

Fees:

The Refuge partially subsidizes the roundtrip airfare between Honolulu and Midway at the beginning and end of the census, and three meals daily are also provided at a subsidized rate. Housing at Midway will be provided free of charge by the FWS. Additionally, the Friends of Midway Atoll often generously donate funding to support a portion of the cost for counters during the census. Census volunteers that are selected are responsible for their own travel to and from Honolulu.

How you will be selected:

Each year, the application period is open from January 1st through May 1st for the count starting in December. Applicants selected will usually be notified by July 15.

Applications will be accepted for one census at a time only. New applications are required for each year that an individual wishes to participate in the count, submitted during the application period of that corresponding year. **A current valid passport and all appropriate foreign visas for entry into the U.S. are required for volunteer travel to and from Midway.**

1. A small panel of census team leaders and FWS staff will convene to review applications and select those most qualified.
2. The panel will review the application materials to ensure completeness and that the applicant meets the requirements.
3. The panel may elect to contact applicant references or call for a brief interview.
4. The goal in selection is to provide an equal opportunity for qualified individuals to participate.
5. The panel will select well-qualified individuals who meet the requirements of the job, have demonstrated the ability to work effectively on the team, can live harmoniously on a remote atoll with few residents, and are able to cover their portion of the trip expenses.

Although the census is tough work and requires dedication and a team effort, the experience most counters share is truly a special "magical" time. Counters enjoy excellent meals, comfortable accommodations, excellent camaraderie, and the opportunity to spend time in a

truly remote Pacific atoll environment dedicated to wildlife, history, and culture with an amazing resident community. Participation is competitive and more applications are received every year than spaces available. However, qualified applicants are always encouraged to apply. Applicants who are selected will be sent a packet of additional information about the Refuge, duties, particulars about the census protocol, suggested items to bring, and required forms to complete.

HOW TO APPLY:

Send the following completed documents via email to the persons listed below:

1. A Cover letter describing why you are interested in participating in the Midway Atoll annual albatross census.
2. A brief résumé outlining relevant education, work experience, and how you meet the listed requirements of the position. (PLEASE INCLUDE ANY PREVIOUS FIELD EXPERIENCE.)
3. Three personal or professional references (with phone and e-mail contact info).

Send the completed documents to: FWS Supervisory Wildlife Biologist Beth Flint and Census Team Leaders at the following email addresses:

Beth_Flint@fws.gov
countleaders@gmail.com

If you have problems submitting your material electronically, please contact us at countleaders@gmail.com

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