

Personal Blog Post from CAST Crew IX Team Member, Mari West

Stranded on Johnston Atoll!

The opinions or views expressed by Mari West, a volunteer currently stationed on Johnston Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, are hers alone and do not represent the views of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we were preparing to leave Johnston. CAST X had arrived in Honolulu and the change-over was fast-approaching. The U.S. Air Force had sent the Kahana (transport vessel) out here to do some work on the island and shortly after that the Kahana was going to come right back to pick us up. We had about a month left. So, we were rolling through some of the more precious food items that we had previously been rationing, taking some of our last photos and videos of Johnston, lamenting over the fact that we wouldn't get to see any wedge-tailed shearwater (wedgie, for short) chicks, looking forward to seeing our family and friends (and pets) and returning to the land of fresh fruit and fast internet, and beginning to think about writing our final report. However, the day before the Kahana arrived with the Air Force crew, we received news from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Honolulu office that plans had changed. Unfortunately, fuel critical need at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, another remote atoll refuge managed by the FWS,. Unlike Johnston's complete dependence on solar power, the operations at Midway are mostly dependent on fuel and generators. They weren't going to last until their next scheduled fuel delivery, so the Kahana was re-chartered to deliver some instead of picking us up at the end of May. After that, the Kahana will be working with NASA and will not be available again until sometime in June. In short, we will very likely be on Johnston for an extra month.

This is not bad news. We do get to spend an extra month on probably the coolest place any of us have ever been, with some wonderful friends to keep us company, after all. And, now, we'll almost certainly get to see some adorable wedgie chicks! However, it was somewhat frustrating and inconvenient news for some of us. Suddenly, it was necessary for our mindset to completely change – the change-over went from being less than a month to two months away. Both Patrick and I had jobs waiting for us back on the mainland that would no longer work out, Alison's siblings had set plans to visit Hawaii upon our return, Rebecca and Alison both had some excellent job prospects starting in June, and, it didn't take us long to realize that we might actually run out of butter. Worst of all, Patrick needed to get home as soon as possible due to a family emergency. There was the slightest chance that he may be able to leave on the Kahana after the Air Force's work here was done, but last we heard the boat was completely full, so it was a long shot. So, Patrick was either going to leave Johnston in five short days or be out here for another two months, away from his family who needed him – not exactly what you call a win-win. Though Patrick loves being out here, his family is quite understandingly way more important. He began working with the Honolulu office to figure out a way to get him on the Kahana. Options included potentially switching places with anyone

willing on the boat, getting the Coast Guard to approve an extra person on board, stowing away on the boat, or creating or faking some sort of emergency (life, limb, or eyesight) that would end up getting him air-lifted off of Johnston. Because the latter two are illegal and dangerous, Patrick decided to stick with the former legal and safe options.

The week that followed, was a whirlwind of excitement and nerve-wracking anticipation. We had visitors on Johnston, and along with them came our first taste of fresh food and new faces in four and a half months. It probably comes as no surprise that the food was glorious. Ed, the Kahana's chef, was really generous and let us have goodies from his kitchen pretty much anytime we stopped by the boat. As a result, our trips there were quite frequent. Fresh, juicy oranges, large bowls of salad, and the remains of some sashimi made from fish that the Kahana caught on the way out here were all drooled over. Not to mention the seemingly endless supply of ice cream that Ed had hiding in his freezer. The folks that the Kahana brought were wonderful, too. Almost all of them were contractors hired by the Air Force through two separate companies, one an engineering firm and the other a construction company. Their main tasks were to fill a large and inexplicable sink hole that had begun to form in the Mixed Metal Debris Area (MMDA, a landfill-like area on the Western side of Johnston where a bunch of debris was piled after the majority of Johnston's old structures were demolished), collect groundwater samples from existing and newly drilled wells, and collect fish samples. Everyone was really friendly and respectful of both the wildlife and Johnston's natives (us). They worked really hard to prevent the disruption of nesting birds and to keep our favorite beach (South Beach), from which they were taking sand to fill in the sink hole, mostly intact, and in both they were very successful. It was really weird, but nice to see some friendly new faces milling about the island and we enjoyed getting to know them all.

But, at the same time, we were eagerly awaiting news from Honolulu about Patrick's situation (would he stay or would he go?). Finally, early Wednesday afternoon, about a day and a half before the Kahana's departure, we received word that the Coast Guard had approved an extra person aboard the Kahana, and Patrick would be able to make it home within the next week. It was bittersweet news, indeed. We were all happy that Patrick would be able to get home to his family, but we knew it wouldn't be easy to say goodbye to such an important member of our team. During the brief amount of time we had left together, we spent some quality time playing cards and went on one last night snorkel (with some of our new friends)! When we said goodbye to the Kahana, with Patrick among them, there were certainly a lot of big hugs and tears. Now, our Johnston family is left slightly broken, but only for about a month and half. We have already made sure to keep in close contact with Patrick so he can stay updated about all the exciting Johnston happenings. And, without a doubt, we'll make the most out of the short time that we have left here. We couldn't have chosen a better place to be stranded and we're all aware of how incredibly lucky we are.

I can't conclude this post without extending a huge shout out to the Kahana crew, Ed, their chef, all the contractors sent out here by the Air Force, and Joel, the Air Force biologist in charge of keeping the Johnston wildlife well-protected. Many thanks to all of you for the work you did while out here and the great level of respect that you showed to Johnston and all of its inhabitants. We truly appreciate it. Another huge shout out to all the folks in the FWS Honolulu office for working so hard to get Patrick home. I'm sure he has had a chance to thank you all in person, but I know how much he appreciates it and it showed us all how much you care about your volunteers! Finally, the biggest shout out of all to Patrick for being such a wonderful coworker and friend. You taught us all a lot about fish and bicycles, challenged us all to think creatively, and charmed us all with your thoughtfulness and generosity. Your presence will be sorely missed (it already is). We love you, you know.



Patrick, even on his last full day on Johnston, continues to charm us all.