

The Leeward Islands

Hidden Islands of the Hawaiian Chain

Text and photos by George H. Balazs



The Hawaiian chain of islands continues well beyond the island of Kauai, but very few of us will ever have the opportunity to visit this remote and unique segment of the fiftieth state. Known as the Leeward or Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, this hidden portion of the archipelago extends for some 1,100 nautical miles and consists of numerous islets and shoals that constitute eroded tops of ancient undersea volcanoes.



Maro Reef, a maze of dangerous shoals 625 miles northwest of Honolulu. INSET: Noddy tern perched on a rusting iron seawall.

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For the most part, these islands are uninhabited by man. Kure Atoll, situated at the very northwestern end of the Hawaiian chain, is the site of a small Coast Guard Loran station where about twenty men reside for a one-year tour of duty. A similar station that existed at French Frigate Shoals from 1944 until its deactivation in 1979 is currently inhabited by a few biologists of the Fish and Wildlife Service. The U.S. territory of Midway, the only site in the Hawaiian Islands that is not part of the State of Hawaii, has about 450 resident personnel under the jurisdiction of the Navy.

The sparse human population of the Leeward Islands contrasts with the rich abundance of wildlife that live and breed in the region. Numerous species of seabirds, the Hawaiian monk seal, the green sea turtle, and four kinds of land birds found nowhere else in the world depend on the area for their survival. The importance of these islands as breeding sites was recognized as early as 1909 when President Theodore Roosevelt established the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation. Today this internationally acclaimed sanctuary is known as the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge which includes Nihoa, Necker, French Frigate Shoals, Gardner Pinnacles, Maro Reef, Laysan, Lisianski, and Pearl and Hermes Reef. Along with certain adjacent waters, these island units of the refuge encompass about eight percent of the total area found within the one hundred fathom curve of the Leeward chain. **ALOHA**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The remains of the Japanese fishing vessel Kaiyo Maru No. 25 that ran aground on Laysan Island in 1970. Numerous shipwrecks have taken place in the Leeward Islands since their discovery in the late 1700's.

A masked booby at Necker Island keeps a watchful eye over her downy youngster taking a noontime nap on the ground.

Green Island, situated within the shallow lagoon of Kure Atoll is the site of a Coast Guard Loran station. The facility includes a 625-foot-high transmitting antenna and a 4,000-foot coral runway.



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CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Tern Island at French Frigate Shoals was enlarged from eleven acres to fifty-seven acres during World War II to serve as a refueling and emergency landing site for aircraft. INSET: A monk seal pup playfully approaches a docile green sea turtle that has crawled ashore to bask in the sun. Both of these native Hawaiian animals have experienced population declines and are now protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

As if contemplating the sunset, a Hawaiian monk seal rests its head on a log washed ashore on the island.

A breeding colony of noddies faces windward on a brisk tradewind day.

La Perouse Pinnacle, a 135-foot-high volcanic remnant at French Frigate Shoals is adorned with the droppings of thousands of nesting seabirds.

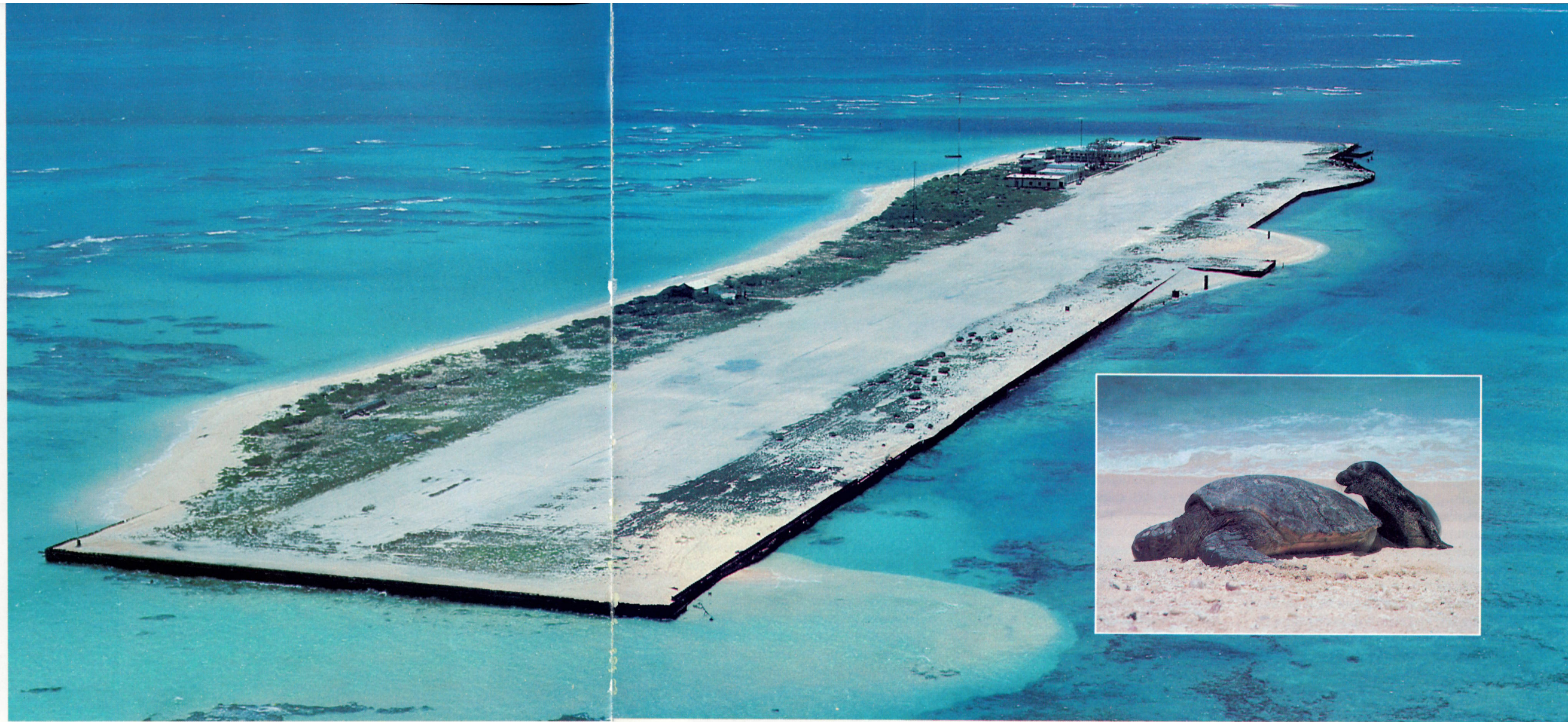
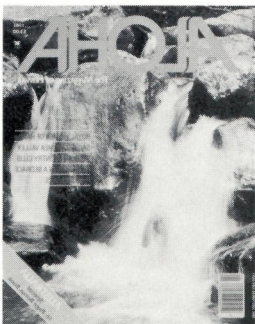


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COVER: An Island youth enjoys a brisk splashing in a “secret” hidden pool on the Island of Kauai.
Photo by Don King/David Cornwell Production.



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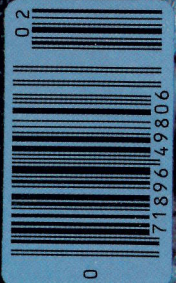
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