

# Kure Atoll—Dark Side of the Sun

*Mai ka pi'ina a ka lā i Ha'eha'e a i ka lā welo i Kānemiloha'i.*

"From where the sun rises at Ha'eha'e (Kumukahi, Hawai'i Island) to its setting at Kānemiloha'i (Kure Atoll)."

L. L. Kimura, in Juvik and Juvik, *Atlas of Hawai'i*, 3rd ed.

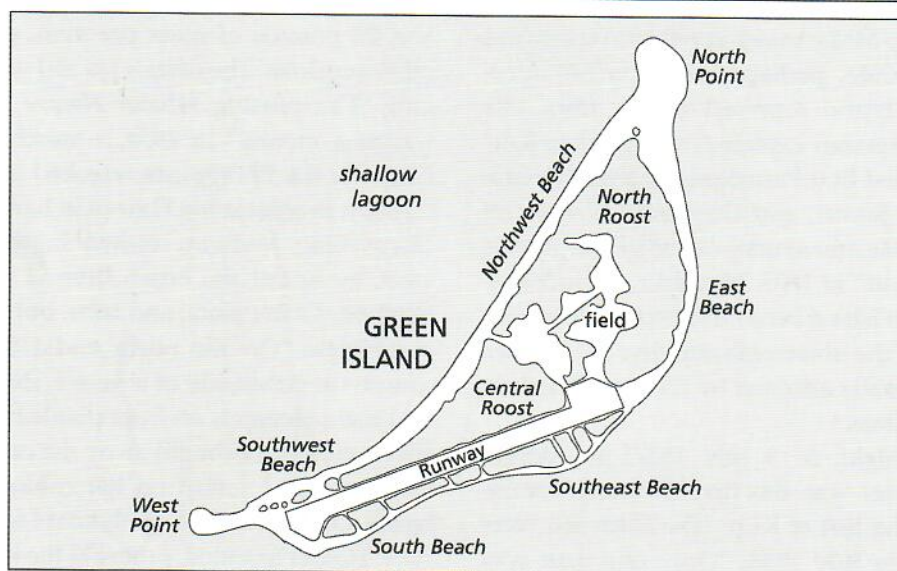
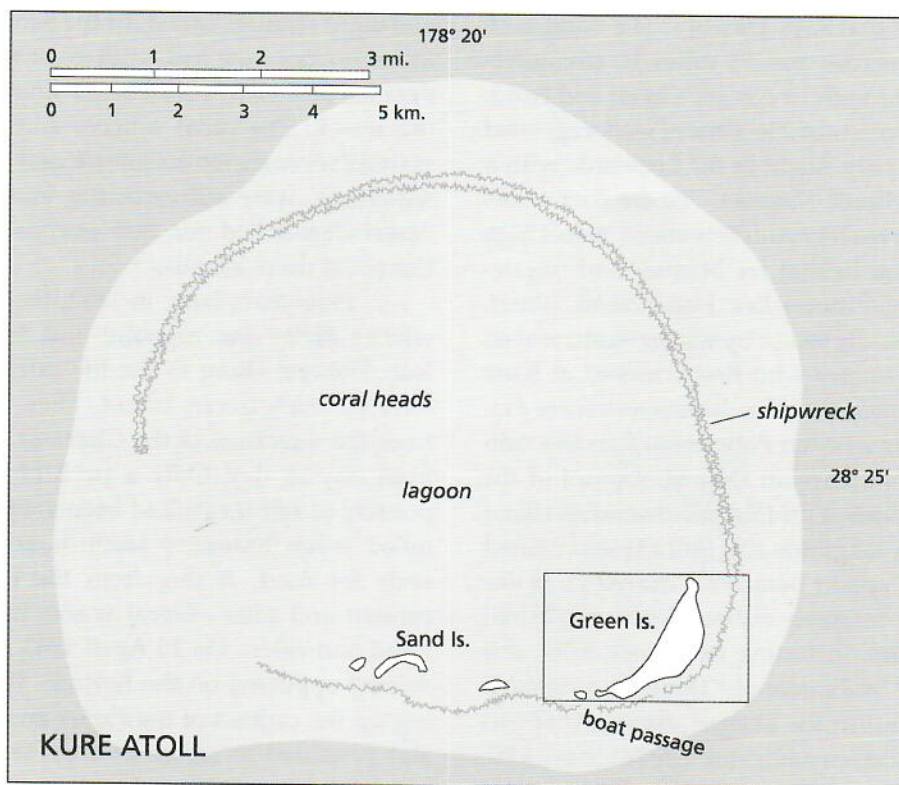
"Now hear this! All personnel will be restricted to the barracks today." The voice of the commanding officer of the Kure Coast Guard Station boomed over the loudspeaker. He went on to explain that "space debris" was anticipated to enter the earth's atmosphere over Kure. It was 1978 and the sky was falling on the "Dark Side of the Sun" (with apologies to the rock music group Pink Floyd—their album of the same name was hot at that time and that also was the theme on the crew's t-shirts: a statement of isolation at one of the most remote loran stations in the



*West view from atop Mt. Kure, the 625-foot loran antenna tower on Green Island, Kure Atoll, 1979. Coast Guard buildings and tower have since been demolished and the island is now abandoned.*

world). It did not seem so safe to be confined indoors when space debris hit because outside you might at least see "incoming"! But orders were orders. To my knowledge, nothing fell to earth that day, but who knows? NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) knows! Somehow, it seemed appropriate that these wide open spaces at the end of Hawai'i are graveyards for wooden ships, steel ships, and rocket ships.

Standing atop Mt. Kure, the 625-foot-tall loran tower, I thought I could make out Midway, 56 miles to the southeast. Below me, the circular atoll lay like a final period



Map of Kure Atoll.



to the sentence that says Hawai'i. The coral reef, about 6 miles across and 15 miles in circumference, is crowned with two islets: Green and Sand. Green Island consists of 236 acres of well-vegetated dunes. It is the only island in the Leewards with a dense forest of Beach *Naupaka*. The crooked stems and rubbery leaves form thickets about 20 feet high that are excellent habitat for boobies and frigatebirds. To the southwest lies 1-acre Sand Island, which is periodically swept by winter storm waves.

No one knows who first wrecked at Kure Atoll. It is possible that the discoverers were Hawaiian voyagers who left Polynesian Rats as a calling card. In 1799, Captain Don M. Zipiani of the Spanish vessel *Senhore del Pilar* discovered an island at about Kure's longitude and latitude and named it Patrocinio. Captain Benjamin Morrell Jr. of the schooner *Tartar* definitely claimed Kure in 1825 and found sea turtles, including two hawksbills, and "sea elephants" in abundance.<sup>1</sup> There are no records available to confirm the alleged discovery of this island by the Russian navigator Captain Kure.<sup>2</sup> We do know that Captain Stanikowitch in 1827 aboard the Russian ship *Moller* may have named the island after Captain Kure, perhaps based on his information of an island reported earlier from this vicinity.<sup>3</sup> The Russian captain/cartographer Krusenstern assumed that Patrocinio, Morrell, Ocean, Massachusetts, Staver, and Cure Islands were all one and the same and synonymized all the names into "Cure Island" in 1835. However, Motu Pāpapa and Ocean Island became the common names near the end of the nineteenth century, until "Kure Atoll" was formally adopted by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.

At midnight on 9 July 1837, the British whaler *Gledstanes* was the first of many vessels known to hit the reef at Kure. The *Hawaiian Spectator* reported in July 1838: "Only one man was lost; he jumped overboard, intoxicated. Captain John R. Brown remained on the island till the 15th of December, when himself, with his chief mate

and eight seaman, sailed for the Sandwich Islands, in a schooner they had, with great toil, and perseverance and skill, constructed from fragments of the wreck. The other officers and men who remained several months longer, and endured great sufferings, were subsequently brought off by a vessel dispatched for that purpose by H.B.M.'s Consul at these Islands."<sup>4</sup>

Five years later, in 1842, the New Bedford whaler *Parker* ran aground and four men were lost. The rest clung to the life raft, which took 8 days to reach Green Island. They built a shelter from the wreckage of the *Gledstanes* and survived from day to day. Only a peck of beans and 20 pounds of salt meats had been saved, so the men killed seven thousand seabirds and sixty monk seals for food. A dog from the *Gledstanes* was present and after several weeks it too was captured and eaten. On 16 April 1843, the ship *James Stewart* appeared on the horizon. It landed, picking up the captain of the *Parker* and a chosen few and promised to return as soon as possible. The rest were left provisioned with 20 pounds of bread and 20 pounds of meat per man, plus cloth and other sundries. The castaways did not have to wait long. The passing whaler *Nassau* rescued them within a month.<sup>5</sup> In 1854, a merchant ship from China or the Philippines wrecked on Kure. When Captain Brooks of the Hawaiian bark *Gambia*, after discovering Midway, visited in the summer of 1859, he found the beach littered with pieces of bamboo, China mats, and tubs, but no sign of the castaways. "On the north end I found washed ashore the broadside of a vessel, that had the fore and main channels on from plankshear to below 6 sheets copper. I brought away the copper and door locks, which I found on her cabin doors on the beach. On the stern of a jollyboat I found the name Isaac Holder branded, probably the builder's name. Good water may be obtained on this island. The second island in size is about two miles long and a half mile wide, with little vegetation, few fowls





North Point, Green Island, Kure Atoll.

and plenty of turtles. The third is a mere sand spit."<sup>6</sup> (The second island mentioned has since disappeared.)

The USS *Lackawanna* surveyed the treacherous reef in 1867 and produced an accurate chart of Ocean Island that should have eliminated shipwrecks at Kure. However, the next wreck was perhaps the most dramatic in the recorded history of Hawai'i. After the frustrating 1870 season of channel dredging at Midway, the USS *Saginaw*, a wooden-hulled sidewheel gunboat, under the command of Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Sicard, headed to Ocean Island to look for marooned sailors. The wind was fair and the engines were running slowly. They expected to near the

island at 4 A.M., but at 2:30 A.M. on 29 October, Sicard sensed danger and ordered the engines to be stopped. At 3:30 A.M. the lookout reported breakers ahead and the order to reverse the engines was given. They revved for 10 minutes until a steam connection broke. The *Saginaw* lost control and the currents drove it onto the reef. She careened to port and the smokestack fell over the side. "It was in truth, a remarkable shipwreck. The night had been clear straight, with a moderate breeze. The ship was heading direct for an island whose position and distance—and that a short one—were known, approximately if not precisely. She was making not over two and a half to three knots, yet she ran directly, without any particular





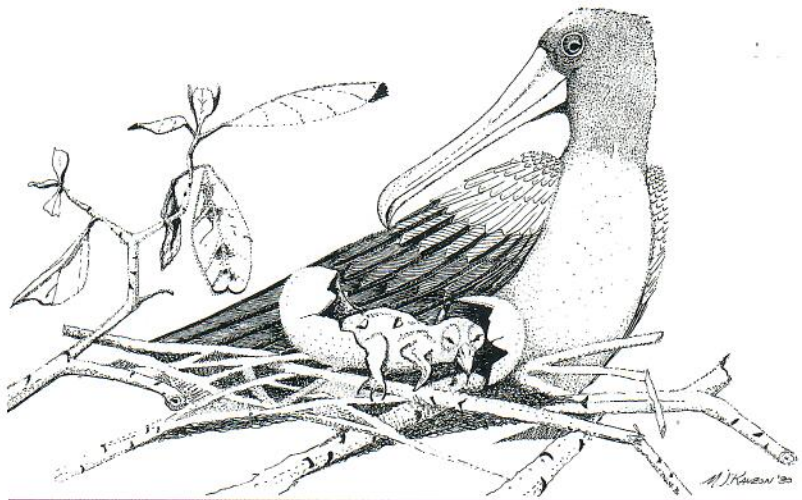
Male frigatebird displaying inflated gular pouch on nau-paka, Green Island, Kure Atoll.

lack of vigilance, on a reef which was above water, and on which the breakers were dashing furiously.”<sup>7</sup>

At daybreak, the ninety-three members of the crew, plus a Midway dredging party traveling on board, abandoned ship and made it to shore. Little could be salvaged except some lumber to build a house and a boiler that was used to distill fresh water from seawater. Much of the food was spoiled by salt water. To survive, the crew ate albatrosses, but feared that a blow from a wing could break a man’s leg. Seals were easily dispatched by a blow to their brittle skulls. “I commenced by sending out parties to kill seal . . . but after about a month I found that, owing to the rapid diminuation of the seal, I was obliged to cut the allowance down, and only killed one seal . . . per day for the whole crew.”<sup>8</sup> The liver and steaks of the pups were especially tasty. The men of the *Saginaw* thought

that they might have to eat rats if the seals and seabirds departed (which was possibly the same thinking as the original discoverers, who may have introduced Polynesian Rats). The men survived on half rations as they refitted the captain’s gig, a light boat with two pairs of oars.

On 18 November 1870, four volunteers—Peter Francis, quartermaster; James Muir; John Andrews; and William Halford, coxswain—under the command of executive officer Lt. J. C. Talbot, set sail for Honolulu. During their 30-day odyssey, they endured three gales that claimed their oars and spoiled their provisions. Exhausted by continual exertion, exposure, and lack of nourishment, they finally reached Kaua’i. What a sight that must have been! But cruel fate was toying with them, because the wind shifted during a heavy rain squall and blew them away from shore. They fought to regain the proper tack into Hanalei Bay only to flounder in the breakers. The gig capsized and Lt. Talbot and two others were washed overboard and drowned. William Halford clung to the boat while James Muir sat in a stupor. Halford “made him fast to the deck” and then carried a tin box containing



Great Frigatebird female tends a newly hatched chick.





A male Brown Booby attends a nest in the interior of Green Island, Kure Atoll.

papers and dispatches to shore. He returned to get the ship's chronometer and returned once again for Muir. At the end of his strength, Halford dragged Muir to shore, after wading through the surf five times. For "showing most heroic fortitude," Halford received the Medal of Honor.<sup>9</sup> Muir died on shore, but Halford got the word out that the rest of the crew was in trouble.

The schooner *Kona Packet* was dispatched, but the schooner's slow speed in winter weather prompted the government to send the steamer *Kilauea* on 26 December to retrieve the marooned crew. On 3 January 1871 at Kure, the *Saginaw's* carpenter was at work on another boat to carry the crew to Midway when he looked up from his task and saw the smokestack of the *Kilauea*. All hands were rescued and arrived safely in Honolulu on 14 January 1871. In spite of obvious mistakes, Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Sicard was cleared of negligence by a board of inquiry.<sup>10</sup>

On 15 July 1886, the *Dunnotter Castle*, carrying coal from Sydney, Australia, to San Francisco, struck the Kure reef at midnight. The crew were able to save the water casks. Although the contents were tainted with seawater, it was better than the water they found on the island. They fitted the lifeboat, and seven men set sail for the main Hawaiian

Islands. During the first 3 weeks at sea, they had but one biscuit and a pint of water per day. For the last 2 weeks, they survived on half that ration! After 52 days, they reached Kaua'i. When word of their arrival reached Honolulu, the steamer *Waialeale* was dispatched to rescue the marooned crew. The ship reached Kure on 20 September, but the island was deserted. After being stranded for 33 days, the crew of twenty-two had been taken off the island by the ship *Birnam Wood* of New Brunswick, Canada, which was heading from Hong Kong to Valparaiso, Chile.<sup>11</sup>

The *Waialeale* did not make the journey needlessly because the ship carried an emissary of King David Kalākaua. King Kalākaua had sent Colonel James Boyd in command of the *Waialeale* to annex the island for the Hawaiian Kingdom. Boyd displayed his commission stating: "I, Colonel James Harbottle Boyd by the power in me vested by His Hawaiian Majesty King Kalakaua's Commission as His Special Commissioner do in His Royal Name take formal possession of Ocean Island or Moku Papapa as a part and portion of His Royal Domain."<sup>12</sup> Boyd saw to it that a house provisioned with essentials, including two 500-gallon water tanks, was erected so that castaways would be able to survive until rescued. Shade tree seeds were also scattered about and three dogs were removed from the island. Within a year, the house blew down and the provisions were rumored to have been pilfered by Japanese feather hunters.<sup>13</sup>

King Kalākaua was inspired by the idea of a confederacy of Polynesian states ruled by the "enlightened, humane and hospitable spirit" of the Hawaiian Government. He helped frame a resolution prohibiting governments from annexing any additional islands in the Pacific. His proposal was largely ignored, and when his emissary approached the U.S. government with the concept that Midway was part of ancestral Hawai'i and should be surrendered, he was summarily dis-



missed.<sup>14</sup> *The Hawaiian Gazette* (1886) lampooned the annexation of Kure: "As we approached the island, in the ships boat, a venerable turtle who was watching us from a sand bank, arose up on his aft flippers and changing a plug of ship tobacco from his left to his right cheek, and scraping the sand out of his eyes, distinctly remarked *honu*. He then executed a double somersault, into the sea, followed by a double-barreled discharge of plover shot from Dr. Chaddock's fowling piece. . . ."<sup>15</sup>

Kure was acquired as part of the Territory of Hawaii on 7 July 1898 and joined the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation in 1909. On 20 February 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt placed Kure under Naval jurisdiction by Executive Order 7299. There was no recorded activity at Kure during World War II, but had the Battle of Midway gone as the Japanese hoped, a contingent of 550 men was to have been detailed to occupy Kure Atoll to set up a seaplane and minisubmarine base.<sup>16</sup>

After World War II, President Harry Truman inadvertently returned Kure to the Territory of Hawaii instead of to the U.S. Department of the Interior. Kure Atoll was made a state wildlife refuge under jurisdiction of the Hawai'i Fish and Game Department, part of the City and County of Honolulu, 1,367 miles from O'ahu. In 1961, the State of Hawai'i gave permission to the U.S. Coast Guard to construct a loran station and permanently occupy Green Island. A 4,000-foot runway and a 625-foot-tall loran tower were constructed.

In 1976, while the island was manned by the Coast Guard, the Japanese ship *Houei Maru* No. 5 ran aground during a February storm. None of the seventeen fishermen aboard was ever found. The rusty hulk remains on the reef like a tombstone to their memory. Like the *Ocean Pearl*, which wrecked around 1888, and the Japanese steamer *Stato Maru*, which went aground in 1938, many ships have hit this inconspicuous island. There were many causes; bad luck, drunkards at the helm, the

island's dubious positions on charts, and sudden violent weather. Kure's treacherous winter weather is due to its location along the southern edge of the Aleutian low-pressure system. The northeast trade winds usually blow 80 percent of the time, especially in the spring and summer. Their strength averages 10 to 15 miles per hour, but in the winter strong west winds often reach gale force.

Temperatures in this subtropical region are relatively mild, ranging from 45 to 90° F, because the surrounding ocean moderates temperature extremes and the near-constant winds have a cooling effect. It can feel like it is going to snow when a damp north wind roars in December. The maritime weather patterns of the North Pacific generally produce rain-bearing storms from December to March. Throughout the Leewards, the low coral islands receive no more rain than the surrounding ocean, usually 30 to 50 inches per year, but the higher basalt islands catch more. Thunder and lightning storms occur periodically over Kure and can create quite a sound and light show. As the sun sets, huge shadows from purple gray cumulus clouds darken the sea. The sky behind becomes salmon and turquoise; the sun burnishes the water. Curtains of rain look as if they are being pulled



In 1976, while the island was manned by the Coast Guard, the Japanese ship *Houei Maru* No. 5 hit the reef; no survivors were ever found.





Changing of the guard at Kure, 1978. The new Coast Guard lieutenant, arriving for his year of command, is met by the outgoing lieutenant on the Dark Side of the Sun.

(3,018 feet down), Suiko (3,540 feet down), and Tenchi Seamount (6,360 feet down) are major seamounts in the Emperor chain that stud the ocean floor (18,000 feet deep) to the western end of the Aleutian Archipelago in Alaska. Along the way, the submarine peaks provide habitat for deep-sea fish. The Pelagic Armorhead, Pelagic Rockfish, and Alfonsino stocks all have drawn foreign fisheries to the area.<sup>18</sup> They, in turn, attract the U.S. Coast Guard, which patrols the region to prevent foreign fishing vessels from entering the 200-mile economic exclusion zone.

from the sea into the sky. A blast of thunder can rumble around the atoll for a full 3 minutes. On moonlit nights, rain squalls create lunar rainbows: double arcs of white light like ghost rainbows on gleaming beaches at midnight where ghost crabs prance.

At 28° 25' N, Kure Atoll is farther from the equator than any other coral reef in the world. Kure's annual coral growth (0.011 inches per year) is just sufficient to offset the rate of annual subsidence (0.0016 inches per year).<sup>17</sup> Beyond Kure, the waters are too cool for coral to grow. One by one, former Northwestern Hawaiian Islands have sunk below the cold North Pacific Ocean. These drowned volcanoes with their ancient coral crowns became the Emperor Seamount chain. Located 162 and 198 miles, respectively, from Kure, Southeast and Northwest Hancock Seamounts are around 780 feet below the surface. The Mellish (60 feet down) and Milwaukee seamounts (1,000 feet down) form the elbow of the submarine mountain chain. Kinmei (180 feet down), Jingu (2,580 feet down), Nintoku

## References

1. Woodward (1972).
2. E. H. Bryan Jr. (1954).
3. Apple (1973).
4. *Hawaiian Spectator* (1838:336).
5. Woodward (1972).
6. Brooks (1860) in Woodward (1972:5).
7. *The Friend* (1871:12).
8. Woodward (1972:303–304).
9. Cressman et al. (1990:3).
10. Cressman et al. (1990).
11. Woodward (1972).
12. Department of the Interior letter, 1886–1887, book 28, Hawai'i State Archives, p. 298.
13. Woodward (1972).
14. Daws (1968).
15. *Hawaiian Gazette* (1886:4).
16. Lord (1967).
17. Grigg and Dollar (1980).
18. Gooding (1980).



# *Isles of Refuge*

Wildlife and History of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

Mark J. Rauzon

A Latitude 20 Book

University of Hawai'i Press

Honolulu