

Hawaii: November 5-9 2022
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Several months ago, my boyfriend's family and I spent a few days in Hawaii. Amongst admiring the beauty and tropicality of the island, my main goal was to try and see a species of mammal that my father hasn't seen, as I knew it was doubtful that he would make it out to Hawaii himself any time soon. I can't picture him in a Hawaiian shirt sipping on a piña colada if you know what I mean.

We stayed at one of the big resorts half an hour away from Honolulu on the island of Oahu, which was right on the coast and had great access to natural pools and the beach. As we went down to explore the resort, I saw several creatures running around in and out of bushes, only to realise they were **Indian mongoose**. Mongoose in Hawaii? They were like the rats of New York; always stealing food and getting in the way. I later researched them and discovered that they were an introduced species on the island. Another pest we came across were **wild pigs**, a delicacy on the island, which explains why the pork was so good.

The highlight of the trip for us was snorkelling with sharks, as well as seeing the Hawaiian Monk Seal, twice! A great place to see **Hawaiian monk seals** on the island is at Ka'ena Point State Park, around an hour and a half drive from Honolulu. We got up early to start the hike to the point, but because of car problems in the parking garage, we ended up arriving much later than intended and started our hike at the hottest time of day. The carpark is by the beach right by the entrance to the hike, and hike itself is 2.7 miles one way. Not only is this state park known for monk seals, it is also a big **albatross** breeding ground, but we went during the wrong season and only saw a few hatchlings.

The hike itself was quite easy, along flat yet rocky ground surrounded by a large hill on one side and the ocean on the other. At the beginning of our hike, we spotted a pod of **spinner dolphins** that ended up swimming parallel to us for several minutes along the path as we watched them jump out of the water from a distance. While this is an easy hike, and should only take a short while to get there, doing it in the heat of the day was exhausting. After around an hour into the hike, I was checking the rocky cliffs down below us looking for any signs of life, when I spotted a large grey blob on a rock. I pulled out the binoculars to get a closer look and realised it was a **monk seal**! We ended up watching it sleep for about 10 minutes (it did not move an inch), until we decided to keep going. There is a lighthouse signalling the end of the hike, and the area is surrounded by fencing and signposts about the albatross. There is a gate you have to go through that seems that it is locked, however you just push yourself through. We were expecting to see several more seals at the point, as my boyfriend Teddy and his family had done this hike before and seen a whole family of them at the point. However, we only saw a few **albatross chicks** and no **monk seals**. We instead went tide-pool exploring by the cliffs and saw many cool fish, but no more mammals, although it would be a great place for whale watching.

We decided to turn back, and on the way we stopped to see the **monk seal** again. It had moved from its original sleeping position to a new one and was now facing us, showing its cute little face and whiskers. We saw several more **spinner dolphins** on the way back, as they come very close to the beaches and are easily visible from the road. Although we saw

no other new mammals, on our last day before heading to the airport, we booked a catamaran to go snorkelling, which was docked about a 10 minute walk from our resort. We saw many turtles and fish, and we even came face to face with a large pod of **spinners** while underwater, which were about 15 feet away from us. After a great lunch and watching turtles swim under the boat, one of our captains shouted “Monk seal!” We all turned around and saw a little head poking out from the water, and then a few seconds later the seal dove under and its flippers disappeared. We were told that it is very hard to see **monk seals** from a boat around Hawaii because of entanglement in fishing nets, shark predation, and loss of pupping beaches because of rising sea levels, and our guides had only seen one on snorkelling trip a couple of times. Although it was a wonderful trip, it was even more wonderful coming home and telling my dad about the two new mammal species I saw that he hasn’t. Ha!



Hawaiian monk seal