

## **Hawaii Mammal Watching/ Bio Blitz**

I just completed a recent trip to Hawaii this past month. I completed several days of bio blitzing both before and after the birding tour, during which I covered three of the main islands: Oahu, Kauai and Big Island (Hawaii). I was on Oahu for 5 days, Kauai for 4 days and Big island for 9 days. The majority of my non-tour time was spent focused on non-avian taxa. I prioritized mammals, fish and invertebrates. Since I don't count non-native species as lifers there was nothing to look for on the herp front. The exception being sea turtles, but the only species I haven't seen yet is not found in Hawaii.



**Short-finned Pilot Whale**

In total I got **202 lifers**, counting only **native** species across all animal taxa. I had **102 new invertebrates**, **5 new mammals**, **20 new native birds**, **0 new herps**, and **75 new fish species**. For all-taxa listers, the best way to see Hawaii's native diversity is either scuba diving or snorkeling. Hawaii is considered by many conservationists as the "extinction capital of the world"; but it is important to know that the marine ecosystems are still healthy, endemic-rich, and hold dense populations of many different fish, crustaceans, echinoderms, and mollusks. Native mammals were challenging to come by, but each find was exceptional and usually accompanied by fantastic looks of each new species. I saw several **Small Indian Mongoose** on Hawaii (Big Island) but I also saw two along roads in Kauai. Most noteworthy encounters were at Ho'okena Beach Park and Honokohau Beach.

This report will only cover my non-tour time in Hawaii. So only O'ahu and Big Island will be discussed here. On the tour itself Kauai only yielded one **Hawaiian Monk Seal** at Kilauea Lighthouse. I didn't visit Kauai on non-tour time, so I can't speak to the mammal activity there. I will organize my report by the islands rather than days.



**Galapagos Shark**

## O'ahu:

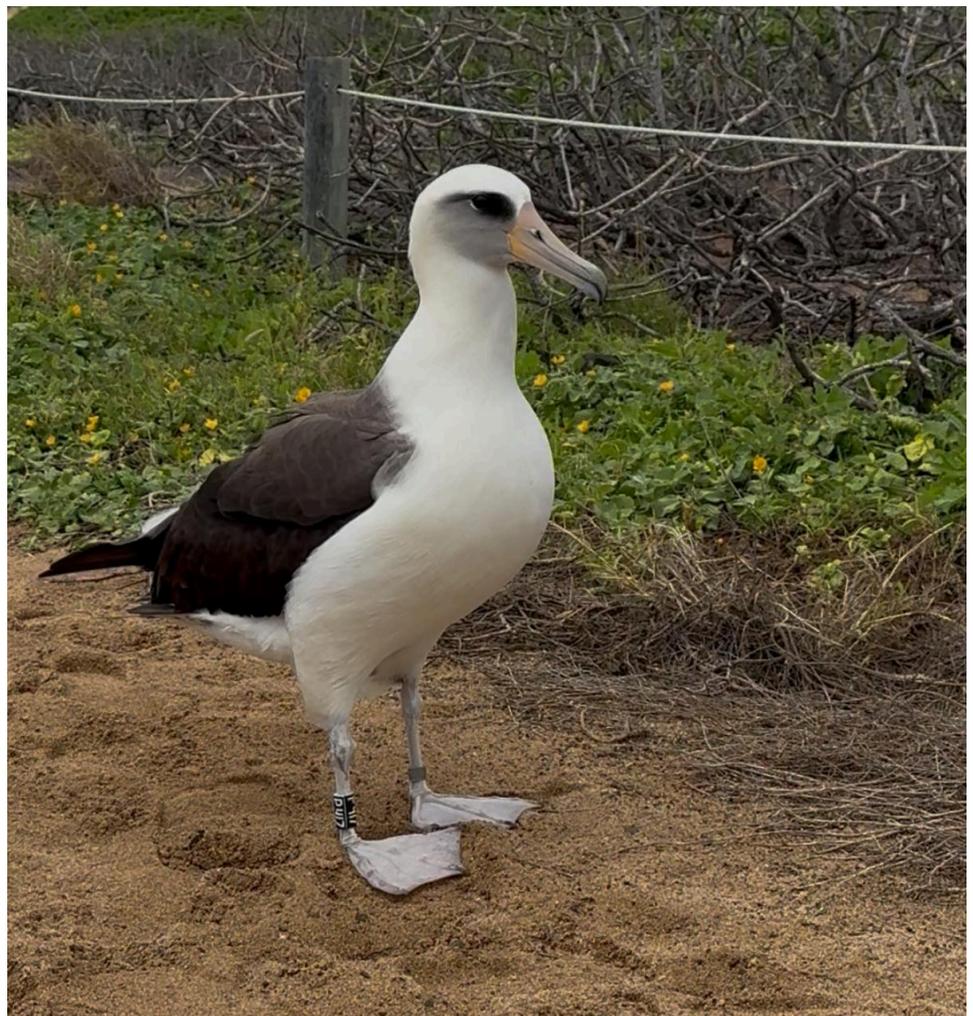
I arrived in Oahu five days before my tour started and there were several places and activities I wanted to try to see as much native biota. On my first day I went to Aiea Loop where I managed to see both of O'ahu native forest birds; the **Oahu Elepaio** and the **Oahu Amakihi**. It was such a thrill to see these birds and one I'd dreamt of for years. Afterwards I made a stop at the university in Honolulu to visit some nesting **Blue-billed White Terns**. Since I'd arrived earlier that day I decided to rest up and visit Ka'ena Point State Park early the next morning for **Hawaiian Monk Seals**. I set my GPS on Google Maps to "Ka'ena Point Trailhead (West Side)".

(Coordinates: 21.5563128, -158.2485982). Along the walk I went down to the rocky shoreline to inspect tide pools.

Some marine invertebrate highlights included both **Black-foot and Yellow-foot Opihi**; an endemic group of marine limpets.

Other finds included **Humpback Cowry, Hawaiian Convictfish, Hawaiian Flagfish, Savigny's Longspine Sea Urchin, and Shingle Urchin.**

I had my first **Hawaiian Monk Seal** of the day at **21.574092,**



**-158.28011.** Just walk slowly and sand rocks on the walk in, try and go during a receding tide. If you decide to look at the tide pools take your time climbing down and be careful about going close to the crashing waves. Always inspect the area first to make sure your intended tide pooling area is sea turtle and monk seal free. Please avoid approaching both seals and sea turtles. **The Hawaiian Monk Seal is critically endangered and only 1400 remain.** It's also one of two endemic mammals to Hawaii; the other is the **Hawaiian Hoary Bat**. Ka'ena Point is the place to see this seal. After the one I mentioned earlier I saw an additional two the point itself. Please note that the hike is 2.5 miles each way. The walk is worth it, especially if you are a birder. At the end of the point there is a rodent proof fence that protects a **Laysan Albatross** colony. If you come at the right time of year they're also nesting **Wedge-tailed Shearwaters** here. There were no seals when I initially arrived by 12:30pm but I spent some time with the albatross. I re-checked about an hour later and found two **Hawaiian Monk Seals** on opposite beaches at the tip of Ka'ena Point.



The following day I went out with Wild Side Hawaii for some cetaceans. It was quite windy so we couldn't get very far off shore, but we found some **Common Bottlenose** (*photo on right*). I had never swam with **Common Bottlenose** before but I got in as they passed the boat. Even though I'd seen this species before it was great to see in the beautiful blue Hawaiian waters. We ended the morning tour with some snorkeling which yielded some lifers. My highlights were **Day Octopus** (*Octopus cyanea*) and hundreds of **Red Pencil Urchins**.

The next day I did both a shark dive and a second whale watch in the afternoon. The cageless shark dive was quite cool. No chumming is allowed in Hawaiian waters so we visited a site where fishermen dump fish waste. Luckily there weren't any fish bits in the water when we entered, but the sharks are attracted to the arrival of the boat's motor. I was hoping to get my lifer **Tiger Shark** but the only species we had was

**Galapagos Shark**. I had seen one only once before for a brief moment in Galapagos so I was thrilled to get better and more prolonged looks. I dove with Go Adventure Hawaii in Haleiwa. I've gone on about 9 shark dives now and I have to say these guys may be the best I've had in terms of



safety protocol. These guys are really knowledgeable and ensured everyone was safe. After the dive I drove back down to Waianae for a second tour.

On the second trip we didn't see my target **Rough-toothed Dolphin**, but we did see my lifer **Spinner Dolphins (see photo)**! This was mammal lifer #498! On the way back we had three Humpback Whales performing courtship jumps and pec fin smacks. We had several **Common Bottlenose Dolphins** join as well but since **Humpbacks** have special regulations we can't swim when they are in the area.

Even though we could have had better luck in terms of cetacean diversity I would recommend **Wild Side Hawaii** as the "go-to" whale watching company for serious mammal watchers. They are very knowledgeable of the area's diversity and can try different areas for different target species. My tour began the following day.



## Hawai'i/Big Island:

After my tour ended in the morning I drove from Hilo to Kona in my new rental car. Along the way I made a stop at **Waiākea Forest Reserve** for some birding and Hawaiian Happy-face Spider searching. Along the walk I had **several l'iwi (see next page), a few Hawai'i Elepaio, a dozen Apapane (see below), and a single Omao**. I failed to find the spider but I had several sites I planned to visit for that spider. I completed my drive to Kona and attended a two-tank dive for **Reef Manta Rays**. The first dive was done one and a half hours before the Manta night dive when it was still light out. The dive itself was 45 minutes with a max depth of 80 feet. We dove at Garden Eel Cove, where I saw hundreds of the endemic **Hawaiian Garden Eel**. Other scuba highlights were **Gold Lace**

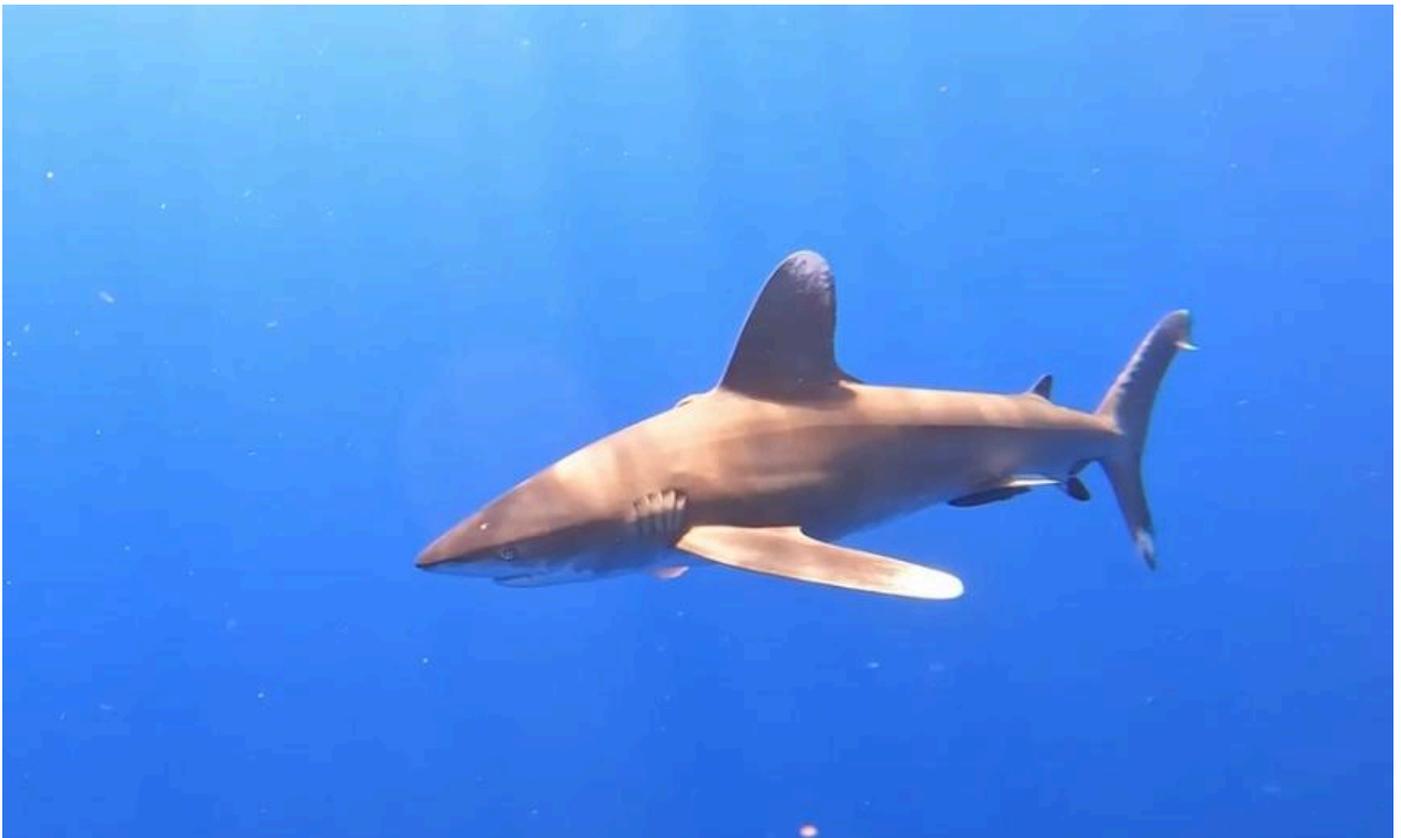


**Nudibranch, Rough-spinned Urchin, Undulated Moray Eel, Pacific Peacock Flounder, Forceps Butterflyfish, Blue-spotted Coronetfish, White-patch Razorfish, Common Remura and Freckled Hawkfish.** The second dive was focused on seeing my lifer **Reef Manta Ray**. I've seen **Oceanic Manta Ray** in the past, but this differently patterned inshore

The following morning I headed out on a "Long Range Pelagic Safari" with **Deep Water**, formerly known as See Through Sea. The company is under new ownership but they are still the top company in Kona for mammal watchers. Recently they had a lot of success with Sperm Whales but unfortunately by the time I joined they hadn't seen any for five days. In order to optimize my time in Kona I signed up for two 7-8 hour days. My first outing was slow at first but we had plenty of cool birds like **Masked Booby, White-tailed Tropicbird, and Wedge-tailed Shearwater**. The first mammals of the day were Pantropical Spotted Dolphins, mammal lifer #499!



We tried for **Rough-toothed Dolphin and Sperm Whale** but found neither the first day. With the last few hours left in the day we returned closer to shore to track down a local pod of **Short-finned Pilot Whales**. As a shark lover I was equally excited to try and see the infamous shark that usually hangs out with pilot whales, the **Oceanic White-tip Shark**. This beast can be a proper “man-eater”, so being in the water with them requires your full attention. We positioned ourselves further ahead of the pod and got in. I’ve seen **Short-finned Pilot Whales** in the past, but being in the water as 9 pass you is quite the experience. I saw a large bull with several females and calves pass by, it was pretty incredible to hear them communicating to each other. Pretty soon the distinct silhouettes of three **Oceanic White-tips (see below)** emerged from the blueness of the water. These sharks are quite spicy, and they usually come in close to investigate people as potential meals. Luckily we are quite big and the divers stayed in a nice big group to ensure safety in numbers. The sharks never tried anything too heart stopping but they certainly were looking for the opportunity. On our way back we saw a brief breach. I missed it but the spotter felt it was most likely a **Baird’s Beaked Whale**. Sadly it never resurfaced in the area.



That night I went to the 1:30am low tide at Honokohau Beach. I found the endemic **Hawaiian Red Shrimp** (*left photo*) in some nearby lava tubes. Along the shore line in the rocky sections I found an extraordinary diversity of marine life. My two biggest highlights were two species of moray eels; **Long-fanged/Viper Moray** and **Tiger Snakemoray**. I found an endemic wharf louse (*Ligia dante*), **Pretty Liomera** (*right photo*), **Bottleneck Sea Cucumber**, **Banded Coral Shrimp**, **Bloody Pebble Crab**, **Teated Sea Cucumber**, **Polished Nerite** and an incredibly rare gastropod, *Umbraculum sinicum*.



I spent some more time tide pooling and invertebrate searching the next day. **Violet-eyed Swimming Crab, Lined Fireworm, and Striped Mullet** were all lifers. I heard Mount Kilauea was beginning to erupt so I drove to Volcanoes National Park to watch the action and try for a few endemic spiders. On the walk to the viewing area I found dozens of my first spider target, the **Hawaiian Wolf Spider (*Hogna hawaiiensis*)**. After watching some lava I went to the Lava Tube Trail to search for my other two endemic spider targets. Even though **Hawaiian Happy-face Spider** is found here, I had no luck. I did find my other spider target, ***Ariamnes waikulal***, which is an endemic whip spider.



**Hawaiian Wolf Spider (left),  
Hawaiian Spotted Toby (top right),  
Yellow-foot Opihi (bottom right)**



The following morning was my second day with Deep Water Pelagics. This day was much more productive, with a total of 5 cetacean species. As we were leaving the harbor we had both **Spinner Dolphins** and **Humpback Whales** around the boat, a pretty epic start. We then shot our straight to Buoy #8 where they had been seeing **Rough-toothed Dolphins** lately. Half way there we came across these sought after dolphins! We had three **Rough-toothed Dolphins** and darted ahead to jump in. They weren't too interested in us but the three **Rough-toothed Dolphins (photo on next page)** came in for a few moments giving me some pretty memorable looks, an insanely cool **#500th mammal species!** I continued on and encountered a huge group of **Pantropical Spotted Dolphins (photo below)** and several **Short-finned Pilot Whales**. I highly recommend doing these Pelagics at least twice. Next time I'll sign up for three trips.



The next morning I went on a morning scuba dive to try one last time for **Tiger Shark**. No tiger sharks, but I got dozens of marine lifers on the two dives. I got **Harlequin Shrimp, Banded Sea Urchin, Orange Cup Coral, Arc-eye Hawkfish, Ornate Butterflyfish, Caramel Nudibranch and Varicose Wart Slug**. The highlight from the first dive was my lifer **Purple Velvet Star**, a spectacularly deep purple sea star. The second dive got me some of my most wanted fish species on the trip. The easy highlights were **Potter's Angelfish and Flame Angelfish, but Pacific Sailfin Tang were equally memorable**. Moray eels are always my favorite fish to encounter, and this dive I got 2 moray lifers. The **White-mouth Moray** and **Undulated Moray** both showed very well, but the **Zebra Moray** stole the show. Its bright white and dark black stripes are enchanting, we watched this beast forage for about five minutes before it snagged a meal and receded. Before going on a battling attempt I made another tide pooling stop at Makolea Beach where I found another new moray, the **Peppered Moray**. Other finds included **Light-spotted Sea Cucumber, Gold-mouthed Triton Snail, Ambon Toby, and Medusa Spaghetti Worms**.



My final mammal target was **Hawaiian Hoary Bat**. I didn't have any more whale watching trips planned and I wanted to clean up on my terrestrial targets. On previous nights I tried Route 130 and Hoboken Beach Park both during dusk, I had no luck with either visual or echo-meter detection. I then tried Honaunau Bay after dark. Again, I had zero detection of bats until I reached the outside gate to the Pu'uuhonua O Honaunau National Historical Park's Visitor Center. There, outside the gate, I had several detections on the echo-meter of **Hawaiian Hoary Bats** (*photo below*). My thermal scope did pick up several heat sources flying, but after learning that some of the moths here are detectable with the scope. However, I failed to get a visual confirmation of any of them, so I did not count it. I wanted to dedicate another night to find this endemic bat. I tried my luck at Keauhou Bay this evening. My recommended tactic is to bring an echo-meter and walk around 20 minutes before sunset until it's too dark to spot bats. Right at sunset (6:47pm) I picked up the calls on the echo-meter and spotted two **Hawaiian Hoary Bats** foraging above the water right at **19.561816, -155.962242**. At one point one of the bats chased the other and swooped at it. It was a wonderful way to see my number #1 mammal target for the trip.



For my last day on Big Island I wanted to try once again for the iconic **Hawaiian Happy-face Spider**, so I tried Kipuka Puaulu Park. This is an ideal option as it contains healthy native forest. I immediately found four **Hawaiian Blue Butterflies**, one of two endemic Hawaiian butterflies. The other endemic butterfly is the **Kamehameha Butterfly**, which can also be found here.

Unfortunately it was cloudy and I never found one, sunny days are best! However, I did find my most wanted invertebrate target, the **Hawaiian Happy-face Spider** (*photo to the right*).

These spiders have been heavily researched for their phenotypic diversity. Many different morphs exist, and most do not have the iconic “happy face”. I was thrilled to find a total of 5 individuals, including one female with an egg sac! As I checked for the spiders under the leaves I found a small endemic snail that wasn't on my radar,

***Tornatellides kilauea***.

Since it was going to rain for the remainder of my

last day I decided to target already wet things. For my final activity I went tide pooling at Onekahakaha Beach Park Cove. My two main targets were



**Sheriff Badge Sea Star and Snowflake Moray.** As I checked the small rock pools I found **White-spotted Frillgoby, Pillow Cushion Star, Rough Nassa, and Hawaiian Topsail.** I decided to walk into some knee deep sandy sections, this is where I found my desired **Snowflake Moray** and a bonus **Blue-stripe Lizardfish.** Epic ending to the trip!

*Photos: Snowflake Moray (top left); Banded Coral Shrimp (bottom left); Hawaiian Blue (top right); Tiger Snakemoray (bottom right)*



## In Conclusion:

### Endemic Mammals

The best location to see **Hawaiian Monk Seal** is K'aena Point NWR, along the 5.5 mile round trip hike. Take your time, stay on trail if you aren't tidepooling, and scan the rocks slowly. I managed to see **Hawaiian Monk Seals** a total of 7 times. I had two encounters on Big island. One swimming in the Honokohau Small Boat Harbor and another resting on the shore of Honokohau Beach. So while O'ahu is best, they are possible to see on Big Island with some luck.

The best location to see **Hawaiian Hoary Bat** is harder to determine. I tried a total of 4 evenings before I got lucky. I had no opportunity to try on Kauai, and the bat is not present on O'ahu. I recommend using an echo-meter and thermal scope together. I never detected any bats along **Route 130 closer to Hilo or Ho'okena Beach**. I detected several



echo-locative pulses at two locations, but failed to get a visual on both these encounters. I detected bats with the echo-meter at the parking area right outside **Pu'uhonua O Honaunau National Historical Park** and outside the **Ali'i Villas Condominium**. Visiting **Pu'uhonua O Honaunau National Historical Park** while it is still light out may provide some success, the area has native trees and some open areas where it is probably easier to spot the bat compared to other sites. Another user recommended **Ali'i Villas Condominium**. Since I couldn't afford to stay there I wasn't able to enter the property. I was restricted to the main road that had lots of traffic. Surprisingly, I still picked up three series of echo-locative pulses here. If you have the money, I recommend staying here and watching the skies during sundown. The only time I got any views of the endemic bat was at **Keauhou Bay**. I walked around for 15 minutes around the beach with no luck but as I reapproached the parking area I got a series of pulses on the echometer, and then spotted one at **6:47pm**, flying over the bay while standing at this pin (**19.561816, -155.962242**). A second bat soon joined and I got to see the two chase each other for a brief moment.

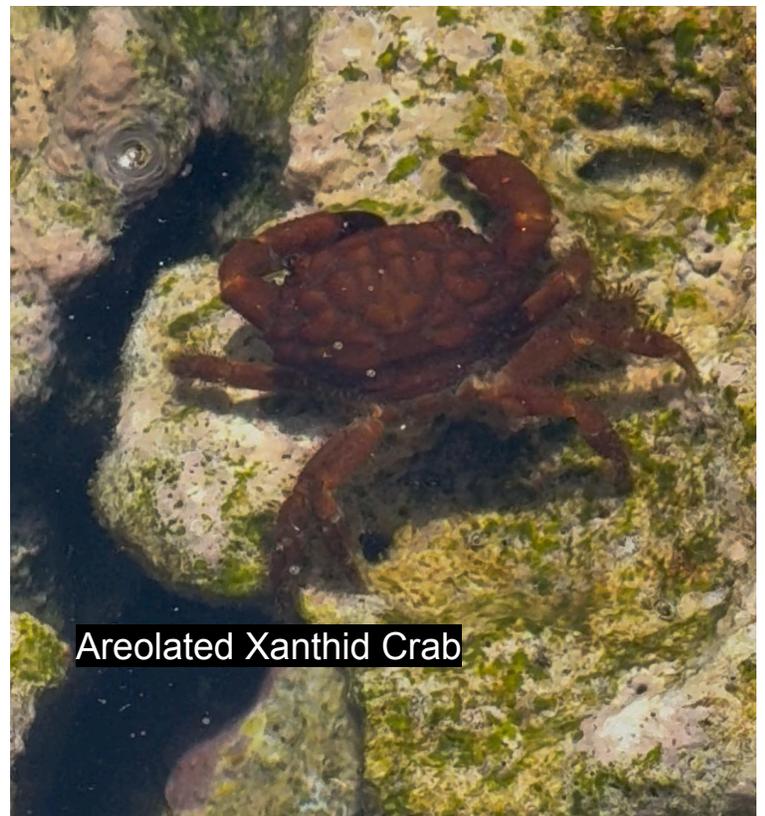


**Oahu Elepaio**

## Pelagic Tours and Marine Mammals

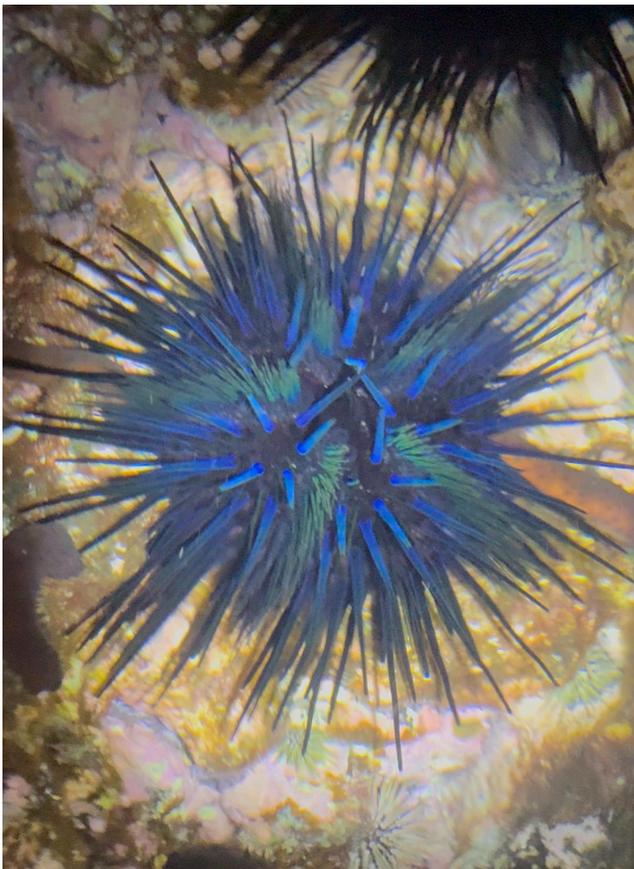
For keen mammal watchers with a solid “sea stomach”, pelagic tours yield the best chances at new species. I recommend going on two-three pelagics per island.

For **O’ahu** I highly recommend using **Wild Side Tours**. Their website is <https://sailhawaii.com/> and phone number is +1 (888) 875-9453. The captain, spotters and guides are top class. A big shout-out to Conner and Bethany for their outstanding knowledge and passion, and Captain Tori for her unmatched years of experience with the local cetaceans. This company runs several tours, it worth planning and organizing your itinerary so you can join there “**6-hour Pelagic Marine Safaris**”. These yield the best chances at off-shore cetaceans. Unfortunately, they are run once a week and my schedule to not align with this option. Their closer to shore tours were still productive for me since I was new to the area. On two tours with this company I have four mammal species: **Hawaiian Monk Seal, Hawaiian Spinner Dolphin, Humpback Whale and Common Bottlenose**. Luck is a big part of any pelagic trip and there are many species that I didn’t see that are in the area; most noteworthy ones are **Fraser’s Dolphin and Melon-headed Whale**. Plus you can get in the water with some cetacean species, an experience like no other!



For **Big Island/ Hawai'i** I highly recommend using **Deep Water, formerly known as See Through Sea**. Their website is <https://www.deepwaterhawaii.com/> and their phone number is 808-767-3227 and email is [dylan@seethroughsea.com](mailto:dylan@seethroughsea.com). The company has a new owner and it is certainly in good hands. Captain Dylan knows how to prioritize a day in terms of targets and their company attracts more serious wildlife watchers. Each outing with them was a boat full of fellow nerds, and civilianless. The spotter, Lauren, was tremendously good at her job. You will be in good hands with these two. The biggest pro of this company is the price and time in field comparison. Many companies charge \$200 for 2-3 hours where all you can really target are **Spinner Dolphins and Humpback Whales**. For an extra \$80 you get an additional 4-5 hours, which can make a huge difference in a day's success. Their 7-8 hour full day pelagic safaris make them the "go-to" company in Kona. Over the course of two trips I managed to see two lifers and five cetacean species: **Rough-toothed Dolphin, Pantropical Spotted Dolphin, Short-finned Pilot Whale, Hawaiian Spinner Dolphin, Humpback Whale; plus a Baird's Beaked Whale** missed by myself and most others.

*Blue-black Sea Urchin (left) Pillow Cushion Star (right)*



If you are planning an upcoming trip to Hawaii and your only desired taxa group is mammals, you can focus your time on Oahu and Hawaii (Big Island) in my opinion.

Accommodation can be very difficult here if you are on a tight budget. In order to save money after spending so much on pelagics and dives I decided to sleep in my car during my time on Big island. There is a real lack of places to sleep for free but I was never asked to leave while sleeping in the parking lot of the Honokohau Small Boat Harbor area. I also spent three nights at the pull out here (19.8410699, -155.923230).

In terms of cheaper rooms I stayed at the Waikiki Beachside Hostel for \$55 a night. Their website is <https://www.waikikibeachsidehostel.com/>

On Big Island the cheapest accommodation I could find was My Hawaii Hostel, their website is <https://www.myhawaiihostel.com/>, which costs about \$55-65 a night. For both of these hostels you will be in dorm styled rooms with strangers. People staying there are typically in the young 20's to late 40's range but there were guests of all ages there.

Hawaii is not a standout mammal destination but if you have a trip planned there is certainly plenty to do! This is a top destination for full taxa listers due to the thriving and endemism-rich marine diversity.



**Rough-toothed Dolphin**