

Trip Report: Hawai'i May 2026  
Luke Tassopoulos

Island chains without many native species of mammal aren't as bad as I would have thought!

I went out to the Big Island of Hawai'i for a friend's wedding this past week. After laying over for the weekend in Honolulu and taking a different friend's engagement photos, which was a new experience for me, I landed in Kona on Monday evening. I stayed in an Airbnb up the hill from the airport in Kalaeloa, which seems to be much more affordable than staying in Kona town or in Waikoloa at the resorts. I hired a car for the week, and this was the right choice as the Big Island is aptly named.

Tuesday Morning, I went on a Pelagic Safari with Deep Water Hawai'i. In the offseason from humpback whale watching, a number of different boats go out on these day trips to look for sharks and cetaceans. The Kona coast is magnificent and drops off very quickly, so only a few miles offshore you can be floating over the 1000 fathom mark. We departed from Honokohau Boat Harbor at 7 am and headed generally south, at the first buoy we saw a silky shark and a nice mahi-mahi. We turned further south and offshore from Kealahou bay, we got our first mammal sightings. There were two pods of **short-finned pilot whales (palaoa)** (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*), one a nursery pod of primarily females and calves, the other a larger assortment with some large males. Hawaiian pilot whales are of the Naisa-type and have a more square head than the Shiho-type whales of the eastern Pacific. Research is being done on these two populations and they may be elevated to subspecies in the future.

The pilot whales are normally pretty skittish, but these ones were comfortable, logging at the surface and spyhopping to check us on the boat out. However, the calm was ruined by a pod of **common bottlenose dolphins (nai'a)** (*Tursiops truncatus*) coming over to bully the pilot whales, followed closely by an oceanic whitetip shark. The dolphins harassed the pilot whales, swimming circles around the calves, and forcing them to dive down to escape. You could hear the pilot whales vocalizing and clashing their jaws from the surface.



After watching the multi-species interactions for a bit, we followed some fishing boats to try and see other species. We got lucky and saw a medium-sized pod of **pantropical spotted dolphins (kiko)** (*Stenella attenuata*). These guys are chipper bow and wake riders and followed us for a bit, and were even quite acrobatic. These dolphins are smaller than the bottlenose and quite similar to the closely related Hawaiian spinner dolphins, but the spinners are a near inshore species.



Other species that you can see but were hiding include Cuvier's beaked whale, Blainville's beaked whale, rough toothed dolphin, melon headed whales, and sperm whales.

The next two mornings I went to Kaloko-Honokohau National Historical Park to explore the old fish traps and fishponds built by the Native Hawai'ians. I started from the visitor center and took a very warm walk of around 1km across a lava field to the fish trap, and proceeded up the beach seeing the green sea turtles sunning themselves. This is a relatively popular beach in the area but not as overwhelmed as Kahalu'u or Kua Bays as the snorkeling is not nearly as good. Along the beach north of the fish trap, there was a **Hawai'ian monk seal** ('Īlioholoikauaaua) (*Neomonachus schauinslandi*) sunning herself. After reporting the sighting to the volunteer, she confirmed that this was 'Waimanu' (RW34), the largest known female of the species. Due to her large size, she has problems nursing her pups and they are often admitted to the Marine Mammal Rescue Center.



I drove up the coast to Pu'ukoholā Heiau National Historic Site (which means Whale Point in the Hawai'ian language) to see spinner dolphins but no luck. It is also a great spot for humpback shore watching in season.

The last native mammal species I saw was a **Hawai'ian hoary bat** ('ōpe'ape'a) (*Lasiurus semotus*) in the late afternoon on Saturday while hiking back up from the Captain Cook monument snorkeling spot on Kealakekua Bay. This is Hawai'i's only native land mammal, so I guess I hit 100% in something for mammalwatching.

Of course, while I was sitting at the Kona Airport waiting to fly back to the mainland, Kilauea started to erupt again and I have major FOMO from not going the two hours across the island to see it. Maybe next time.

This wasn't my first time on the Big Island, and I have seen monk seal plenty before, but this is the first time actually recording it in my mammalwatching list. The other four species were lifers. I also saw three common introduced species – **feral domestic goat, small Indian mongoose, and brown rat**. None of these were lifers either.

TL;DR

**Five native species, four lifers\*, two endemics**

Hawaiian monk seal (endemic)

Short finned pilot whale\*

Common bottlenose dolphin\*

Pantropical spotted dolphin\*

Hawai'ian Hoary Bat\* (endemic)

**Three introduced species**

Feral goat

Small Indian Mongoose

Brown rat