

NATURAL HISTORY GUIDE TO AMERICAN SAMOA



**National Park
of American Samoa**

**P. CRAIG
EDITOR**

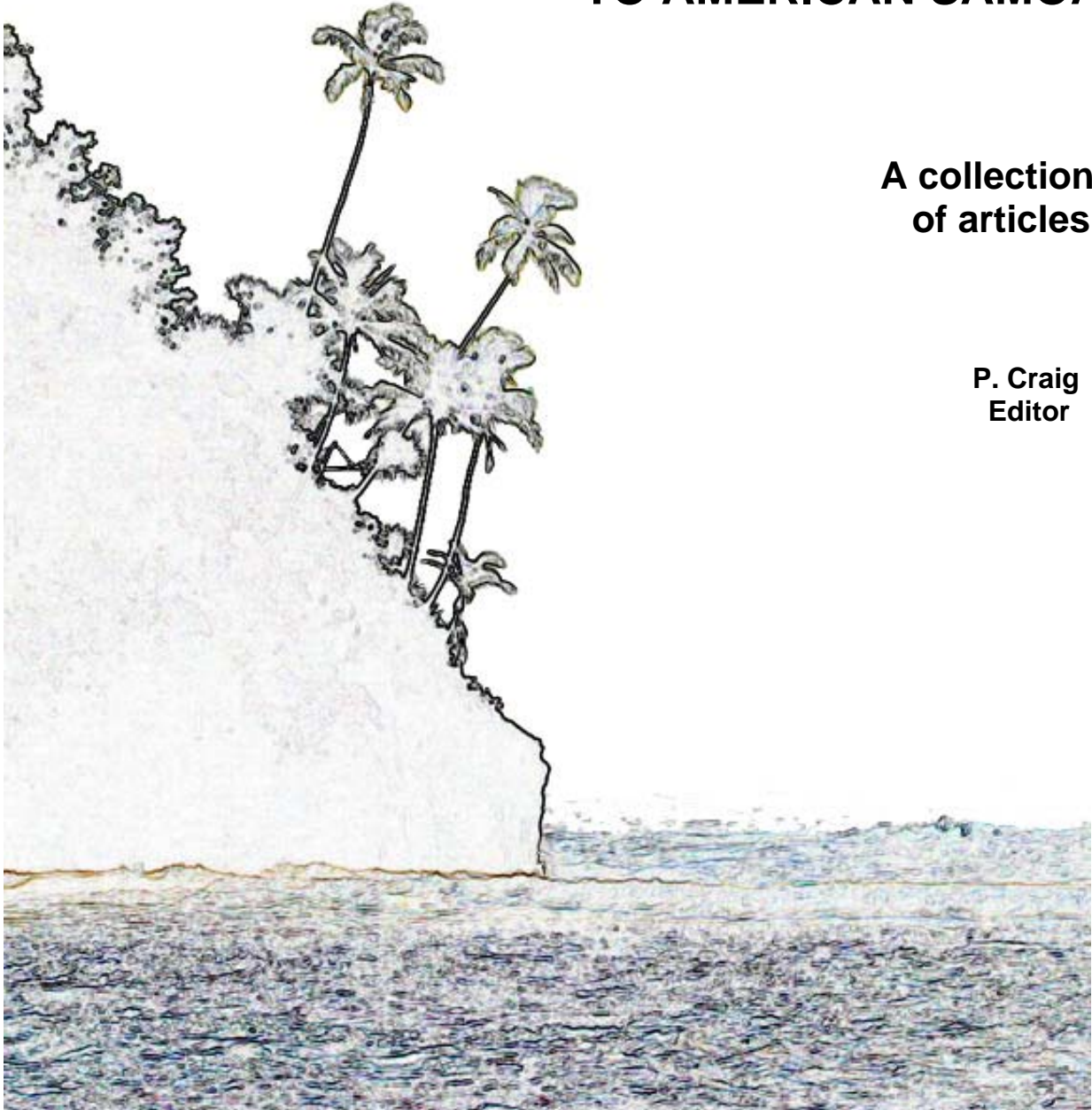


**DEPARTMENT OF MARINE
& WILDLIFE RESOURCES**

NATURAL HISTORY GUIDE TO AMERICAN SAMOA

A collection
of articles

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Preface & Acknowledgments

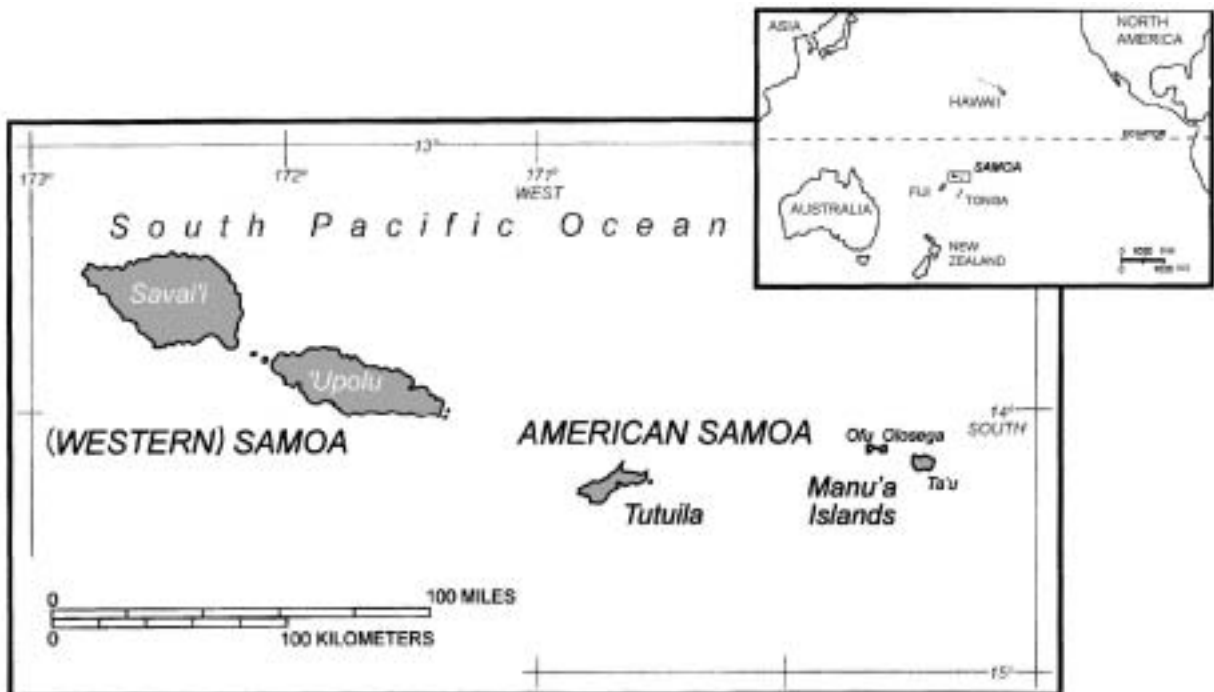
This collection of articles provides a glimpse into the marine and wildlife resources in American Samoa's tropical, oceanic environment. The articles were written by 8 biologists at the Department of Marine and Wildlife Resources (DMWR), National Park of American Samoa (NPS) and Land Grant Program at the American Samoa Community College (ASCC). Our purpose in writing these was to make the results of our studies available to local teachers, students, visitors and whoever else might be curious about Samoa's unique environment. The use of English, Samoan and scientific names of plants and animals varies among chapters, so the reader is referred to cross-reference lists in the mammal and reptile checklist (Chapter 18), bird checklist (Chapter 27), and the plant index at the end of this report.

Several individuals, organizations and publishers have kindly allowed their illustrations to be reprinted in this volume; their credits are listed on page 76. Special thanks to Dick Watling for permission to reproduce the excellent pictures from his books "Birds of Fiji, Tonga and Samoa" and "Birds of Fiji and western Polynesia" (Pacificbirds.com).

Joshua Seamon, Matt Le'i, and Larry Basch provided comments throughout the text, and Tavita Togia and Art Whistler provided the plant reference list on page 75. Support to DMWR was provided by the Federal Aid in Sportfish and Wildlife Restoration Acts.

It is permissible to use these articles for educational purposes or to modify them to reflect local conditions in other islands; an acknowledgement would be appreciated.

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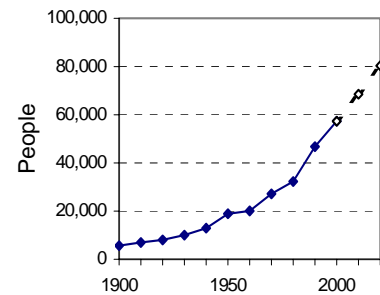


1. Local facts and maps

Samoa Archipelago. This chain of 9 inhabited Pacific islands is located 14° south of the equator and is divided into two political entities, the US Territory of American Samoa and the neighboring independent country of (western) Samoa. The youngest islands in this chain lie towards the east (Ta'u), contrary to an earlier geological report.

Territory of American Samoa. The total land area is 76.1 square miles and includes five volcanic islands (Tutuila, Aunu'u, Ofu, Olosega, Ta'u) and two remote atolls (Rose, Swains).

Population. Polynesians arrived here about 3,000 years ago. The current population (60,000 in 2002) is growing rapidly at 2.1% per year. Most people (96%) live on Tutuila Island. The ethnic composition is approximately 90% Samoan, 4% Tongan, 2% Caucasian, and 4% others.



Topography. The main islands are steep mountains that emerge from the ocean floor about 2- 3 miles below the sea surface. Peak elevations are about 3,100 feet on Ta'u Island (Lata Mountain) and 2,142 feet on Tutuila Island (Matafao Peak).

Climate. Hot, humid and rainy year- round, but there is a long, wet summer season (October - May) and a slightly cooler and drier season (June - September). Total rainfall is 125 inches at the Tafuna airport and 200+ inches in mountainous areas.

Hurricanes. While very destructive, hurricanes (cyclones) are a natural feature of the environment in this part of the world. The most recent ones in American Samoa occurred in 1981 (Esau), 1987 (Tusi), 1990 (Ofa), and 1991 (Val).

Native flora and fauna. Most native species here are closely related to those in Indonesia. Due to our remote location in the Pacific Ocean, the diversity of terrestrial species here is low: 471 flowering plants and ferns, 24 resident land and water birds, 20 resident seabirds, 3 mammals (all bats), 7 skinks, 4 geckos, 2 sea turtles, 1 snake, and other occasional visitors. In contrast, the diversity of marine species here is high: 890 coral reef fishes, over 200 corals, and a few whales and dolphins. Insects and other invertebrate species here are not well known.

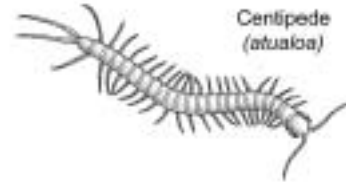
Endemic species. Species found only in the Samoan Archipelago include one bird (Samoan starling) and about 32% of local plant species. Five flowering plant species are endemic to American Samoa itself. Marine endemics have not been identified, but a thorough investigation has not been conducted.

Threatened or endangered species. Federally listed species here include humpback whales and the green and hawksbill sea turtles. Additional species 'of concern' in the Territory include the sheath- tailed bat, 3 birds (Spotless Crane, Friendly Ground Dove, Many- colored Fruit Dove), several land snails, and others.



Pests and weeds (invasive non- native species). There are many: rats, 3 bird species (2 mynas and bulbuls), feral pigs, dogs, cats, toads, house gecko, tilapia and molly fishes, African snails, about 250 alien species of vascular plants (many of them weed species), and others.

Dangerous species. Few. On land, no poisonous snakes, but a bite from a large 8- inch centipede can be painful. In the ocean, sharks are generally not a problem but stepping on the poisonous spine of a stonefish can be a serious medical emergency although this rarely happens. Consumers of fish should note that ciguatera poisoning has been found (infrequently) in several snappers (locally called *mu*) and a few other fish species. Also, avoid eating any fish or invertebrate caught in Pago Pago Harbor, because they are contaminated with heavy metals and other pollutants.



Tropical diseases. Malaria is not present, but two other mosquito- transmitted diseases can occur here: dengue fever (caused by a virus) and filariasis (elephantiasis, caused by a parasitic nematode worm). However, the chance of getting either by a visitor is slight.

Conservation areas as of 2002:

| Site | Year | Location | km ² | acres |
|--|------|--------------------|-----------------|--------|
| Rose Atoll National Wildlife Sanctuary | 1973 | Rose Atoll | 158.8 | 39,251 |
| Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary | 1986 | Tutuila | 0.7 | 161 |
| National Park of American Samoa | 1993 | Tutuila, Ofu, Ta'u | 42.6 | 10,520 |
| Vaoto Territorial Marine Park | 1994 | Ofu | 0.5 | 120 |

All fishing is prohibited at Rose Atoll, but traditional subsistence fishing is permitted at the other sites. Other 'special management areas' in the Territory include Pago Pago Harbor, Nu'uuli Pala Lagoon and Leone wetlands.

P. Craig
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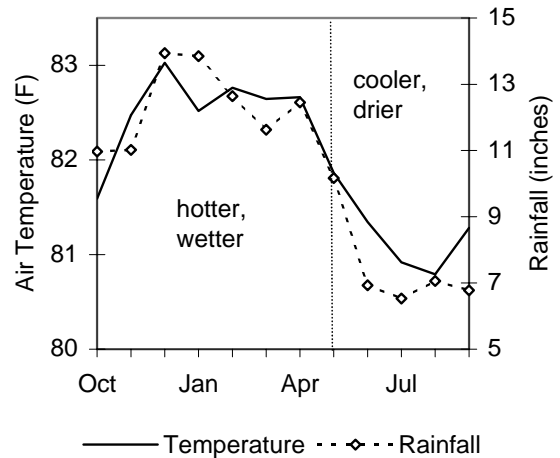


2. Seasons in Samoa

Samoa's weather may seem warm, wet and humid all year, but we do have two seasons. Not exactly summer and winter, because Tutuila is a small dot in a vast tropical ocean, so the ocean moderates our weather year- round. Our seasons are sometimes referred to as tropical wet and dry periods, although you may wonder, when is it ever dry here?

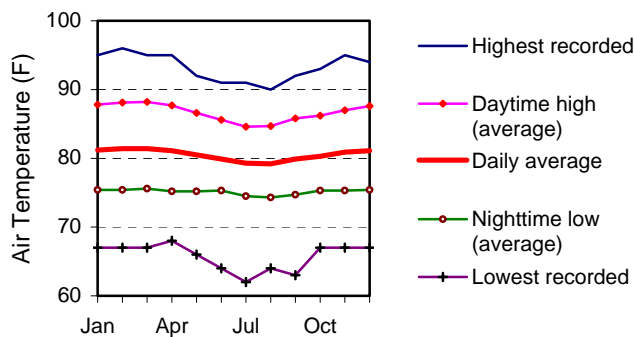
October through May is our 8- month hot and wet summer. Rainfall at the Tafuna airport weather station is about 11- 14 inches per month and air temperature (averaged over a 24- hour period) is about 82- 83° F (for the period 1990- 2002). Our 'cold' spell occurs from June through September, when averaged air temperatures plummet to 81° F and rainfall is reduced by half.

Actual rainfall can vary much more than this, as we all know. Minimum and maximum records for rainfall over a one- month period are 0.3 and 32.7 inches. The amount of rainfall we receive depends largely on where we are standing. The harbor area is very wet - - it receives 200 inches of rainfall per year. Some mountain areas may get up to 300 inches (25 feet) per year. The Tafuna plains are much drier and receive a mere 125 inches per year.

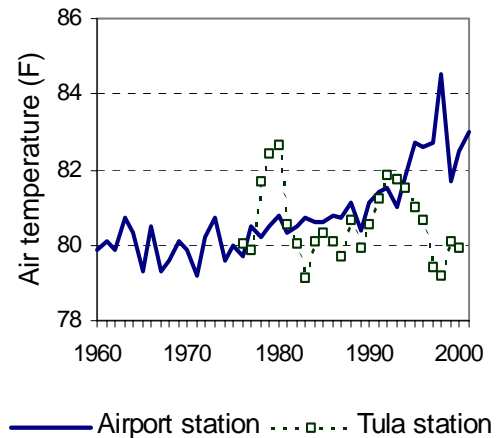


If it seems like it rains every day here, it almost does. In most years, the airport weather station detects at least a trace of rain 300 days of the year. But a noticeable amount of rain (at least one tenth of an inch) occurs on about 50% of the days of the year. But remember, the airport (where these measurements are taken) is the driest part of our island. Relative humidity at the airport fluctuates in the 80s (daily range 73- 90%).

Air temperatures in recent years typically fluctuate from nighttime lows around 77° F to afternoon highs in the upper 80s. We now average 60 days per year at 90° or above. Record highs and lows here are 96° and 62° F.



But if it feels like our climate it is getting warmer, it is, but the picture is a little complicated. We have two long- term records of air temperature in American Samoa, the NOAA weather stations at the Tafuna airport and at Tula. Temperature trends at these two sites are quite different, probably due to local conditions where the temperatures are actually measured. Temperatures measured at the airport weather station have risen steadily over the past 15 years (see graph), but no such increase has been recorded at the NOAA station in Tula. The airport station measures air temperatures at a height of about 5.5 feet above the ground, and it is located on the Tafuna Plains which is rapidly being built up with buildings and roads, so it is probably detecting a near- ground increase in temperature that is felt by us. Whether other parts of Tutuila are warming in a similar fashion is not known. In contrast, the Tula station measures air temperatures at about 50 feet above the ground, so it is less affected by near- ground conditions. It shows no increase in temperature, as would be expected at our remote oceanic location.



As summer progresses, the temperature of the ocean's surface waters also increases by 2° F. Warmer ocean temperatures, in turn, help provide the energy to start hurricanes, thus the chance of a hurricane is greatest between November and March.

Some plants and animals in Samoa schedule their activities, such as flowering or spawning, according to the seasons. These biological events tend to occur over a much longer period in the tropics compared to colder regions of the world, because the distinction between our two seasons is not great and growing conditions here are generally good year- round. Nevertheless, seasonal patterns of flowering and fruiting mean times of abundance or scarcity for some of our native wildlife, particularly the fruit bats (*pe'a*) and Pacific pigeon (*lupe*).

Some animals schedule their seasonal migrations to Samoa to avoid winters elsewhere in the world. We see more golden plovers (*tuli*) and tourists during the October to March period when they flee winter in the northern hemisphere, while humpback whales (*tofolā*) are most common here in September- October when they escape winter in the southern hemisphere.



Hurricane Val in 1991

3. Biodiversity in our rainforests and coral reefs

There's a certain mystique about the word 'biodiversity' that seems to be associated with images of steamy jungles or wondrous new medicines, but the word usually refers to the number of species or 'species richness' of an area. One reason why tropical areas are so fascinating is that they contain the highest numbers of plant and animal species found anywhere on earth.

American Samoa sits squarely in the tropics, so we should have a high biological diversity here, but we do and we don't. There is a sharp contrast between the number of plant and animal species that live on land here (few) versus those that live in our coastal waters (many). Most small islands in the South Pacific share this characteristic.

To start at the beginning, when our islands emerged as fiery volcanos above the sea surface, they were devoid of plants or animals. As time passed and the terrain became more hospitable, life for organisms became possible, but the plants and animals still had to cross major ocean barriers to get here from someplace else.



A quick look at a map will show one reason why few land species got here. We are really quite isolated in the Pacific Ocean, far from potential sources of plants and animals. To reach our shores, organisms would either have to blow in on the wind, drift for hundreds or thousands of miles on some piece of floating debris, or be carried in by another organism like plant seeds in a bird's stomach. The species that were successful probably got here by 'island hopping' across the Pacific, spreading from island to island over the course of many thousands or millions of years.

The difficulty in getting here is best illustrated by the sparse representation of native mammal species. Over the past 1.5 million years that Tutuila Island has existed, only 3 mammal species (all bats) got here and established viable populations. Our native species list also includes about 471 flowering plants and ferns, 24 resident land and water birds, 20 resident seabirds, 7 skinks, 4 geckos, 2 sea turtles, 1 snake, and occasional other visitors (this list does not include all the introduced non-native species like rats, dogs, pigs, toads, myna birds, and many weeds).

There's a second reason for our low diversity on land - - the small size of our islands. In general, the smaller the island, the fewer the species on it. For example, tiny Rose Atoll (0.4 sq mi) supports only 5 native plant species, 21 birds (virtually all seabirds), 2 geckos, and 2 sea turtles.

So, although American Samoa technically has 'tropical rainforests' due to our high level of rainfall (200- 300 inches per year in some mountainous areas), we lack the high species richness found in the jungle rainforests of Indonesia, Africa or South America that are filled with hooting monkeys, poison dart frogs, pythons and flesh-eating piranhas.

On the other hand, because of our isolation, some terrestrial species in Samoa have evolved over many thousands of years to such an extent that they have become distinctly different species found nowhere else but here. For example, 1% of our plant species occur only in American Samoa; 32% of

our plant species and the Samoan starling (*fuia*) occur only in the Samoan archipelago (which includes western Samoa); and the Samoan fruit bat occurs only in the Samoan and Fijian islands. So, our rainforest may lack diversity, but it contains some species found nowhere else on earth.

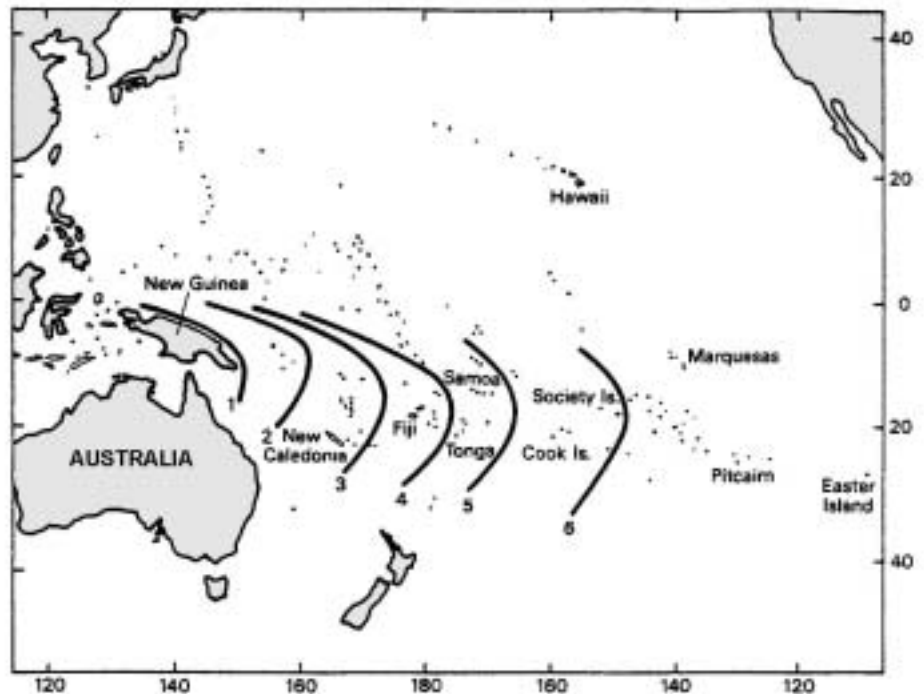
Turning to our marine environment, we find the opposite situation. There is an incredibly diverse ecosystem just beneath the waves. Coral reefs are among the most species- rich ecosystems in the world. We have, for example, 890 nearshore fish species which is an amazingly high number compared to many other coastal areas. To get a sense of this species- rich environment, if you were to dive on our reefs once a week, you could in theory see a new fish species on every dive for 17 years.

Although coral reefs are limited to shallow waters, mostly around the fringes of islands, most coral reef species have eggs and larvae that can survive for weeks or months in the open ocean and get dispersed by ocean currents to new locations. As a result of this genetic exchange of marine organisms between islands, there are probably few marine species that are unique to the Samoan islands.

Finally, superimposed over the South Pacific region is a larger- scale pattern of species distributions. Most of our marine and land species can be traced back to the same or related species inhabiting mainland and insular southeast Asia. From that center of remarkably high diversity, rainforest and coral reef species radiated out, spreading eastward across the South Pacific islands. But like ripples in a pond, the farther away one gets from that 'center', the fewer the species (see figure). This pattern applies to corals, fishes, sea turtles, seagrasses, mangroves, land birds and plants. Very few species reached here from the opposite direction (South America) probably due to the much greater distance and fewer islands in that direction to facilitate 'island hopping'.

P. Craig
NPS

High terrestrial and marine biodiversity in Region 1 decreases across the Pacific towards Region 6.



4. This volcano we live on

The geology of the Samoan islands is surprisingly interesting. First, we are living on a volcano, which is resting quietly at the moment. Second, our volcano is on the move -- it's traveling towards China with us on it. And, finally and most unfortunately, our volcano is doomed and it will eventually sink back into the dark ocean depths.

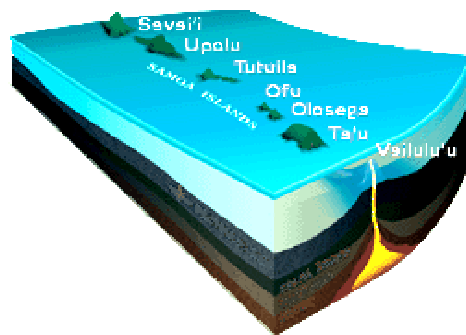
It is not really an exaggeration to call the Samoan islands 'active volcanos'. These islands were indeed formed by volcanism, and the volcanos are still active, in a geologic timeframe of course, and due to some unusual circumstances as described below.

About 1.5 million years ago, our volcano spewed forth enough lava to rise up out of the ocean and become "Tutuila Island". Actually, just the tip of the volcano is visible to us -- most of the mountain is underwater. While the tallest mountain peak on Tutuila is about one half mile high, the mountain extends another 2 miles below the sea surface.

The most recent volcanic eruptions were a lot more recent than many people realize. In western Samoa, major eruptions occurred in 1905 when lava flows destroyed a village. In the Manu'a islands, subsurface volcanic eruptions and earthquakes occurred in 1866, causing dense clouds of smoke and pumice to erupt from the ocean surface for several months. One hundred years ago is just a blink of the eye to a volcano, which measures time in the millions of years. We humans tend to forget how briefly people have lived upon these shores. Human habitation on Tutuila, even considering the whole 3000- year period that Samoans have dwelt here, represents a mere 0.2% of the time since the sun first shone on this new land.

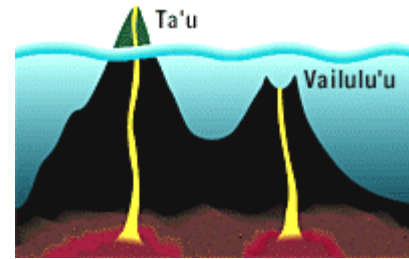
To explain our volcano's march towards China, we first need to review the nature of the earth's surface or crust. The earth's outer layer, the one we live on, is several miles thick, but that is a thin skin compared to the total size of the earth. This outer layer is made up of many separate sections that seemingly float on top of the earth's molten core and move about in very slow motion. Geologists call these outer sections "plates". You may recall, for example, that the continents of Africa and South America were once joined together when the earth first formed, but the two continents slowly drifted apart to where they are today. The same process applies to the plates under the Pacific Ocean. The plate we're on is called the Pacific Plate and it is moving westward (towards China) at a leisurely speed of about 3 inches per year. At this rate, in one million years we will be 50 miles closer to China.

It is not accidental that the islands of American Samoa and western Samoa lie roughly in a straight line. Directly underneath us is what geologists call a "hot spot" of thermal activity in the earth's core. It's a volcano just waiting to happen. When the pressure builds up at the hot spot, molten magma bursts up through the Pacific Plate and forms a volcanic island. Then the hot spot calms down for awhile, perhaps a million years or so. During this peaceful interval, the Pacific Plate keeps marching onward, so when the hot spot acts up again, it forms a new volcanic island rather

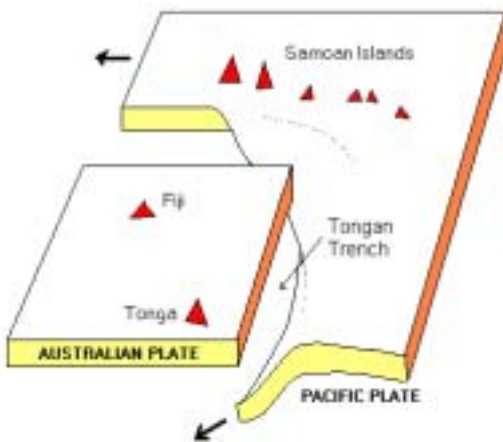


than build upon the previous one. In other words, the hot spot stays in one place but the plate above it keeps moving.

The islands formed therefore generally lie in a straight line that is oriented in the direction the plate is moving. The new islands form on the eastern end of the chain, so the islands become progressively older as you move from east to west. For that reason, the islands in western Samoa are about 1 million years older than the islands in American Samoa. (Early geologists got this direction backwards.) The newest volcanic eruption in our island chain is forming about 30 miles east of Ta'u Island, but it will probably be another 100,000 years before this sub-surface volcano, named Vailulu'u, breaks the sea surface.



But something else really exciting also happens in our area. As Tutuila Island glides westward, a part of our plate collides with another plate to the west of us (the Australian Plate), and our plate actually rips in two at this point (see diagram). One piece of our plate continues moving towards China, but the other piece slides down into the 6-mile deep Tongan Trench and under the Australian Plate, never to be seen again.



The collision of these two colossal pieces of the earth's surface causes the seafloor to bend and rip, which in turn probably causes some earthquakes and renewed volcanic activity. Recent surveys suggest how this might be happening. Long cracks in the seafloor have been discovered between the Samoan islands and the Tongan Trench. The cracks are oriented in an east-west direction and seem to be formed as the seafloor bends southward down into the top of the Tongan Trench. These cracks may make it easier for the hot magma beneath the crust to spew upward and emerge as young lava on top of our old islands.

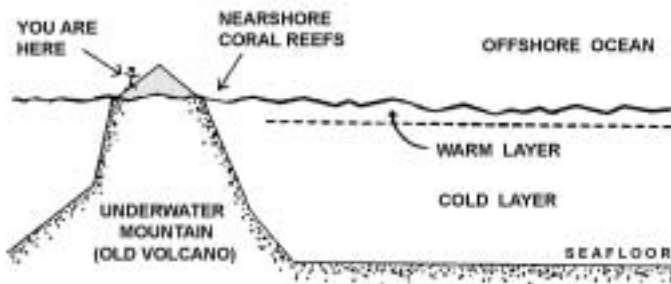
And all this is happening a mere 100 miles south of Tutuila Island. We live in a very unique area.

Finally, all oceanic volcanos must come to an end. As time passes, two things happen. Our volcano erodes continuously as ocean waves attack its shorelines and rivers gouge into its terrain. In addition, the weight of a newly formed volcano is so heavy that it causes the volcano to sink slowly back down into the sea. Rose Atoll and Swains Island are good examples of sunken volcanos. In the distant past, Rose and Swains may have been magnificent mountainous islands with beautiful rainforests and coral reefs. But that's ancient history now, because those islands, over a period of several million years, eventually sank out of sight. All that remains are tiny amounts of coral that grew up from the peaks of the mountains as they slipped below the sea surface.

Not to worry. Tutuila Island should be around for a few more million years.

5. Our deep blue ocean

American Samoa is much larger than you might think it is. The whole Territory covers 117,500 square miles, which is about the size of New Zealand or the state of Oregon. The Territory is big because we claim jurisdiction of the ocean that surrounds American Samoa, from the shoreline out to 200 miles offshore. That is standard procedure throughout the world (each country with marine coasts wants to protect its coastline and marine resources from others). To be more precise, American Samoa has jurisdiction over territorial waters out to 3 miles, while the US federal government maintains control of the zone from 3 to 200 miles from shore.



Most of the Territory is open ocean, of course. Only a minuscule 0.1% of the area consists of dry land (all 7 islands total only 76.1 square miles). The other 99.9% marine portion consists of two main habitats - - the shallow coastal waters adjacent to the islands (*a'au, aloalo*) and the deep waters offshore (*vasa*). Shallow coastal habitats, with their coral reefs and colorful fish, are

quite limited in total area because our islands slope steeply down into deeper water and depths of 2000 feet are reached within 0.5- 2 miles from shore. So, most of our coral reefs are restricted to a narrow ring around each island. In total, we have about 114 square miles (296 km²) of coral reefs in the Territory.

The rest of our marine environment consists of deep blue ocean with a fairly flat seafloor about 2- 3 miles below the sea surface. The reason for the blue color of the ocean is an interesting one and it is a key factor to understanding our ocean ecosystem, so we need to get technical for a moment. Water by itself is highly transparent with a bluish tinge. What adds other colors to the ocean are, in large part, small marine plant- like cells called phytoplankton. The more phytoplankton in the water, the greener the water becomes. Phytoplankton require two main ingredients to grow well: sunlight and nutrients (fertilizers). If they have both, they grow in abundance. This, in turn, supports a productive food web: phytoplankton provide food for the microscopic shrimp- like animals (zooplankton), and the zooplankton provide food for the fish to eat.

Tropical oceans are not green because conditions are generally not good for plant growth, so relatively few phytoplankton cells are present in the water. Although phytoplankton have all the sunlight they could ever want in the surface layer, nutrient levels there are too low to support much plant growth. This occurs because the deep tropical ocean is typically stratified into two layers with very different temperatures. The sun heats up the surface layer, which is about 300 feet deep, to a pleasant 84° F, but the deeper layer remains a chilly 42° F. Because warm water is lighter than cold water, the warm ocean water almost always stays on top, the cold water stays on the bottom. The two layers do not mix.

That's the rub. The bottom layer is where the nutrients are, but because of the 2- layer stratification, the nutrients can't get up to the surface layer where they are needed to combine with sunlight for plant growth. So, conditions for phytoplankton are not very good in the tropical ocean. The surface layer has lots of light but few nutrients, while the bottom layer has lots of nutrients but no light. It's pitch black down there. This arrangement doesn't support a very

productive foodweb, so there are generally fewer fish in tropical oceans than in non- tropical oceans.

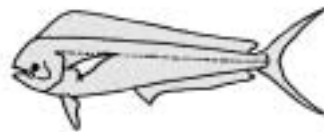
You might wonder, how is it that non- tropical oceans are much more productive? The answer is, again, temperature. Away from the tropics, seasonal changes in water temperature cause the water to mix. Winter temperatures cool the upper layer causing it to sink and mix with the bottom layer, and when this occurs, some nutrients are brought up to the surface. The nutrients in shallow sunlit waters stimulate phytoplankton growth, thus fueling a more productive foodweb.

In the tropics, the 2- layer stratification of the ocean persists year- round because hot sun keeps the surface layer warm. The tropical ocean has been called a 'biological desert' for this reason. That's an exaggeration, of course, because all the tuna out there are finding something to eat. And, many other species live out there as well, from an occasional whale, dolphin, sea turtle or seabird, to numerous species of fish and invertebrates such as jellyfish and shrimp- like crustaceans.

What are some of the marine resources in our offshore waters? Three ocean resources of potential interest to American Samoa are fish, minerals and the water itself. Several kinds of food and sport fish are present in modest numbers: tuna, *masimasi*, marlin, wahoo, sharks, and flying fish.



Marlin (*sa'ula*)



Mahimahi (*masimasi*)



Tuna (*atu*)

Surveys indicate, however, that the abundance of oceanic fishes within our 200- mile limit is probably not high enough to warrant significant commercial development of offshore fisheries. That's the main reason why the big tuna boats that deliver to American Samoa's canneries have to travel far beyond our 200- mile zone to other locations where the tuna are more abundant.

Another resource mentioned from time to time are the mineral deposits, such as manganese nodules, that lie on the seafloor. However, these nodules, even if present in our waters, are too deep for economic extraction by current technologies.

Perhaps a more exploitable resource in the future involves the temperature of the ocean's cold bottom layer. Scientists are working on a technology that extracts energy (to produce electricity) through a heat- exchange mechanism that is made possible by the large temperature difference between the tropical ocean's warm surface and cold bottom layers. A demonstration facility for this technology has been operating in Hawaii since the 1970's. The two requirements for this technology - - a large temperature differential in the ocean, and easy access to this temperature difference by land- based facilities - - are met in American Samoa. Will our future electricity needs be powered by our own blue ocean?

P. Craig
NPS

6. What is coral?

The islands of American Samoa are blessed with an abundance of coral, so this article presents an introduction to these unusual organisms.

Corals are animals like ourselves, although that may not be readily apparent because many look like whitish rocks, especially those washed up on the beach. In a sense, corals are indeed partly rock, because only the outer thin layer of the coral is inhabited by the coral animal itself. In that way, corals are like large trees – the inner part is hard and provides structural support, the outer part is the living, growing organism. And, like trees, most coral animals are permanently attached to one spot on the reef.



Several types of corals on our reefs

The coral rubble that Samoans traditionally spread outside their houses, and the coral rocks along our beaches, are old, dead pieces that broke off the reef during a storm, got tumbled around and tossed up on the beach.

Living corals grow primarily on the outer reef flat and in deeper water. Although they take varied shapes, the coral animals inhabiting the surface of all these types are similar. They look somewhat like miniature sea anemones (*matamalu*, *ulumane*) or upside-down jellyfish (*alualu*) with short tentacles that give the coral a slightly fuzzy appearance when the tentacles are extended. Each single coral animal is called a polyp, but the coral branch or block we see on the reef is actually not a single animal but a colony of hundreds or thousands of tiny polyps living side by side, giving the appearance of being a single coral animal.



A polyp with tentacles extended

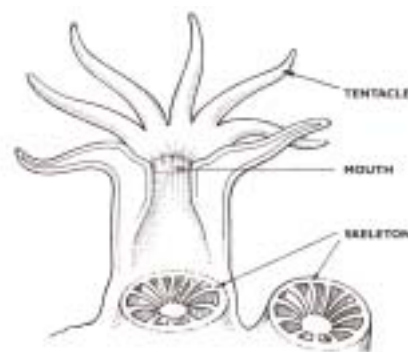


Diagram of a polyp

The coral's short tentacles can be pulled back into the hard part of the coral when the animal is disturbed or when the coral is exposed at low tide, so even a live coral can look like a rock at such times.

In the coral shown here, a single polyp lives in each hole. Together, they form a colony of polyps.



It seems almost inconceivable that these tiny coral polyps can build the hard coral 'rocks' that we see on the reef. They do this by secreting layers of a hard substance (calcium carbonate) beneath their living cells. It's as if each tiny polyp built a rock- solid house for itself but then, as it grows taller, it decides to close- off the bottom rooms in its house. Then it grows some more and closes- off another layer of bottom rooms, and so on. In this way, the coral polyp always lives in the outer, top layer, which has been built upon layers and layers of rooms below.

Each polyp also cements its high- rise house to those of its adjacent neighbors which strengthens the whole structure, resembling a solidly built apartment complex. Adding on these new rooms is a slow process. Growth varies from about 0.5- 3 inches per year depending on the species. The very largest corals on our reefs may be hundreds of years old. Over very long time periods, these corals grow into massively strong reef structures that can bear the brunt of powerful waves that crash upon them day after day.

Corals are one of the few organisms on earth that continually build on top of their old 'houses', forming such large solid structures. This is not like a bird that might build its nest on top of another nest, because both of these nests decay and disappear in a short time. In fact, most organisms on earth leave little trace after they die as their bones or shells disintegrate (dust to dust). Not corals. They build structures much larger and longer- lasting than the Pharaoh's pyramids. What other organism can do this (except modern man with his steel and cement)?

Consider Swains Island or Rose Atoll, for example. Both are the remnants of old volcanos that, after millions of years, finally sank back down beneath the ocean's surface and disappeared altogether as volcanic islands usually do (see Chapter 4). But as they slowly sank, the coral continued to grow on top of the submerged mountain tops, layer by layer, keeping pace with the sinking rate of the mountain. The thickness of the coral there now is probably hundreds or thousands of feet thick on top of the old mountain peak and it's all that's left poking above the ocean surface. Were it not for this thick coral foundation on top of these old mountains, Swains Island and Rose Atoll would not exist today.

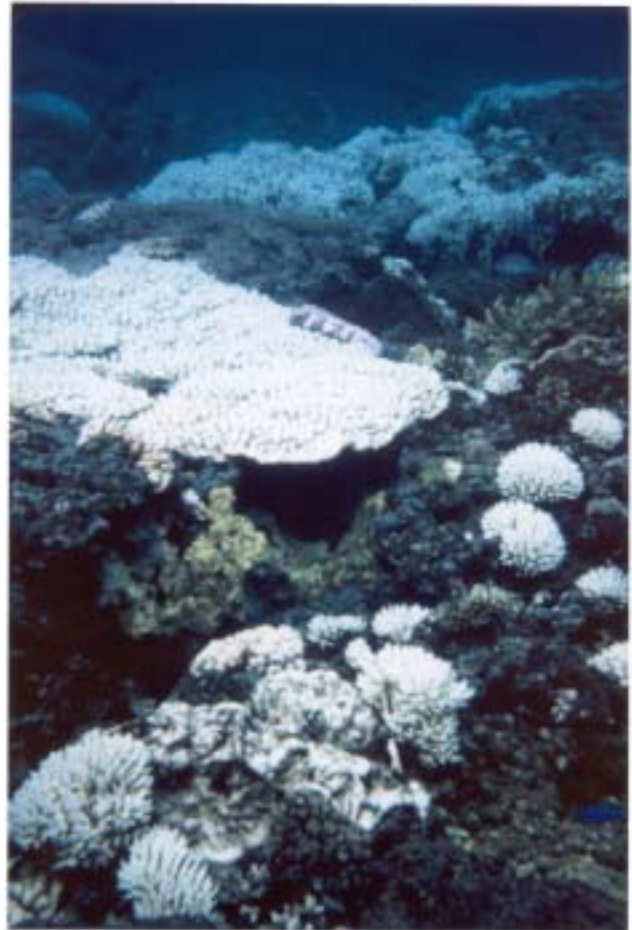
7. When corals turn white and die

In recent years, coral reefs in American Samoa have turned pure white on several occasions. They look freshly bleached, quite pretty, but that's a clear sign that things are bad for them.

Two very different kinds of stress cause corals to turn white - - (1) clorox bleach, and (2) warm water temperatures. Clorox bleaching happens from time to time when a foolish fisherman dumps clorox onto the reef to kill fish. This is very short- sighted because it also kills everything else in the vicinity - - young fish, crabs, snails and corals - and that harms the reef itself and reduces everyone else's catch.

Nature can also cause the coral to bleach with extra warm water temperatures. It only takes a slight increase above normal water temperature to bleach the coral. Bleaching can be caused by a short-term exposure (1- 2 days) at temperature elevations of 3- 4 degrees, or by long- term exposure (weeks) at elevations of only 1- 2 degrees. To a diver, this may look like a pretty snowfall on the reef, but it indicates that the reef is seriously stressed.

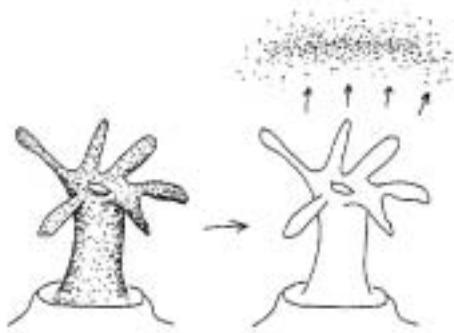
Underwater photo showing several kinds of coral on our reefs that turned white, or "bleached", due to heat stress in 1994.



It seems odd that corals will die when the water gets slightly warmer, because most corals live only in warm tropical waters. Nonetheless, they live close to the hottest temperature that they can tolerate, so it doesn't take much to push them over the limit.

To explain what is happening, recall that corals are animals with colorful plant- like cells (zooxanthellae) living in their tissues. These cells use the sun's light to produce food, which is shared with the coral animal. Many coral animals receive much of their food this way, so this relationship is quite important to the coral animal. The animal, in turn, provides the zooxanthellae

with nutrients and a secure place to live. Both the coral and the zooxanthellae benefit from this arrangement.



Normal coral polyp with plant-like cells inside the coral's tissues.

Heat-stress causes the coral polyp to release its plant-like cells.

When the coral is stressed by warmer than usual temperatures, the zooxanthellae are released from the coral, for reasons known only to them. What's left is a rather colorless coral animal overlying a bright white coral skeleton (see drawing). The animal portion of the coral may eventually recover its zooxanthellae and continue living, or it may die, depending on how stressed it gets. It's easy to tell when portions of the coral die because they become covered with fuzzy green algae.

A little bleaching occurs here during most summers, but it was particularly bad in 1994.

Not all coral species were affected then, but

those in shallow waters were hardest hit, and some bleaching down to the 130- foot depth was observed. Bleaching occurred again in 1998 when we experienced very low tides due to a strong El Nino event. The exposed corals turned white and died. In more recent years, we have narrowly escaped major bleaching incidents that hit nearby Fiji and western Samoa, but fortunately the area of warm ocean waters that caused the bleaching did not extend as far northeast as American Samoa.

Scientists predict that episodes of warm water temperatures will become more frequent due to a general warming of the earth. That's bad news for us. While it's unlikely that all of our corals will die off as the environment gets warmer, the number of corals here may well decline. That could cause two problems in American Samoa. First, a reduction in coral growth and number of species could reduce the diversity of habitats used by fish, so a downturn in fish catches from the reef could occur. Second, the reef itself could begin to erode, allowing more storm waves to reach our shorelines and cause damage to roads and houses. Both of these changes would probably occur at a slow but steady pace over the next 50 years.

What to do? Not much, unfortunately, because American Samoa has little impact on the world's changing climate. On the other hand, it makes sense not to worsen the situation by further stressing our coral reefs with rubbish, sewage from piggeries, or dirt (sediment) from land- use activities that flows into streams and out onto the reefs. Additionally, we should also identify and protect any areas where corals appear to be naturally resilient to bleaching events. These hardy survivors could then help re- seed other areas where the corals had died.



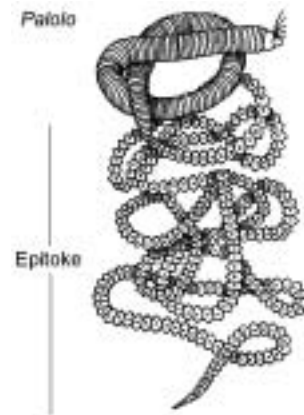
P. Craig
NPS

8. Palolo swarming

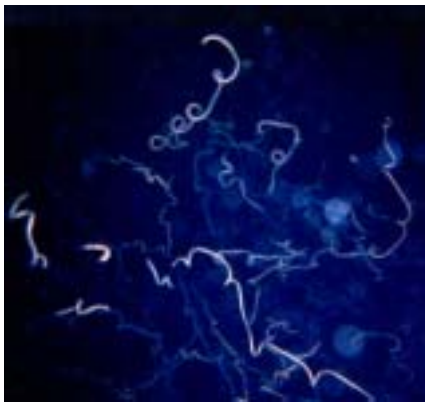
Once or twice a year, *palolo* swarm to the surface of the sea in great numbers. Samoans eagerly await this night and scoop up large amounts of this delicacy along the shoreline with hand nets. This gift from the sea was traditionally greeted with necklaces made from the fragrant *moso'oi* flower and the night of the *palolo* was and still remains a happy time of celebration. The rich taste of *palolo* is enjoyed raw or fried with butter, onions or eggs, or spread on toast.

Palolo is the edible portion of a polychaete worm (*Eunice viridis*) that lives in shallow coral reefs throughout the south central Pacific, although they do not swarm at all of these locations. This phenomenon is well known in Samoa, Rarotonga, Tonga, Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

Palolo are about 12 inches long and live in burrows dug into the coral pavement on the outer reef flat. The worm is composed of two distinct sections (see drawing). The front section is the basic segmented polychaete with eyes, mouth, etc., followed by a string of segments called the “epitoke” that contain reproductive gametes colored blue- green (females) or tan (males). Each epitoke segments bear a single, tiny eyespot that can sense light (that's why islanders are able to use a lantern to attract the *palolo* to their nets).



When it comes time to spawn, *palolo* will back out of their burrows and release the epitoke section from their body. The epitokes then twirl around in the water in vast numbers and look like dancing spaghetti. Around daybreak, the segments dissolve and release the eggs and sperm that they contain. The fertilized eggs hatch into small larvae that drift with the plankton until settling on a coral reef to begin life anew.



Palolo underwater

The swarming of *palolo* is a classic example of the coordinated mass spawning of a simple marine organism. The worms emerge from their burrows during a specific phase of the moon, but the actual date is a bit complicated. The swarms occur on the evenings of the last quarter moon of spring or early summer. In Samoa, this is seven days after the full moon in October or November. Swarming occurs for two or three consecutive nights with the second night usually having the strongest showing.

Palolo usually appear here in October, but sometimes in November or sometimes during both months. This difference is due to the fact that there are approximately thirteen lunar months in one calendar year and the *palolo* use primarily the moon to time their spawning activity. However, if they always spawned every twelve lunar months, their time of spawning would occur earlier every year. After a few years, they would be spawning in August or July (midwinter). In order to make up for this difference, the worms will delay spawning in some years to the thirteen lunar month.

The fact that *palolo* adjust their spawning time means that there are other factors beside the moon that determine the time of year they begin to mature and are ready to release their epitokes. Several

studies on this matter have suggested that rising seawater temperatures, tides, weather, moonlight or other biological signals may play a role in starting the maturation and release of the epitokes. Once the swarming begins, the presence of the *palolo* spawn in the water probably stimulates other *palolo* to release their mature epitokes.

Rules For Predicting Emergence. Everyone seems to have their own methods for predicting when the best *palolo* rising will occur. Several natural clues that preceded the *palolo* rising enabled islanders to predict the correct timing for *palolo* swarming. These included the flowering of the *moso'oi* tree, the closing of the *palulu* flower (a morning glory), a strong smell from the reef, brown foamy scum (from coral spawn) on the ocean, toxins occurring in reef fish, and abrupt weather changes or bad weather such as thunderstorms or lightning.

So, will *palolo* swam seven days after the full moon in October or November? One set of rules used to predict the main night of emergence depends on the calendar date of October's third quarter moon (seven days after October's full moon). If it occurs:

1. From October 1 to 8, *palolo* will not appear until November.
2. From October 8 to 18, *palolo* will not appear in October or the swarming will be weak followed by a stronger appearance in November.
3. From October 19 to November 7, there will be a single, strong swarming centered on this date.
4. From November 8 to 17, there will be a strong appearance on this date, possibly following a weaker swarming during the previous month (see number 2 above).

To further complicate matters, the actual time of emergence of *palolo* in Samoa differs between islands. They usually appear around 10 pm in the Manu'a Islands (however, it has occurred at 1 am there), 1 am on Tutuila and closer to 4 or 5 am in western Samoa. This difference is somewhat consistent from year to year and cannot be accounted for by difference in tides or moonrise. The difference in tides between islands is far less than one hour and the time of moonrise is only minutes apart.



A good catch of palolo

David Itano
DMWR



9. Giant clams (*faisua*)

Giant clams (*faisua*) are magnificent animals and it's always a pleasure to see one of these beauties on the reef. They are large, colorful and, surprisingly, the clams are part animal and part “plant”. That's because giant clams, like corals, have plant- like cells (zooxanthellae) in their tissues that produce free food for the clams. When a clam opens its shell and spreads out its pretty mantle, it exposes these solar panels (the zooxanthellae) to the sun to make food, like a plant unfolding its leaves.



At the same time, the clam also gets some food by drawing water through its siphon and filtering out any tiny food particles (zooplankton). Perhaps that's why giant clams grow so large – they have two very different ways to get food.

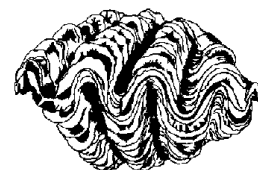
We have two native species of giant clams in our local waters, *Tridacna maxima* and *T. squamosa*, which look fairly similar. They grow to about 12- 15 inches in shell length, although most found today are much smaller because the larger ones have been over- harvested. The largest and most famous species of giant clam (*T. gigas*), which grows as big as a large suitcase, does not occur in our waters.

Because giant clams need sunlight, they inhabit shallow, clear waters down to about 60 feet deep. They grow very slowly; one local clam was 18 years old. They spawn repeatedly over their life span and release millions of eggs each time they spawn, but most young clams do not survive, so the adults have to live a long time and spawn many times to insure that the population survives. Larval clams swim in the water for about a week, then settle permanently onto the reef to grow.

The clams are a favorite food item throughout the South Pacific and their accessibility in shallow waters and slow growth make them susceptible to overfishing. That is very much the case in American Samoa, where few remain on many of our reefs. There is a growing concern that our population of giant clams may be getting too few and far between to spawn successfully.

Partly for that reason, there has been an interest in growing these clams in hatcheries to supply markets for food and the aquarium trade. DMWR has operated a hatchery here for many years and tried to encourage local production by supplying small clams for local 'farmers' to grow them on their reefs. That effort has met with limited success for several reasons. Considerable dedication is needed because it may take years to grow the clams to a commercial size, and the clams have to be protected from poachers and predators. And there are always *fa'alavelave* events that call for contributions of giant clams if anyone has some. In general, giant clam mariculture here has usually supplemented family needs rather than create a commercial business.

Harvest regulations in American Samoa are: giant clams taken for personal consumption must be at least 6 inches in shell length, or if sold, a license is required and giant clams must be at least 7 inches in shell length and sold with the clam still in its shell.



P. Craig, NPS

10. Sharks

We are quite fortunate not to have much of a “shark problem” in American Samoa. Based on conversations with long- time residents here, it appears that there have been very few shark attacks in the Territory and probably no fatalities here in the past 30 years.

The few injuries that have occurred were usually related to fishing activities, and records from the hospital's Emergency Medical Services concur with this. EMS has responded to only one or two shark incidents in recent memory – one was a somewhat humorous account of two fishermen trying to land a shark in their boat. The first fisherman brought the shark up to the side of the boat so that his partner could club it, but his partner missed. The shark then reared up and bit the first fisherman, who then got mad and clubbed his partner for missing the shark.



Blacktip reef shark
(malie)

The sharks (*malie*) living in our nearshore waters are generally not dangerous to swimmers or divers. The most commonly seen species are the blacktip reef shark (*Carcharhinus melanopterus*) and the whitetip reef shark (*Triaenodon obesus*). These are not large sharks, usually about 4- 5 feet in length, although everyone swears that the one they saw was bigger. They feed on fish and shellfish. The whitetip has an unusual habit of resting occasionally on the seafloor during the daytime.

These two shark species are usually not aggressive but they may swim close by to see who's in their area. But both are attracted to wounded and bleeding fish, which accounts for several shark encounters with divers who had tied speared fish around their waists. Need it be suggested that this is not a smart thing to do?

The blacktip is easily frightened away, but on rare occasions small blacktips will sometimes startle a person by swimming directly at them. They look like a little torpedo coming straight at you, but other than your brief panic attack, no harm is done. Another quirk of the adult blacktip is that, at night, it may charge at a diver's light if the light shines on them for too long.

Sightings of more dangerous sharks in our nearshore waters are rare, but over the years, a few tiger sharks have been seen or caught around Tutuila. Also, hammerhead sharks are known to swim into Pago Pago Harbor, where some give birth to young and others are perhaps attracted there by the cannery wastes.

So, yes indeed we have sharks in our shoreline waters, but most are not of serious concern. Yet, someplace deep in our brain yells Danger! whenever we see one. But it is still very exciting to see a shark swim by. Our heart rate jumps, but then the shark is quickly gone, and our only thought is wow, did you see that?

11. The *alogo* surgeonfish -- ruler of the reeftop

American Samoa's coral reefs are truly a wonder of nature. Our sea is home to a very diverse and colorful assemblage of plants and animals. Some 890 species of fish occur here, which is about twice the number of fish species found in Hawaii.

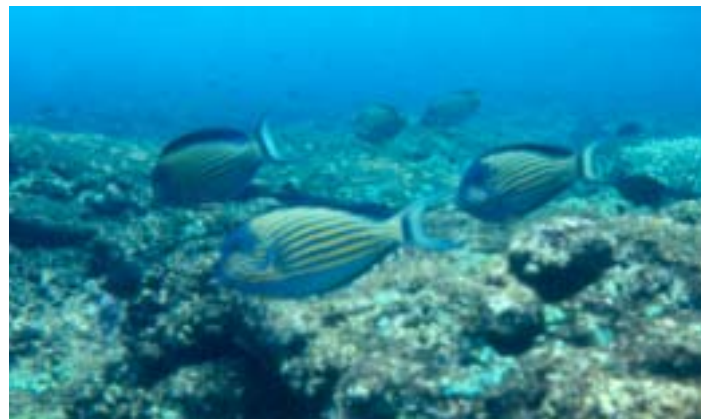


At first glance, the reef seems to be an exotic panorama of mass confusion, complete with bizarre shapes of fish painted in psychedelic colors. It's like looking into an overstocked aquarium. But as you frequent the reef more often, you begin to notice some structure to the confusion. Each species, for example, is generally found only in certain habitats such as shallow reef flats, sandy bottom areas, or deeper waters.

Many individual fish even take up permanent residence at a particular site rather than roam around. One particular fish I watched stayed at the same coral block for 3 years (it had a unique markings on its body, so I could easily identify it). That coral block was home.

Such stay-at-home behavior is actually quite common among coral reef fishes. One abundant species on our reefs that does this is the *alogo*, also known as the blue-lined surgeonfish (*Acanthurus lineatus*) because of its knife-like blade located near its tail. The blade is usually not visible because it is folded away into a groove in the fish's skin. It is a bit poisonous, and careless handling of the fish may cause a puncture and painful swelling in your hand.

The *alogo* grows about 8 inches long and weighs half a pound. It is a very attractive fish, with bold yellow, blue, and black horizontal lines on its sides, although its basic color pattern can be swiftly altered depending on the *alogo*'s mood. For example, when the *alogo* becomes aggressive and chases another fish, its face and fins darken and it looks angry (to me at least).



The *alogo* lives in the foamy surge zone where the waves crash against the reef.

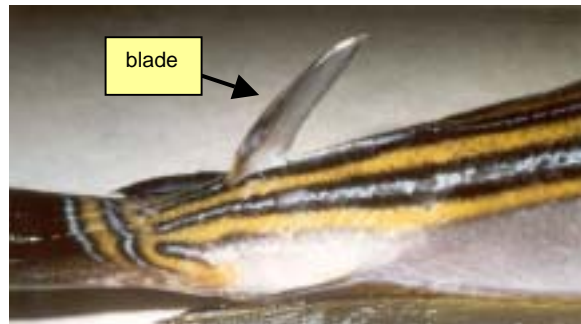
This is not an easy place to live, but the *alogo* is adept at it. When a really rough wave hits, the *alogo* darts down into a hole or over the reef edge into the safety of deeper water.

Like a lot of other reef fish, the *alogo* is a territorial animal, which means that it dwells at a particular patch of reef and protects that site from all other fish. The territory of each *alogo* measures about 5 x 5 feet. There it feeds on the thin film of plant material (algae) that covers the reeftop and appears as a greenish grassy turf. Because of their territorial nature, the *alogo* space themselves evenly across the reeftop, and as they munch away on the algae-covered rocks, they remind me of a herd of miniature cows feeding in a distant pasture.

Many other species of coral reef fish are also algae eaters, and two general patterns of feeding have evolved among these species. One is for a species to become territorial and fiercely guard its own algal patch, the other is to be non-territorial and roam around the reef looking for an unguarded patch of algae to eat. To an underwater observer, this dual approach to feeding is readily visible - - most of the reef is picked clean of all edible algae and looks like bare rock, except where a territorial fish guards its lush algal plot.

The feisty *alogo* defends its plot from all competitors, so the turf algae grows well there and provides all the food the *alogo* needs. Protection of this garden doesn't come cheaply, however. The *alogo* must defend its territory every minute of the day from other fish that lurk nearby, waiting for a chance to sneak in and eat the *alogo's* garden.

That's where the *alogo's* sharp blade comes in handy (see photo). The *alogo* will threaten to viciously sideswipe an intruder with this weapon. Most other fish heed the *alogo's* warning and back-off quickly. It's mostly a bluffing game played repeatedly through the day.



Other aspects of the *alogo's* behavior are fascinating. Every evening at dusk, all the *alogo* migrate off the reeftop to deeper waters where they will spend the night sleeping in crevices to escape being eaten by predators like sharks (*malie*) and jacks (*malauli*, *ulua*). At dawn, they return by the same route. Their migrations to and from the reeftop look like rush-hour traffic on an underwater highway.

The *alogo* is a popular Samoan food fish and it is the single most important species of reef fish caught, accounting for about 30% (by weight) of all reef fish caught in the nearshore subsistence fishery. Most are caught by spear fishermen, particularly at night when the fish are sleeping in reef crevices. Daytime spear fishermen have a much harder time catching them, because the *alogo* tend to stay just out of spearing range.

P. Craig
NPS



12. *Manini* and *pone* -- two favorite reef fish

Manini and *pone* are two favorite food fishes found just about everywhere in shallow waters around the islands of American Samoa. Like *alogo*, they belong to the family of fishes called surgeonfish because of their sharp knife blades that fit into grooves near their tail. *Manini* and *pone* are rather meek fishes, however, and they do not seem to wield their weapons much.

The *manini* (*Acanthurus triostegus*) is a small fish about 5 inches long. Its coloration is yellow with vertical black bars, which looks a bit like a prisoner's uniform and that's why this fish is also called the convict tang.

Manini often swim in large schools containing hundreds or thousands of individuals. There are two good reasons for this schooling behavior - - it helps them escape predators and it also helps them get access to food. First, when a large fish attacks a school of *manini*, the *manini* scatter in all directions like a shotgun blast. This commotion momentarily confuses the predator and the *manini* get away. Each *manini* thus has a better chance of not getting eaten if it stays in a group.



The *manini* also cleverly use their schooling behavior to get food. They like to feed on the thin green algae turf that grows on reef rocks, but these algae patches are usually guarded fiercely by *alogo* surgeonfish and damselfishes (*tu'u'u*) who are nasty to intruders.

Just the sight of a *manini* gets them livid with rage. A single *manini* would not stand a chance to get by these guards, but a large group of *manini* can succeed. The *alogo* and damselfishes are simply overwhelmed when hundreds of *manini* descend into their protected territory to feed. While the *alogo* futilely chases one *manini* away, a hundred others are gobbling up its garden.

Manini spawning is a spectacular event. When conditions are right, thousands will assemble to spawn at a particular time and place. They often spawn in or near the reef channel (*ava*) at dusk when the tide is high. Their behavior and coloration is noticeably different at this time, as they swim around in an agitated fashion and change color to white with wider black bars.



This seething mass of fish mills about until they can't take the excitement any longer. A group of them will suddenly burst upwards in the water column, spawn, and return to the seafloor again, all in a split second. Although this happens fast, you can tell that the fish actually spawned because the milt expelled by the male fish looks like a puff of smoke from a gun. When the spawning action really gets going, it looks like an underwater version of popcorn popping.

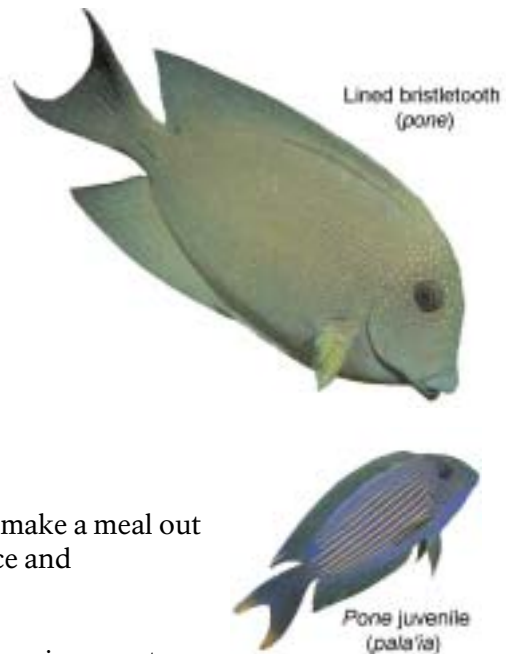
After spawning, the fertilized eggs drift away with the currents. About 1- 3 months later, the small *manini* that survived this larval stage are ready to settle back onto the reef.

Pone (*Ctenochaetus striatus*, or the lined bristletooth surgeonfish) are a different type of surgeonfish in two respects. They are a dull brown color and they have funny teeth. Their lack of spectacular coloration is somewhat of an embarrassment in tropical waters which are renown for brightly colored fish. *Pone* are, however, one of the most abundant fishes on the reefs, so they must be doing something right.

Their teeth have evolved very differently from other surgeonfishes because what they feed upon is quite different. Instead of having actual teeth to bite off algae the way that *alogo* and *manini* do, *pone* have a mouthful of bristles which they use as a comb or brush to collect the sediment and detritus that lies on reef surfaces. The detritus they eat includes all the small bits and pieces of formerly living plants and animals. The detritus in your backyard, for example, might include grass clippings, old *ulu* leaves, decaying coconut husks, rotting papayas, and numerous unseen dead insects.

Detritus is found everywhere, but few large animals can make a meal out of it. *Pone* can, and that may account for their abundance and widespread distribution on coral reefs.

Every several years or so, *pone* have a very successful spawning event, and uncountable numbers of their young (*pala'ia*) settle onto the reef. *Pala'ia* are very pretty and look like small dark *alogo*. But their beauty fades as they grow, and in just a few weeks they turn brown in color.



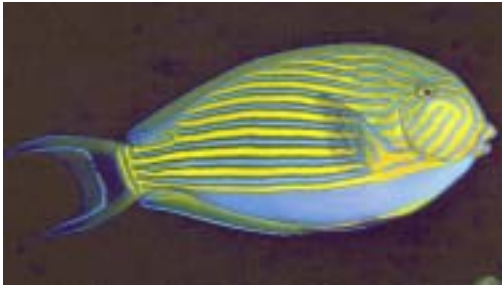
P. Craig
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13. Old fish caught in Samoa

This is hard to believe - - an 18 year old *alogo* was caught in American Samoa. That's old enough to get a drivers license.

We're talking about the *alogo*, also known as the bluelined surgeonfish *Acanthurus lineatus*. Nothing unusual about its size - - it was the standard 8- inch *alogo* you see in the stores. And I ate it. All that remained were the little bones that scientists use to determine the age of the fish. These bones, when looked at under a microscope, have concentric circles, one for each year, just like tree rings. You just count the rings and that's how old the fish is.



What's even more astonishing is that an *alogo* caught in Australia's Great Barrier Reef was 44 years old. I am not kidding. Reputable scientists determined the age of that fish. There were also other *alogo* in the Australian sample that were 20- 40 years old, so the record age of 44 is believable. These old fish were not unusually large, just the standard size *alogo*.

It turns out that this is not unusual for coral reef fish.

Recent studies show that several other species of surgeonfish (*pone*), unicornfish (*ume*), groupers (*gatala*) and snappers (*mu*) can also live up to 20- 40 years. These findings are beginning to reshape our understanding about the ecology of coral reef fishes and their vulnerability to overfishing. The occurrence of many long- lived fish in a population indicates that the coral reef fish community is fairly stable, with a low replacement of individual fish. Once a young fish gets to the reef, it may be there for decades.

Why would these fish live so long? The answer provides some key information about the environment that the fish live in. Fish typically exhibit this type of life cycle (long life span and repeat spawning) when few of their young survive. That's certainly the case for coral reef fish - their thousands of eggs and larvae drift around with the ocean currents for weeks or months. Very few of them make it back to the reefs. So, if all their young usually die, the fish need to live a long time and spawn repeatedly to make sure that at least some young survive. If the adults lived only a short time, the population might disappear altogether.

Every so often however, during years when the ocean currents and conditions are just right, massive numbers of young fish survive and appear on our reefs, like *pala'ia* (young *pone* surgeonfish) or *i'asina* (young goatfish).

While this is, of course, all very interesting, there is an important take- home message. It is easy to overfish populations with these life history characteristics. Having a long life span and spawning repeatedly may be a successful strategy under natural conditions, but it also makes these fish extra vulnerable to overfishing. That's because fishermen tend to harvest the larger (older) fish in the population. Under heavy fishing pressure, all the old fish may be taken, leaving only the smaller, younger fish. That would put the population in a very precarious situation, because the younger fish



i'asina in a basket trap

left may not yet be old enough to spawn. This type of overfishing probably occurred on Tutuila's coral reefs in the 1990s and may be continuing. It is a common belief that fish on our reefs are fewer and smaller than they used to be, and there is some scientific evidence to support this.

Two fisheries in American Samoa target these coral reef fish -- the subsistence fishery and the artisanal (small-scale commercial) fishery. Subsistence fishing includes the multiple ways that Samoans have always caught nearshore fish. These catches declined significantly in the early 1990s, but the current status is not known.

The artisanal fishery that sells reef fish to local stores is a relatively recent development. It is conducted by teams of night divers who use underwater flashlights and spears to catch sleeping fish. In the mid 1990s, many of these divers switched from free-diving to scuba diving, which greatly increased the number of fish they could take. It is likely that this type of fishing had a significant impact on our reef fish populations, so the use of scuba gear while spear fishing was banned in the Territory in early 2000.

So, that 18 year old *alogo* was not just an unusual trophy – it was also a vital member of the fish community that spawned year after year (for about 14 years after it reached maturity at age 4), thereby insuring that some young fish survived to maintain a healthy population of *alogo* on our reefs.

P. Craig
NPS



Fish for dinner



Roadside fish seller

14. Tuna

The ocean around us supports a variety of offshore fishes, such as *masimasi* (mahimahi), swordfish, wahoo and marlin, but by far the most commercially important of these pelagic fishes are the tunas. The most common in our local waters are albacore (*apakoa*), yellowfin (*asiasi*), skipjack (*atu*) and dogtooth tuna (*tagi*).

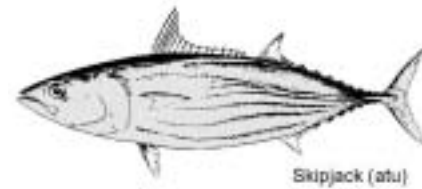
Dogtooth tuna are occasionally seen near shore, but tuna prefer the open ocean and are wide-ranging species. These ultra-streamlined fish undertake impressive oceanic travels -- one skipjack was caught here that had been tagged near Australia over 2000 miles away. But the general movements of tuna in our area are not known.

Fishermen catch tuna in our area by trolling at FADs (fish aggregation devices), offshore seamounts, or wherever seabird flocks are feeding (the flocks indicate the presence of baitfish that the tuna are probably also feeding upon). In recent years, commercial catches of locally-caught tuna have increased in the longline fishery that targets albacore using long lengths (extending 5- 40 miles) of monofilament longline with baited hooks.

Given that American Samoa has two major tuna canneries and we are the No. 1 port in the United States in terms of value of fish landed (about \$200,000,000 of tuna per year), it is somewhat surprising to realize that few of the fish canned here are actually caught within American Samoa's waters. That's because tuna are not particularly abundant in our area, so local catches delivered to the canneries amount to less than 1% of the 200,000 tons of tuna processed at the canneries each year. Commercial quantities of tuna are generally located 1000s of miles away from American Samoa, so the big purse seiners and foreign longliners that you see docked in Pago Pago Harbor do not fish locally. Instead, they must travel for about 1 week just to reach their distant fishing grounds. The reason why these boats deliver their catch to the canneries here is simply because the tuna canned in American Samoa can enter US markets tariff-free as "Made in USA", and the US is one of the largest consumers of tuna.

A rather enjoyable feature about tuna is that their meat generally lacks parasites, so people eat raw tuna in a variety of forms (*oka*, sashimi).

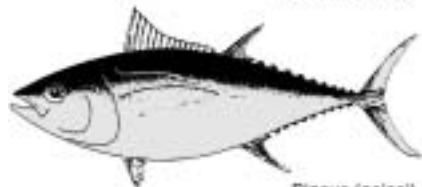
P. Craig, NPS



Skipjack (atu)



Yellowfin (asiasi)



Bigeye (asiasi)



Albacore (apakoa)



15. Turtles In trouble

In Samoan folklore, sea turtles were believed to have the power to save fishermen who were lost at sea by bringing them safely to shore. The Samoan word for sea turtle, “*Ta sa*,” translates literally to “sacred fish”, presumably because of this ability.

Samoans have traditionally harvested sea turtles for food, and the shell was often made into bracelets, combs, fishing hooks, and also was used in the headpiece worn by a princess during important dance ceremonies. Turtles were incorporated into Samoan songs and art, and there are even turtle petroglyphs (rock carvings) in Faga'itua and Leone. And, of course, there's the legend about the Turtle and Shark that appear in the sea at Vaitogi when villagers sing a special song.



TURTLE PETROGLYPH

It therefore seems extra unfortunate that turtle numbers in Samoa have declined so much that they are now considered endangered species. Although it is difficult to determine how many are left, it is clear that few females lay eggs each year in the whole Territory. This drop parallels the worldwide decline of sea turtles due to overharvest, loss of nesting beaches, and incidental kills in fishing gear. Pacific populations of one of our species (hawksbills) are “rapidly approaching extinction” according to a recent review.

Two turtle species, the green and hawksbill, are the most frequently found turtles in our local waters. The hawksbill or “*laumei uga*” (*Eretmochelys imbricata*) is usually the species that nests on Tutuila beaches. This is a solitary nester, and perhaps only 1 or 2 hawksbill females now use a suitable beach. The hawksbill is occasionally poisonous - - in the late 1950s, many people in Aunu'u got very sick after eating one.

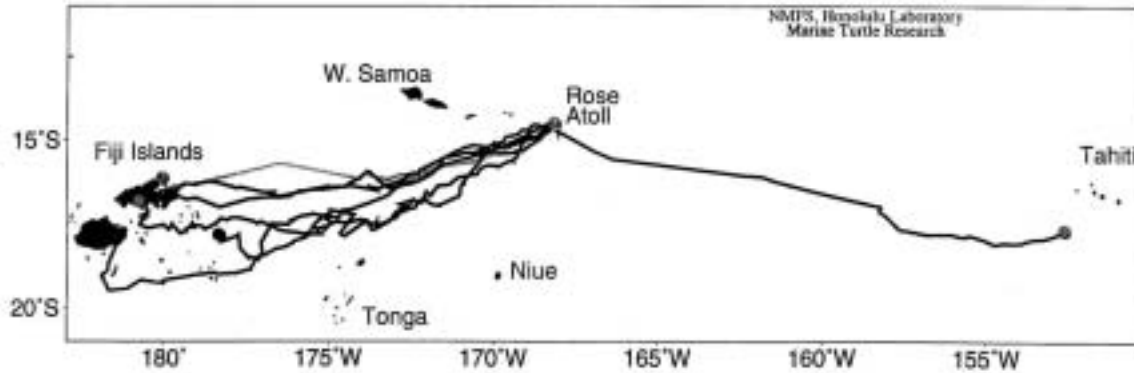


Our other species is the green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), named after the color of its fat. It is also found around our islands, but it nests primarily at Rose Atoll. These long-lived turtles have rather complicated life cycles that involve repeated long-distance migrations to and from American Samoa. They start life as eggs buried in beach sand. Once a female has laid her first group of about 100 eggs, she will return at 2-week intervals to lay more. In about 60 days, the eggs hatch and the little turtles dart into the ocean. Where they go is not known, but eventually they take up

residence at some feeding area that may be far away from American Samoa.

There they remain for some 20- 25 years until they become sexually mature, at which time they return to the very same beach where they came from. After laying eggs there, the adult females then turn around and go back to their distant feeding grounds. That's the basic pattern for most sea turtle species throughout the world. Swim far away to some nesting beach, then swim back to their feeding area, back and forth every few years thereafter.

We have some very interesting migration data for green sea turtles at Rose Atoll (see map below), where a tagging study was conducted in the mid- 1990s. In all, 10 tagged turtles were recovered after nesting at the atoll. Eight swam 800 miles directly to Fiji (unfortunately two of them were eaten when they got there). Another went past Fiji to Vanuatu, and the last one went in the completely opposite direction to French Polynesia near Tahiti.



It's understandable why the adult turtles do not stay at Rose Atoll after nesting, because their favorite food (seagrass) is absent there. But I wonder why don't they just stay in Fiji where they have both seagrass and nesting beaches.

Anyway, this pattern of large- scale movements between a turtle's nesting area and feeding area means that turtle stocks in the South Pacific Ocean are all mixed together. While some of “our” turtles were caught in Fiji, the reciprocal is also true - - turtles that feed in our waters probably originated from islands elsewhere in the South Pacific. This mixing greatly complicates conservation efforts. It means that region- wide cooperation among the island countries of the South Pacific is essential; otherwise, while we try to protect turtles in American Samoa, our turtles may be killed later when they migrate to other islands.

Tough federal and territorial laws exist in American Samoa to protect turtles and their eggs, because they are an endangered species. There is a \$10,500 penalty for killing a turtle or importing any turtle product into the Territory (shells, stuffed turtles, turtle combs, etc.). Fortunately fewer turtles seem to be taken in American Samoa, probably due to their scarcity but also due to outreach programs that inform children and villagers about the endangered status of the turtles.

In addition to education efforts, we must protect both the turtles and their habitat. Sandy beaches are essential for turtle nesting areas, so hauling sand away from our beaches results in the loss of critical habitat for these species. No beaches, no nesting turtles.

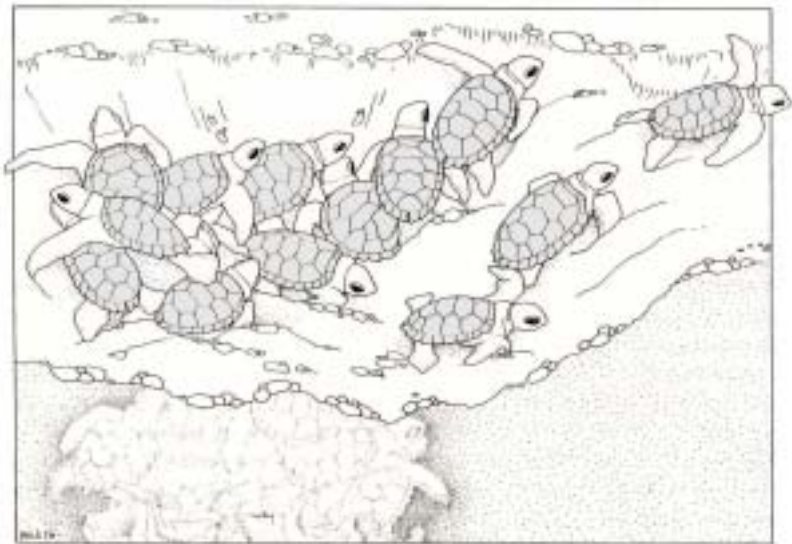
Although some villagers may still like to eat turtle meat and eggs, the point to remember is that turtles are a disappearing resource in American Samoa. They are a part of Samoa's heritage and need to be vigorously protected, or they may be lost altogether. It is a sad commentary that many young Samoans have never even seen a live sea turtle.



P. Craig
NPS

16. Baby turtles: look but don't touch!

Baby sea turtles. They're so neat - - perfectly formed miniatures, all racing down the beach together to get into the water. Kids think they're cute and they want to keep them as pets, and plenty of parents think baby turtles make great pets. After all, they don't bark or fight, and they're so tiny so they don't take up much space. They don't eat much, either.



Also, some people in American Samoa believe that when a nest of turtles hatches and all the babies run to the sea, their mothers are waiting out on the reef to eat them! Because of this misguided belief, some people collect baby turtles and keep them at home or release them on a different beach. The very best thing we can do for baby turtles is: **LEAVE THEM ALONE!**

Many years of scientific research on sea turtles have taught us that mother turtles do not eat their babies. Adult turtles eat mostly seagrass, algae (seaweed), and sponges (the living kind, NOT the kitchen kind). In fact, after the female turtle has laid eggs (sometimes two or three times in the space of a few weeks), she goes back out to the sea and leaves the area. For example, after nesting at Rose Atoll, some of American Samoa's green sea turtles swam to Fiji – over 800 miles away! So, those of you with good intentions out there, rest assured that mom will not be eating her babies, and you do not need to collect the baby turtles from the beach to save them from her.



It is true that baby turtles do have predators, such as large fishes and sharks. Nature provides the turtles with some protection however: (1) most turtles hatch at night when predators might have difficulty seeing them, (2) baby turtles are dark-colored, and this “cryptic coloration” enables them to be camouflaged as they swim over the reef, (3) female turtles can lay over 100 eggs in a single nest — when this many turtles hatch at the same time, a big jack (*ulua*) or shark (*malie*) can't possibly catch and eat all of them, so some have a chance to hide in the reef. This is called “predator swamping” and is common among reptiles (lizards, snakes, turtles, etc.). For this reason it is a bad idea to take “just a few” baby turtles away, and release them later. The “predator swamping” effect is lost and those baby turtles will probably end up as some fish's lunch.



surviving, let alone finding their home beach later (that is, if they don't just die in the bucket).

A critical reason to leave baby turtles on the beach is that THAT EXACT BEACH is very important to them. Baby turtles remember or “imprint on” the beach where they hatched. Like many animals, turtles have little natural magnets in their brains that allow them to home- in on their native beach. Years later when it's time for them to reproduce, adult turtles, with their internal “homing devices”, will seek that same beach. If hatchling turtles are removed from their home beaches and kept in someone's bathtub or bucket, chances are they will become confused and have little chances of

Sea turtles have been around for millions of years and survived just fine before humans started taking their babies off the beach, whether to “protect” them or otherwise. Newly- hatched turtles, just like their gigantic moms and dads, are wild animals and are not meant to be kept as pets. The ocean provides better food and a cleaner, healthier environment for turtles than humans can.

Turtles are far- ranging animals that swim thousands and thousands of miles in the sea during their lifetimes. When they go to their nesting islands, they meet with other turtles, mate, lay eggs, and so keep their species alive. Every time a female sea turtle finds her way back to the beach where she was born and nests there, she completes the ancient, natural cycle that keeps sea turtles alive on Earth. Imagine a turtle imprisoned in a bucket, tub, or garbage can, swimming endlessly in tiny circles, never to see the open ocean, never to meet another turtle, never to help its species survive.

Sea turtles all over the world are dwindling in number. All species are listed as threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act, including our own green and hawksbill sea turtles. If we want our children and grandchildren to be able to see these huge, magnificent sea turtles swimming alive and free in the ocean, where they belong, we have to do our best to protect them now. The very best way we can to do that is by protecting the beaches where they nest, letting the baby turtles find their own way into the sea, and not hunting the big turtles. Future generations of turtles (and people) will thank us.

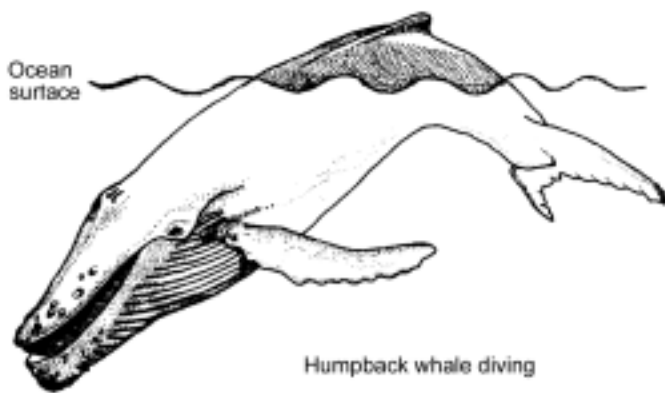
Holly Freifeld
DMWR



17. Whales Ho !

September and October are the peak months when humpback whales (*tafola*) visit our balmy waters. It's almost impossible not to get excited when one is spotted. Most of us feel inexplicably privileged for a brief glimpse into their mysterious world, and there's an uncontrollable urge to shout 'thar she blows'.

Part of our fascination with whales is their huge size, of course. Adult humpbacks (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) grow up to 50 feet long and weigh about 40 metric tons (which equals the combined weight of 200 sumo wrestlers). We rarely get a chance to see the whole whale, except when they make a spectacular leap (“breach”) out of the water. We usually see only their air spout or their humped back as they prepare to dive:



Humpbacks are air-breathing mammals (like ourselves) that live their complete lives in the ocean. They reproduce like all land mammals, but they do it underwater. Whales obviously have to make sure that their babies don't drown while being born. Mother whales nurse their young for about a year.

These whales eat small schooling fishes and krill (small shrimps). They feed by sucking in tons of water in a single mouthful, and then strain the

food out as they expel the water. The out-going water is filtered through specialized structures called “baleen”, which looks (with a little imagination) like a mouthful of coconut fronds. Humpbacks lack real teeth because they have no need to bite or chew their tiny food items. It seems odd that the whale, which is one of the world's largest animals ever, feeds on such small things.

The appearance of humpbacks in Samoa is an important segment of their grand migration up and down the South Pacific Ocean. During the warm months of the southern hemisphere, our whales feed in the rich waters of Antarctica, located 3,200 miles to the south of us (see map). Biologists call this particular group of whales the “Group- 5 Antarctic stock”. When Antarctic's bitter winter sets in, the Group- 5 whales seek warmer waters. They migrate northward, with some going towards Australia and others migrating towards Tonga. Apparently most of this latter group remains near Tonga, but at least some migrate onward to Samoa. However, one of our whales was sighted near Tahiti, so their migration patterns still hold some surprises for us.



A few humpbacks might arrive in Samoa as early as July or leave here as late as December, but they are most common here in September and October. They occur in small groups of adults or in mother- calf pairs. Humpbacks have been sighted around all 7 of the islands in the Territory, but we don't know how many are actually here. They migrate here to mate and give birth to their young. And, interestingly, they stop feeding while here - - only when they return to the Antarctic do they resume feeding.

While an occasional spout of whale- breath can be seen in our local waters, you can also hear the whales if you stick your head in the water. Humpbacks are famous for their unique “songs”. Yes, whales sing! During mating season, male humpbacks sing to either attract females or to defend their territory from other male whales, much like birds do with their own songs.



Humpback whales
(mother and calf)

The whale's song is haunting and complex. It sounds like a eerie series of chirps, squeaks, whistles and grunts. I know that “grunts” don't seem like they could make much of a song, but you just have to take my word for it. It is unlike anything you have ever heard. Scuba divers can hear the singing if they hold their breath and pay attention. Snorkelers can also hear the songs, but they have to dive at least 10 feet deep to get below the noisy surface layer of water. The song lasts about 10- 20 minutes, it has a beginning, middle and end, and all males of the same stock sing the same song. Biologists can therefore identify where a whale comes from by listening to its song. For example, Hawaiian humpbacks sing a different song (than the Samoan humpbacks), because they belong to a different stock of whales that migrates between Hawaii and Alaska. The whales' song is one of the world's wonders of nature and it's at our doorstep.

Humpback whales are currently listed as an endangered species because their world- wide populations were decimated by whalers in the 1800's and 1900's. By the time commercial whaling was stopped in 1966, 95% of our stock (Group- 5) had been killed. Recovery of Group- 5 has been unexpectedly slow, probably due to continued whaling by Soviet factory ships as late as 1972 and a subsistence harvest of these whales occurred in Tonga up to 1978. In any event, whales in American Samoa remain few in number, and in some years hardly any are seen here.

Because humpbacks use our waters to give birth to their young, it is important to protect them when they are here. Enjoy their presence, but don't pester them. Avoid the temptation to boat right up to them or follow them at close quarters. Boaters, divers and swimmers should stay at least 100 yards away, and watch from there.

P. Craig, NPS



18. Mammal, reptile & amphibian checklists

| Common and Samoan names | Scientific name | Origin ¹ |
|--|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| MAMMALS | | |
| Bats | | |
| Samoan fruit bat ² (<i>pe'a vao</i>) | <i>Pteropus samoensis</i> | N |
| White-naped fruit bat ^{2,3} (<i>pe'a fanua</i>) | <i>Pteropus tonganus</i> | N |
| Sheath-tailed bat (<i>pe'ape'avai</i>) | <i>Emballonura semicaudata</i> | N |
| Rodents | | |
| Polynesian rat (<i>isumu</i>) | <i>Rattus exulans</i> | PI |
| Roof rat (<i>isumu</i>) | <i>Rattus rattus</i> | MI |
| Norway rat (<i>isumu</i>) | <i>Rattus norvegicus</i> | MI |
| House mouse (<i>isumu</i>) | <i>Mus musculus</i> | MI |
| Others | | |
| Pig (<i>pua'a</i>) | <i>Sus scrofa</i> | PI |
| Dogs | <i>Canis familiaris</i> | PI |
| Cats | <i>Felis domesticus</i> | MI |
| Marine mammals (incomplete listing) | | |
| Humpback whale (<i>tafola</i>) | <i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i> | N |
| Sperm whale | <i>Physeter catodon</i> | N |
| Dolphins | | N |
| REPTILES | | |
| Sea turtles | | |
| Hawksbill sea turtle (<i>laumei uga</i>) | <i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i> | N |
| Green sea turtle (<i>laumei ena'ena, fonu</i>) | <i>Chelonia mydas</i> | N |
| Leatherback sea turtle ⁴ | | |
| Geckos | | |
| Pelagic gecko (<i>mo'o</i>) | <i>Cyrtodactylus pelagicus</i> | N |
| Polynesian gecko (<i>mo'o</i>) | <i>Gehyra oceanica</i> | N |
| Mourning gecko (<i>mo'o</i>) | <i>Lepidodactylus lugubris</i> | N |
| Stump-toed gecko (<i>mo'o</i>) | <i>Peropus mutilatus</i> | N |
| House gecko (<i>mo'o</i>) | <i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i> | MI |
| Skinks | | |
| Snake-eyed skink (<i>pili</i>) | <i>Ablepharus boutonii</i> | N |
| Micronesian skink (<i>pili</i>) | <i>Emoia adspersa</i> | N |
| Azure-tailed skink (<i>pili</i>) | <i>Emoia cyanura</i> | N |
| Lawes skink (<i>pili oua</i>) | <i>Emoia lawesii</i> | N |
| Black skink (<i>pili uli</i>) | <i>Emoia nigra</i> | N |
| Samoan skink (<i>pili lape</i>) | <i>Emoia samoensis</i> | N |
| Moth skink (<i>pili</i>) | <i>Lipinia noctua</i> | N |
| Snakes | | |
| Pacific boa ⁵ (<i>gata</i>) | <i>Candoia bibroni</i> | N |
| Blind burrowing snake ⁶ | <i>Typhlops braminus</i> | MI |
| AMPHIBIANS | | |
| Marine toad ⁶ (<i>lage</i>) | <i>Bufo marinus</i> | MI |

¹ N = native, PI = Polynesian introduction, MI = modern introduction² Also known as flying foxes³ Also known as white-necked, Tongan or insular fruit bat⁴ A juvenile was caught on longline gear near Swains in 1993.⁵ Ta'u Island⁶ Tutuila Island

19. Flying Foxes (fruit bats)

Large flying foxes, also known as fruit bats, are one of the more unusual animals in American Samoa, especially for visitors from areas where bats are small and rarely seen. Three species inhabit our islands – two large fruit bats (*Pteropus samoensis*, *P. tonganus*) and a small insect-eating bat (*Emballonura semicaudata*; see Chapter 32). These three are the only native mammals in the Samoan islands.



The two flying foxes are especially distinctive: they are renowned for being large (with a wing span up to 3 feet wide) and active both day and night. *Pteropus samoensis* (*pe'a vao*) is commonly called the Samoan flying fox. It is presently found only in the Samoan Archipelago and Fiji. It once occurred in Tonga but is now extinct there. The other flying fox, *Pteropus tonganus* (*pe'a fanua*), has several common names such as the Insular, White-naped, White-necked or Tongan fruit bat. It has a wider distribution in the Pacific, ranging from islands off Papua New Guinea to the Cook Islands.

In American Samoa, flying foxes can be seen flying, soaring, feeding, or just hanging in trees. Although individuals of the two species overlap in size (adults weigh 300- 600 grams), there are ways to differentiate them from a distance. When silhouetted against the sky, the *pe'a vao* has a more triangular shape, with wings that are slightly scalloped and relatively dark and opaque. Their flight appears more relaxed, usually with slower wing beats and deeper wing strokes. It is not unusual to observe them soaring in the air in the day, taking advantage of rising currents of warm air (thermals) to seemingly float up and about without flapping their wings.

In contrast, *pe'a fanua* has a more cross-like appearance: the neck and head appear more pronounced, the wings are narrower and more scalloped, and the hind legs stretch out like a tail. In flight, *pe'a fanua* tend to have faster wing beats and shallower wing strokes. They are less likely to soar in thermals and generally take a directional route to and from roosting sites at dawn or dusk.



White-naped flying fox (*pe'a fanua*)



Samoan flying fox (*pe'a vao*)

Despite these differences, it takes keen eye to distinguish the two species from a distance. Close up, the *pe'a vao* may sport a white to yellowish triangular patch that starts from the forehead and extends to the back of its head, or it may simply exhibit a generally grayish head with or without flecks of white hair (much like a graying man). Its neck and shoulder areas are a beautiful russet brown, while the rest of the body has a dusty black appearance. The *pe'a fanua*, on the other hand, has a basically black head and body. These black areas serve to set off a distinctive band of creamy yellow on the back of the neck and which extends slightly below its shoulders as if in a cape. This explains why they are called white-naped fruit bats although the color is not really white.

The two species have quite different social behaviors. During the daytime, *pe'a fanua* form large roosting groups or colonies of hundreds to thousands of bats. These colonies are generally organized according to their reproductive status and may be composed of bachelor males, clusters of females defended by an adult male (suggesting a harem mating system), or groups of females and their young. In any case, individuals appear to be relatively “faithful” to their roosts, usually returning to their respective colonies following foraging flights.

But the *pe'a vao* does not do this. Instead, these bats usually roost singly on branches, or as pairs of males and females (suggesting a monogamous mating system), or as a female with its young. When roosting, *pe'a vao* males tend to hang from exposed or dead branches of trees on ridge tops while females roost in more covered positions on forest slopes.



There is little information on how long flying foxes live, although some held in captivity have lived 20 years. We assume that they live shorter lives in the wild, because natural catastrophes like hurricanes may periodically reduce their numbers, as occurred in the early 1990s. With proper management and protection from hunting, the populations will generally bounce back but this requires a number of years, because females of both species probably have only one young per year and we do not know how many of their young survive to adulthood.

The care and energy that both bat species put into their young is remarkable. Pregnancy lasts approximately 5 months in both species, and once the young are born, it takes at least another 3 months before they are weaned. Even after they are capable of flight, the young continue to receive parental care, perhaps until they reach adult size or become reproductively active themselves. We know this from observations of pairs of individuals seen to alight independently on the same tree and subsequently come together with one individual (presumably the juvenile) being wrapped up in the other's wings as they settle down to roost. Sightings of pregnant females and individuals carrying young in flight indicate that *pe'a vao* give birth mostly between April and June. *Pe'a fanua* births appear to occur year-round but are more common in January and June to August.

Although their name indicates that they are fruit-eaters, both species also eat nectar, pollen, leaves, and sap. They tend to consume only the “juice” of fruits and leaves. To do this, a bat will carefully chew on food (usually eating around large seeds), press the pulp against the roof of its mouth with its tongue, squeeze and suck in the juice, then spit out most of the pulp in pellets called “ejecta.”

These ejecta are especially abundant under breadfruit trees (*ulu*) where the bats have been feeding overnight. Among the splatter of mushy bits of the fruit, you can find these pellets of drier material that sometimes show tooth and palatal (roof of the mouth) impressions, much like a dental cast produced at a dentist's clinic. Ejecta pellets help us to identify food items that bats eat even when we do not directly observe them feeding. In addition to direct observations and analysis of ejecta, their diets are also determined through pollen present in facial hair and in feces. These data help scientists determine which plants are important because they are preferred, nutritious and/or available year- round.

At least 42 plant species provide food for the *pe'a vao* and *pe'a fanua* in American Samoa. These consist mostly of forest tree species, such as *aoa* (*Ficus prolixa* and *Ficus obliqua*), *asi* (*Syzigium inophylloides*), *a'amati'e* (*Elaeocarpus ulianus*), *ifi* (*Inocarpus fagifer*), *fetau* (*Callophyllum inophyllum*), *mamalava* (*Planchonella samoensis*), and *tava* (*Pometia pinnata*). The bats also eat fruits grown by man such as mango (*Mangifera indica*) and *ulu* (*Artocarpus altilis*), but damage to crops is limited if fruits are harvested before they ripen on the tree. Also, when you hear the bats squealing in banana patches at night, it's usually because they are fighting over the banana flowers, not the fruits. Despite the broad similarity in their diets, *pe'a fanua* exploit flower resources and feed on trees (especially domestic ones) closer to human habitations more often than do *pe'a vao*.



The rewards of the interaction between flying foxes and plants are certainly not one- sided, because the plants and forest also benefit from being visited by bats. When the *pe'a fanua* visit patches of *vavae* flowers (*Ceiba pentandra*), for example, they help transfer pollen from one tree to another and that, in turn, enhances fruit formation and production. Flying foxes are also important for seed dispersal. When they consume fruits with small seeds (such as *aoa*), some seeds that get swallowed do not get digested but are carried and deposited away from the tree source. In American Samoa, flying foxes are the only animals that can carry fruits with large seeds, such as *ifi*, over distances and uphill. Studies of bat movements on Tutuila reveal that bats may commute between feeding areas up to 40 km apart during a single night. Seeds that are transported can colonize naturally bare or cleared areas and aid in the revegetation of gaps in forests where trees may have fallen from disease, age, or bad weather.



It may bother us that flying foxes eat some of the fruit that we grow for ourselves, but these bats are tireless workers that help maintain the health of our rainforest, and they are fun to watch.

Ruth C. B. Utzurrum
DMWR

20. Banyan trees - lifeline for Samoa's wildlife

In the complex world of the Samoan rainforest, each of our native plants and wildlife contributes a unique and essential part. Just as the beauty of a hymn would be less without the harmonies of different voices, so the beauty of the Samoan forests would be less if any of our plants or animals were lost. And yet, as in a choir, there are a few natural “voices” that sing out above the rest. These are the plants and animals most important for the harmony of Samoa's natural world. Foremost among these are the *aoa*, or banyan trees.

Banyans are fascinating plants. Now, a lot of people don't think of plants as “fascinating”. After all, they just sit there, right? Well, not banyans. Although banyans give life to countless animals by feeding them with their fruit, all banyans start out as killers - stranglers, to be exact. Another name for the banyan is “strangler fig”.



The *aoa* is a member of the fig family. They earn the other part of their name by their strange way of growing. Most plants, of course, sprout from seeds that have fallen to the ground, and grow up toward the sun. Banyans usually do the opposite: they sprout from seeds that have been left by birds high in a tree, and grow down toward the ground. The seedling first anchors itself by sending roots into the little pocket of decaying leaves or moss where it has sprouted, then it wraps more and more roots around the tree that supports it, called the “host” tree. Soon the banyan's roots are spreading down the trunk, and finally they reach all the way to the ground. By then the fate of the host tree is sealed. It is literally buried beneath the growing banyan - strangled to death. Eventually the body of the host tree decays away, leaving no trace behind, except sometimes a long hollow extending up inside the middle of the full- grown banyan. Because banyans will start life on almost any type of host tree, they kill very few of any particular kind, and so are no threat to other plant species. Still, they're rather...fascinating, don't you think?

In Samoa, we have two different kinds of native banyan trees, both called *aoa*. One kind (*Ficus prolixa*) becomes a huge tree, with an enormous spreading trunk that seems to be a twisted net of many smaller trunks. This kind of banyan has green fruit. The stronghold of this kind of banyan in American Samoa was the Tafuna Plain, where hundreds of the huge trees used to grow. Today, only a small fraction remain. Most have been cut down to make room for the uncontrolled development in this part of Tutuila. Fortunately, a few magnificent trees still survive.

The other kind of *aoa* (*Ficus obliqua*) is usually much smaller and does not have such a spreading form. Its trunk usually looks more “normal”, though it may have a hollow inside. This type of banyan seems to favor cliffs and steep slopes, although it can also be found on flat land. It doesn't always start life as a strangler, but sometimes grows up by itself. The easiest way to recognize this kind of *aoa* is its fruit, which is orange or red when ripe.

There is also an introduced kind of banyan tree in Samoa, the *pulu*. This tree, originally from Asia, is usually planted along the coast in villages; a large one grows next to the public market in

Fagatogo. *Pulu* trees differ from *aoa* trees by their much larger leaves and larger, fuzzy red fruit. Although *pulu* are handsome trees that are useful for stabilizing our coasts, their fruits are not favored by wildlife, and so they do not play an important role in Samoa's natural symphony.

In contrast, both kinds of *aoa* are very important for wildlife. In fact, a good case can be made that they are the most important tree species for the fruit-eating birds and bats of Samoa. There are two reasons why they are so important. First, they produce enormous amounts of fruit. When one of the huge banyans has crop of fruit, its spreading crown has room for a whole army of hungry fruit-eaters. In a single tree, I have seen three *lupe* (Pacific Pigeons), eight *manutagi* (Purple-capped Fruit-Doves), four *manuma* (Many-colored Fruit-Doves), a dozen *fuiia* (Samoan Starling), scattered *iao* (Wattled Honeyeaters) and *miti vao* (Polynesian Starlings) - all at the same time. No other Samoan trees provide such a feast. The second reason why banyans are so important is that they fruit at all times of year. Most kinds of large forest trees have a definite fruiting season: for example, *asi* tends to fruit from April to July, but some banyans have ripe fruit every month of the year. Between 10- 30% of banyan trees have ripe fruit in any given month. This means that a fruit-eater can always find banyan fruit, even if all other fruits were out of season.

One Samoan bird has come to depend on the reliable banyan. This is the *manuma*, or Many-colored Fruit-Dove, one of the rarest birds on Tutuila. In two years of observation, I have recorded *manuma* eating fruit on 99 occasions. In 98 of these 99 times, the *manuma* were eating banyan fruit (the one exception was berries of the *soga* bush). One probable reason why the *manuma* is so rare today is the loss of many banyan trees, particularly in the Tafuna Plain. If this bird is to survive here, it is essential that banyan trees be protected, and, if possible, increased in number.



Manuma

In addition to their important role in feeding wildlife, *aoa* trees also provide homes for many animals. *Lulu* (Barn Owls) frequently sleep and nest in the hollow trunks. *Tava'e* (tropicbirds) find large nesting shelters, and *fuiia* (Samoan Starlings) and *ti'otala* (White-collared Kingfisher) find protected nest holes. From its open, sheltered base to its spreading, fruit-laden crown, a banyan tree is a haven for wildlife.

Sadly, banyans today are under threat in American Samoa. Many were severely damaged by hurricanes in 1990- 91. Many others have been cut down, and more are threatened by continued development, particularly in the Tafuna Plain. Some of the most magnificent banyans that still stand have been made into gigantic trash barrels, their hollow trunks filled with mounds of used diapers and rusting cans. This garbage is sometimes burned, which can kill the banyan even if that is not intended.

What can you do? Give banyans the respect and protection they deserve. If your family is lucky enough to have an *aoa* on your land, please take care of it. Don't cut it, burn it, or use it as a garbage dump. If you notice a young banyan getting started, help it along by clearing away vines. If you know someone who has a banyan on their land, talk to them about its importance for wildlife. The banyan is a living testimony to the bounty and riches of Samoan nature, and is a lifeline for our wildlife.

21. Natural foods for wildlife

An animal's place in its environment is determined, more than anything else, by what it eats. By studying what the birds and bats of American Samoa eat, and when those different foods are available, we are better able to develop plans to manage and conserve our wildlife and to help these animals in a crisis, such as after a hurricane.

Most animals can be grouped by what and how many kinds of foods they eat. Animals that eat many different things are called generalists, while those that eat only one or a few foods are called specialists. True specialization is often a two-way dependency: an animal depends on a plant for food, and the plant depends on that animal to help it disperse its seeds. On remote islands like American Samoa, there is often not that much of any one kind of food, and hurricanes can cause serious shortages of the foods that are available, so it is usually not a good idea for either a plant or an animal to rely on only one other creature. We have few bird or bat species that are specialists in American Samoa.

The technical word for the generalist, “omnivore”, literally means “eats everything”. Humans probably have the broadest diet of any animal - - we happily eat meat, leaves, seeds, fruit, and fungus - - not to mention Bongos. Animals that are most likely to survive in new environments - like when they first arrived on Tutuila - are often omnivores. A good example is the rat (*isumu*), which can eat fruit, eggs, crabs, fungi and probably many other things.

“Carnivores” are those species that eat almost exclusively other animals. We usually think of carnivores as fierce hunters, like wolves or lions, but actually any animal that eats other animals is a carnivore. The Barn Owl, or *lulu*, is the only Samoan animal that hunts other birds and mammals, but we have lots of other carnivores, including all our fish-eating birds and even our many animals that eat insects.

“Herbivore” is a description of those animals that eat only plants. This is a very general term, so it is better to specify what part of a plant is eaten, whether leaves, fruits, or nectar. Each kind of animal usually is good at eating only one, or at most two, of these parts of a plant, because they are so different. For example, to rely on leaves, you need strong teeth to grind up the tough fibers, and a big stomach to process all that material. Cows and horses are well equipped for the job. At the other extreme, to rely on nectar (the sweet liquid inside of flowers), you need to be able to zip between lots of flowers and reach inside to suck up the small amount of juice in each one. Nectar-feeders tend to be small and energetic, with long beaks or tongues to reach inside flowers. Finally, to eat fruit, you need to be able to travel long distances, since trees with fruit are often hard to find.

There are no native Samoan animals that are specialized for eating leaves (except insects and snails). However, leaves are regular parts of the diet of fruit bats (*pe'a*) and Pacific Pigeon (*lupe*). Perhaps the leaves contain a nutrient that can't be found in fruit, or maybe they help to fill up a hungry animal when there is little other food available.



Nectar is a very important food for many of our local animals. The beautiful red and black Cardinal Honeyeater (*segasegama'u*) is our most specialized nectar-eater. Its long bill and tongue enable it to reach deep into flowers, and its small size allows it to perch on even the tiniest twigs to reach the blossoms. Other birds that eat lots of nectar are the Wattled Honeyeater (*iao*), and the pretty little parrot (*segavao*) found in Manu'a. It may come as a surprise that fruit bats also eat a lot of nectar. Bats eat flowers from many different kinds of plants, from those with large flowers (such as *gatae* and *futu*), medium sized flowers (such as *fa'i*), to those with large numbers of smaller flowers (such as *asi*, *maota*, and *a'amati'e*). The bats lick flowers using their long tongues, or sometimes take a shortcut and eat the entire flower.



Fruit is the most common item in the diet of the Samoa Starling (*fuia*), Pacific Pigeon (*lupe*), Purple-capped Fruit Dove (*manutagi*), and fruit bats (*pe'a*). Though all these animals share many of the same foods, each has its favorites. Differences in what each species eats are partly caused by the different ways they feed and by their different sizes. Since *lupe* and *manutagi* swallow fruits whole, this limits the size of fruit they can eat. *Manutagi* seem to eat no fruits larger than *moso'oi*, but *lupe* are not as limited because they have really big mouths and can eat all but the largest fruits. Although *fuia* are smaller than *lupe*, they have stronger bills. This allows them to pry open tough husks, and to poke into very large fruits like *esi*. *Pe'a* can eat the largest and hardest fruits because of their strong jaws and sharp teeth. They have a very unique way of feeding: they take a bite from a fruit, but don't really swallow it. Instead, each bite is squeezed in the mouth, the *pe'a* swallows the juice and pulp, then flicks its head and spits out a flattened mass of leftover fruit called an 'ejecta'.

The white-naped fruit bats (*pe'a fanua*) seem to especially like fruits from plantations such as mangos, and those from coastal trees such as *fetau*, although maybe they really like flowers best. Samoan fruit bats (*pe'a vao*) generally prefer fruits found in the forest, both from non-native trees like *ifi* and native species such as *a'amati'e*, *asi* and *gasu*. Both bats like figs, especially the green-fruited kind of *aoa*, and perhaps most of all, *ulu* (breadfruit). But if you see bats in your *ulu*, you needn't worry that they are taking food from your mouth - - they like the overripe fruit that has been left on the tree so long that people wouldn't eat it anyway.

Our most common Columbiformes (*lupe* and *manutagi*) all love the fruit of *moso'oi*. It's funny to watch a little *manutagi* struggling to choke down a big *moso'oi* fruit - but they get it down every time. Another large fruit favored by *lupe* (and sometimes eaten by *manutagi*) is the nutmeg (*atone*). This is an interesting 'fruit', since what the birds eat is almost entirely indigestible seed - the useful part is just a thin, brightly colored network (red or orange depending on the species of *atone*) that covers the seed. This colored part is very fatty and is a good food for birds even if there is not much on each fruit. Apparently this is a successful way to disperse seeds, since *atone* is the most common tree in the mature forests of Tutuila.

Fruits preferred by *manutagi* include *aoa*, *mati*, the white berries of *soga*, and the seeds inside *maota* and *mamala* fruits. *Lupe* eat many of the same fruits, but are able to eat a greater variety

because they are a big bird. They also eat the large fruits of *mamalava*, *mamalupe*, *a'amati'e* and *ala'a*. *Mamalupe* literally means 'pigeon's mouthful': one *lupe* once took a full 30 seconds to swallow a single *mamalupe* fruit!

Nectar feeders and fruit eaters don't just use their food plants - - they can help them as well by fertilizing their flowers. This happens when pollen from one flower sticks to a bird's feathers or the fur of a *pe'a*, and then rubs off when the animal visits another flower. Fruit eaters also help plants. Most of the time this happens when they eat the fruit but don't completely digest the seeds; when the animal defecates, the seeds may have been moved far from the parent tree where they have a better chance to grow. Many plants actually count on animals eating their fruits, and so they coat their seeds with a substance that makes them hard to digest. In this way, immobile trees accomplish their most difficult task - - dispersing (spreading) their fruit. When a tree species has no seed dispersers, its spread to new areas will be limited, it can become restricted to only a few places, and it is vulnerable to extinction from hurricanes, diseases, or cutting by people. A good example of such a tree is *ifilele*, which tends to occur in only a few areas on the north side of Tutuila.



Probably the most important disperser of fruits in American Samoa is the *fuiia*, since it eats a very wide variety of fruits. It is particularly important in regenerating (converting back to forest) areas that have been cleared for plantations or by hurricanes. You can see this by noting how quickly a cleared area will become covered with *lau pata*, *maota*, and *masame*, or how *nonu* or *pualulu* begin sprouting in a clearing deep in the forest. Once an area has these initial forest tree species, the area becomes more suitable for tree species that prefer mature forests, like *mamalava* or *asi*.

You can play an important role in helping the wildlife on our islands by helping our native trees. First, avoid cutting down or burning native trees, especially slower growing species such as *au'auli* or important coastal species such as *fetau*. Other trees are so rare or important that they simply should never be cut, including *aoa*, *tava*, and *togo*. Some plantations illustrate a good compromise between the needs of people and the needs of the forest. As the plantation is cleared, smaller, fast growing trees like *lau pata* or *atone* are cut, but larger trees are avoided, or only their limbs are pruned (cut off). In this way crops like *talo* (taro) get the sunlight they need, but it does not kill large trees that are adapted to recovering from hurricane damage. Such trees may resprout leaves and branches, probably about the time a farmer is done harvesting the crops from the plantation.

Second, help native trees by planting them. You can request seedlings of native species from the Land Grant at the Community College. Always plant native trees instead of exotic (foreign) trees unless needed for their fruit. For example, *aoa* should be planted instead of *pulu* trees. Flame trees, *vaepovi* and African tulip trees may look attractive to people, but these trees benefit fewer wildlife species than our own native trees. For areas such as lawns where large trees are not wanted, tree ferns (*olioli*) are an attractive native option, while the various kinds of *mati* are good choices for wildlife. In places where too much shade is undesirable, *filimoto* is a good choice.

22. Island streams

Tutuila Island has about 160 small streams that flow year-round along at least a portion of their main channel. These streams are steep, shallow and short (most are less than a mile). Stream flows are generally low but they can flood quickly in response to heavy downpours. But even with the high rainfall in our mountains (200- 300 inches per year), the water drains quickly to sea or percolates into the porous volcanic soil to recharge our groundwater supply of drinking water.

Our streams support surprisingly few species - - there are only 10- 12 freshwater fish species and not many more freshwater invertebrates here. The principal species are freshwater eels (*tuna*), gobies (*apofu*, *mano'o*), mountain bass (*sesele*, *inato*), shrimp (*ulavai*) and snails (*sisivai*). Additional species may enter the lower ends of streams, but they are not restricted to a freshwater environment. Two non- native fish species were also introduced here, probably in the 1970s: mollies (*fo- vai*) to control mosquitos and tilapia to grow in aquaculture. The impact of these alien species on the native populations is not known. Additionally, we can only wonder about the impact of the alien marine toad (*lage*) that sometimes has thousands of its young tadpoles swimming in local creeks.



The low number of species in our streams is in stark contrast to the many marine species living in our coastal marine waters (890 fish species and countless invertebrates). Part of the explanation for this difference is simply that our streams are small and offer limited habitat for stream- dwelling organisms. But another more interesting aspect of this low diversity is: how did any freshwater species get to American Samoa in the first place? We are a small island surrounded by hundreds of miles of deep ocean. Freshwater species generally cannot survive in saltwater, so how could these freshwater fish, shrimps and snails cross the ocean barrier to get here? The trick is that they all have a marine stage in their life cycle. After they spawn, their newly hatched larvae wash out of the stream into the ocean where they drift about as marine plankton for a few weeks or months. Some make their way back to a coastline where they seek a stream to live out the rest of their lives. It might be expected that the few freshwater species that got to our remote islands have evolved over thousands of years into unique (endemic) species found nowhere else in the world, but the opposite is true. The marine stage of these species allows a wide dispersal and continual genetic mixing of populations, so the species inhabiting our streams are widely distributed across the South Pacific region.

Because streams drain the valleys we live in, they serve as good indicators of how well we are taking care of the land. Sad to say the message is not good. Our streams once provided food and drinking water, but now they are treated as a place for people to throw rubbish and piggery wastes. And, after a heavy rainfall, some streams turn chocolate brown with the dirt that erodes from the landscape. Much of this soil erosion is due to poor land- use practices such as the farmer's bare-earth clearings for plantations on steep mountain slopes and the run- off from inadequately designed construction sites. In the former case, the farmer not only loses the soil needed to grow his crops, but the eroded dirt fouls our streams and ends up in coastal waters where it degrades our coral reefs. It does not have to be this way. There are better ways to dispose of rubbish and to prevent erosion that can make streams a healthier place for fish as well as for the children who play in the streams.

P. Craig, NPS

23. Snakes In Samoa !

Snakes in Samoa? You bet. Two kinds, one right here on Tutuila Island and the other on Ta'u Island. Fortunately, neither is the dreaded brown tree snake (more about that below). Also fortunately, neither is poisonous, both mind their own business, and they are no threat to anyone.

On Tutuila, we have an unusually small black snake that looks like a plump earthworm about 6 inches long. A closer inspection reveals that it has tiny scales. It's called the potted soil snake or blind burrowing snake (*Typhlops braminus*), because it has almost no eyes and it burrows through the soil. This secretive nocturnal snake is occasionally found by someone digging in their garden. It eats small soil creatures like termites and insect larvae.

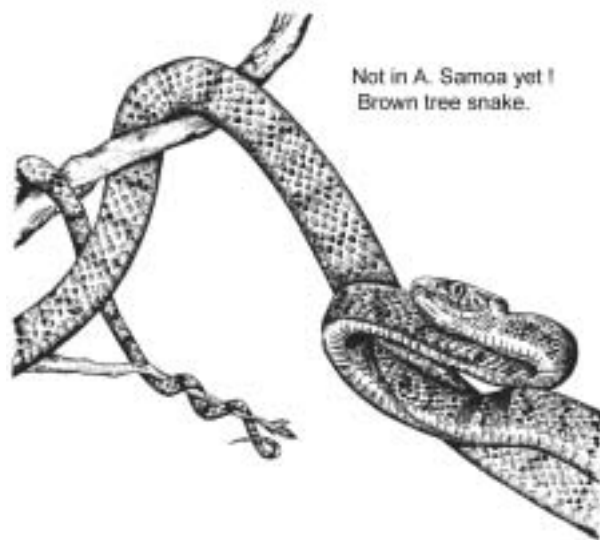
This harmless snake is widely distributed around the world, but it is not a native species of our island. It was probably introduced here when its eggs were carried in the soil attached to some imported plants or machinery. In 1993, it was found in the Tafuna area. Another one was found in Pago Pago in 2001.

The other snake found on Ta'u Island is the *gata* or Pacific boa (*Candoia bibroni*). It also occurs in western Samoa. At one time it inhabited Tutuila Island (its bones were found there) but went extinct for unknown reasons. The Pacific boa is more commonly found on islands closer to Indonesia; American Samoa appears to be the eastward limit of its distribution.

This snake grows to a respectable length of 3 to 6 feet. It tends to be tan or darkly colored, but its coloration can be variable. This species is usually found in forests, it is active mainly at night, and it probably eats lizards, rats, and small birds and bird eggs.

The Pacific boa looks a lot like another undesirable snake species, the brown tree snake (*Boiga irregularis*), which we don't have in Samoa and hopefully never will. You may have heard that the brown tree snake invaded Guam and caused havoc there. It wiped out Guam's native bird species and helped decimate their fruit bat populations by eating the young bats left hanging in the trees when the adults flew off to find food.

Parents in Guam were even advised to keep their infants and small children away from this snake because it is somewhat poisonous and occasionally has been caught lunging on a baby's arm. How's that for a reptilian nightmare?



Well, not to fear. We do not have the brown tree snake in Samoa. So, if you see a large snake on Ta'u island, don't kill it. However, if you see one on Tutuila Island, it is very important that you send it to DMWR for identification. It is essential that we keep the brown tree snake out of American Samoa. Several of them have already slipped into Hawaii hidden in aircargo shipments

from Guam. The snakes will crawl into the cargo or onto the plane's landing gear and then go wherever the plane goes.

A final note. On rare occasions, sea snakes have been seen in our coastal waters. One verified air-breathing banded sea snake (probably *Laticauda columbrina*) was collected here in 2000. However, most local sightings of 'sea snakes' are actually fish (eels) that are very snake-like in appearance. It would not be difficult to confuse the two:

Banded sea snake



Snake eel (a fish)



Moray eel (a fish)



P. Craig
NPS



24. Toads everywhere !

The marine toad (*Bufo marinus*) is a recent introduction to American Samoa. It was purposely brought here in 1953 to control mosquitos or insect pests that attack taro.

The toads (*lage*) were brought from Hawaii and introduced into artificial ponds at Taputimu on Tutuila. From there, stocks were liberated in Tafuna and Utulei. The toads then expanded their range to include all of Tutuila, from sea level to the top of Mt. Alava. Fortunately, they have not yet been transported to Manu'a or to western Samoa.



The toads breed year- round here. All they need is standing fresh or slightly brackish water in which to lay their eggs. Thousands of eggs that look like a string of black and white pearls are laid by each female. Within a week the eggs hatch into small black tadpoles that feed voraciously on aquatic plants. The tadpoles look defenseless but are thought to be toxic to birds and other animals. Within a month these tadpoles develop legs and change into adult toads.

As adults, they typically hide under boards or vegetation during the heat of the day and emerge at night to feed on insects and other invertebrates. They eat snails, millipedes, centipedes, spiders, roaches, moths, flies, caterpillars, termites, beetles, ants, earthworms, grasses, and even an occasional small toad.

How many toads inhabit Tutuila Island and how many bugs do they consume each night? In a wildlife study conducted in 1976, biologists estimated that over 2 million toads lived here with us. Some rough calculations suggest that these toads consume about 5 tons of bugs every night!

To some people it might appear that the toad is beneficial. One must keep in mind, however, that many of those insects would have been eaten by native birds and perhaps by the small insect-eating sheath-tailed bat (*pe'ape'avai*) that is now extremely rare in American Samoa. No one has examined the actual impacts the toads are having on our native wildlife, but there are many examples of introduced species causing the extinction of native plants and animals by out-competing them for food or other resources.

Another concern involving the toad is its toxic skin glands. The adults have two large parotid glands on their “shoulders” that secrete a creamy white fluid when handled. These secretions are highly toxic if eaten, rubbed into the eyes, or brought into contact with mucous membranes. Dogs have died when they mouthed these toads. In addition, a high incidence of the salmonella bacteria occurs in toads, thus an abundance of toads near drinking water supplies may lead to bacterial contamination.



Gilbert S. Grant, DMWR

25. Pest invaders are here

The history of life on islands is a story of invasions. Ever since the high islands of American Samoa rose out of the sea as barren piles of volcanic rock, living things have been making the long and dangerous journey across the Pacific to reach this new land. Until a few thousand years ago, every plant, insect, and bird that lived on our islands was the descendant of a lucky adventurer that had crossed hundreds or thousands of miles of open ocean to establish a new colony here.

The first Samoans were also such lucky adventurers, making the perilous voyage here in their journeying canoes. But their arrival marked the beginning of a new way for plants and animals to reach our islands - being carried here, either by accident or on purpose, by people. Ever since then, the environment of American Samoa has changed tremendously.

Some of these changes may have benefited some wildlife species. For example, the introduction several important food plants such as breadfruit and bananas provide a year- round source of food for some birds and fruit bats, rather than seasonally like some native plants that are eaten by wildlife. Other changes brought by the Polynesians were harmful to the environment - for example, the introduction of rats (*isumu*). And since the arrival of Europeans and Americans, the rate of introduction of new plants and animals to American Samoa has increased tremendously. The results have often been disastrous.

Some plants brought by the Polynesians “escaped” to spread widely through the natural forest such as *ifi* and *nonu* trees. More recently, about 250 alien plant species (many of them weeds) have also become established in American Samoa and some of these threaten our native forest. One that is familiar to everyone is the “mile- a- minute” vine, or *fuesaina* (*Mikania micrantha*). This was introduced by accident, sometime before 1924. It is now a major pest in plantations and forests, and has spread tremendously following hurricanes in the early 1990s. The vine needs sunlight for its very fast growth, and so doesn't do well inside the shade of the mature forest. The hurricanes, however, opened up the forests to sunlight by knocking down many trees and breaking off the tops of thousands more. Vines like these can form layers several feet thick that can choke the seedlings of native trees and slow the recovery of our forests from the damage of the hurricanes.

Another well- known pest to agriculture is the giant African snail (*sisi aferika*, *Achatina fulica*). This was reportedly introduced to the Pacific when the governor of Tahiti imported them to satisfy the hunger of his mistress for escargot, or edible snails. Bad, bad idea - not only were the snails not edible, but they quickly spread throughout Polynesia, and became a major pest of taro and other crops.



Unfortunately, the story does not end there. In the hopes to control the giant snails, a predatory snail (*Euglandina rosea*) native to Florida was deliberately introduced here in 1980. The idea was that this new snail - the one with the long pinkish shell - would kill off all the giant snails. Instead, it has driven the native land snails of the Pacific islands to the edge of extinction. All the native snails of Tahiti are now extinct, and the Samoan snails, which used to be collected by the thousands to make *ula*, are almost gone. Meanwhile, the giant snail continues to thrive despite the new predator.

Another example is of an invasion that is still under way - - by introduced birds. The first bird introduced to American Samoa was, of course, the chicken (*moa*). Although these occasionally nest in the forests, they are not truly established as wild birds here, and are no threat to our native birdlife. However, we do have three introduced bird species on Tutuila. One of these is the *manu palagi*, or Red-vented Bulbul, the black bird with the crest that is common in nearly every village. This species became established here in the 1950's. The other two species both arrived in the 1980's and there seems to be no name for them in Samoan. These are the Common Myna and the Jungle Myna. They look almost the same - both are blackish brown, with big white patches in the wings and tail when they fly. They are now abundant from Pago Pago to Leone, but because they have only been on Tutuila a few years, they haven't spread very far to the eastern or northern parts of the island yet (although one was seen in Tula in 2001). None of these three introduced birds has made it to Manu'a, which is still home to only our native Samoan birds.



What's wrong with having new kinds of birds to live in our villages and gardens? In some parts of the world, including Hawaii, both bulbuls and mynas are serious pests on fruit crops such as guava. Second, they may spread the seeds of pest plants, like mile-a-minute vine and "Koster's curse" weed (*Clidemia hirta*), that native birds do not eat as readily. Third, they may drive out native birds, like the *iao* or Wattled Honeyeater. Although we don't know for sure that this is happening, there seem to be more *iao* around villages in Manu'a than on Tutuila where the introduced birds are common. Finally, the introduced birds may spread diseases that will attack our native birds. This has happened in Hawaii. In fact, on the main islands of Hawaii, the native birds have been almost completely exterminated. Every bird you seen in the lowlands of Hawaii is an introduced species; the native birds hang on only in isolated mountain forests. We don't want our Samoan birds to share this sad fate.



The lesson to learn from these examples is that we must be very, very careful when thinking about introducing a new plant or animal to Samoa. Even species that seem beneficial, like the predatory snail, can have bad and unforeseen effects. And once a new species is established, it is almost impossible to get rid of. Wisely, the Territory has established strict laws against bringing in exotic animals and any plant that may become a noxious weed. Flowering plants, like Honolulu rose (*Clerodendrum chinese*), may look pretty in a garden but turn into major pests when they run wild.

American Samoa's forests and wildlife are unique to all the world, having developed here over hundreds of thousands of years in isolation. We must take care to preserve and protect this special heritage by staying alert to keep unwelcome invaders from our shores.

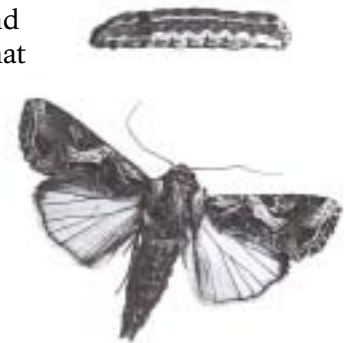
26. Common pests and diseases of local agricultural plants

Gazing up at the beautiful mountains on our islands, we see hillsides of lush green tropical foliage. A picture of botanical health. That's true for the most part, but if we look closer, we notice that some plants can get sick and die, or they can be injured when insects, animals, strong winds or landslides damage their leaves, stems or roots. Sometimes insect pests or diseases spread fast, injuring or killing many plants over a large area. Then we take notice, particularly if we were growing those plants to eat.

Here are five common plant pests and diseases that can cause serious damage to local agricultural plants.

Taro leaf blight disease (*lega, laumu*). Many people became acutely aware of this plant disease in 1993- 94 when it destroyed most of the Samoan taro crop. The disease is caused by a fungus (*Phytophthora colocasiae*) that has been in Fiji for many years, but we don't know how it came to American Samoa. Perhaps it arrived here on taro tops (*tiapula*) from another island, or its fungal spores blew in on the winds of Hurricane Val in 1991. Taro leaf blight is most severe when the weather is cool and wet. Rain splashes spores of the fungus into the air, which are then blown by wind from plant to plant. The expanding brown spots made by this fungus cause leaves to die faster than normal, so the plant must use its energy to make more leaves instead of storing the energy in the taro corm (*i'o ole talo*) that we want to eat. Farmers are now growing taro varieties from Micronesia that are more resistant to the fungus. The Palau taro, for example, still gets the disease, but less severely, so the leaves live longer and corms are of normal size.

Armyworms (*anufe- ailatalo*). These insects are more appropriately called cluster caterpillars, because they are not worms at all. They are the juvenile stage of a thick- bodied grayish- brown moth (*Spodoptera litura*) that flies about at night. It is a serious pest of many crops and may occur throughout the year. The caterpillars are often found on taro leaves in small numbers and if found soon enough, they can be picked off by hand before they eat too much of the leaves. Sometimes there are so many that they can't be removed fast enough. As with taro leaf blight, this has a major impact on the plant, because energy is taken from the corm (*i'o ole talo*) to replace damaged leaves, so the harvest is reduced. The female moth lays 200 to 300 eggs in a cluster during the night. After the eggs hatch, the young larvae feed together, eating larger and larger holes in the leaves as they grow, until only the thick ribs of the taro leaf remain. The mature larva falls to the ground, forms a pupa which is the resting stage when the caterpillar changes shape and grows wings, and afterwards emerges as an adult moth that flies off to lay more eggs. The complete life cycle, eggs to adult, takes only about 30 days. In American Samoa there are several friendly insects, mainly small wasps, that attack and kill armyworms. But if the armyworms are too numerous, the wasps cannot control them and considerable damage to the plant may result. Unfortunately, spraying the armyworms with pesticides also kills the helpful wasps.



Banana bunchy top virus (*laufeti'iti'i- vaelusi*). This is one of the most serious diseases of bananas. The virus can be so devastating that some regions of the world affected by it, like parts of Hawaii, are no longer able to produce bananas commercially. For unknown reasons, places like American Samoa are less severely affected. It may have something to do with the small insect, an aphid (*afiti*),

that carries the disease from plant to plant. Perhaps these aphids are less effective virus carriers or they are not very abundant here. Banana plants infected with the virus produce small, narrow leaves with yellow, tattered edges bunched together, thus the name “bunchy top”. When one plant becomes infected, the virus spreads to the rest of the plants growing from the same “root” mat. Infected plants stop producing bananas and become shorter and shorter until the plant finally dies. During this time, any aphid feeding on an infected plant can carry the virus to an uninfected banana plant. Another way the disease is spread is by removing suckers from an infected root mat and planting them elsewhere. There is some concern in American Samoa that the disease could begin to spread more widely, but there is a safe, easy way to control bunchy top with a small application of a common herbicide [contact Land Grant for details].

Burrowing nematode (*nematota*). This pest attacks the roots of banana plants. Nematodes are small, worm- like residents of soil and water. Most of them feed on dead plants and other tiny organisms, but some attack the roots of living plants. The burrowing nematode (*Radopholus similis*) enters young banana roots and eats the insides. When large numbers of nematodes feed on a plant, the roots are so damaged that the plant can fall over. This is one reason why banana plants topple over during strong winds or rain, or when they bear a heavy bunch of fruit. Damaged banana plants usually produce fewer and smaller fruits than healthy plants. Banana varieties grown in American Samoa have no resistance to this pest. The best way to control the nematodes is to remove their source of food (the banana root mat) for one year or flood the land, making it unsuitable for the nematode.

Rhinoceros beetle (*manuainiu*). These giant beetles cause a distinctive diamond- shaped pattern cut out of coconut leaves (fronds). The adult beetle burrows into the tops of coconut trees, then down toward their center. As it burrows, it cuts through the new, unopened leaves, so when they open later, large wedges of the leaves are missing. If the midrib is cut, the leaf may break on windy days. While this may weaken some leaves and make them look unsightly, we don’t know if the damage is serious enough to reduce the number of coconuts produced by the tree.



The adult beetle (*Oryctes rhinoceros*) is amazingly large - - almost two inches long - - black and shiny, with a horn on its head, like a rhinoceros. Although it's hard to visualize, the horn apparently helps them feed by stabilizing the beetle while it moves its jaws up and down, scraping a hole in the tree. The beetles do not eat the wood but live on sap from the damaged plant cells. The female lays one egg on the ground, usually in dead coconut trees, logs, piles of compost or debris. The young larvae are white with a brown head. They grow almost four inches long before they pupate and become adult beetles.



Fred Brooks
Land Grant Program (ASCC)

| Common and Samoan name | Scientific name | Ofu- | | | | |
|--|---------------------------------|---------|---------|------|--------|------|
| | | Tutuila | Olosega | Ta'u | Swains | Rose |
| SEABIRDS | | | | | | |
| Booby, brown (<i>fua'o</i>) | <i>Sula leucogaster</i> | R | R | S | S | R |
| Booby, red footed (<i>fua'o</i>) | <i>Sula sula</i> | R | R? | S | S | R |
| Booby, masked (<i>fua'o</i>) | <i>Sula dactylatra</i> | S | S | | | R |
| Frigatebird, great (<i>atafa</i>) | <i>Fregata minor</i> | R | S | S | S | R |
| Frigatebird, lesser (<i>atafa</i>) | <i>Fregata ariel</i> | R | S | S | S | R |
| Gull, laughing | <i>Larus atricilla</i> | S | | | | |
| Noddy, blue-grey (<i>laia</i>) | <i>Procelsterna cerulea</i> | R | R | R | | |
| Noddy, black (<i>gogo</i>) | <i>Anous minutus</i> | R | R | R | R | R |
| Noddy, brown (<i>gogo</i>) | <i>Anous stolidus</i> | R | R | R | R | R |
| Petrel, collared (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Pterodroma leucoptera</i> | | | R? | | |
| Petrel, Herald (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Pterodroma arminjoniana</i> | R | | R | | |
| Petrel, Tahiti (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Pterodroma rostrata</i> | R | | R | R? | |
| Petrel, white-necked (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Pterodroma externa</i> | S | | | | |
| Shearwater, Audubon's (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Puffinus lherminieri</i> | R | | R | | |
| Shearwater, Christmas (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Puffinus nativitatis</i> | | | R? | | |
| Shearwater, Newell's (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Puffinus newelli</i> | S | | | | |
| Shearwater, short-tailed (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Puffinus tenuirostris</i> | * | | | | |
| Shearwater, sooty (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Puffinus griseus</i> | S | | | | |
| Shearwater, wedge-tailed (<i>ta'i'o</i>) | <i>Puffinus pacificus</i> | R? | | R? | | |
| Storm petrel, white-faced | <i>Pelagodroma marina</i> | S | | | | |
| Storm-petrel, white-throated | <i>Nesofregetta albigularis</i> | | | R? | | |
| Tern, black-naped (<i>gogosina</i>) | <i>Sterna sumatrana</i> | | S | | S | S |
| Tern, bridled | <i>Sterna anaethetus</i> | S | | | | |
| Tern, crested | <i>Sterna bergii</i> | S | | | | |
| Tern, gray-backed (<i>gogosina</i>) | <i>Sterna lunata</i> | R | | | | R |
| Tern, sooty | <i>Sterna fuscata</i> | S | | | S | R |
| Tern, white (<i>manu sina</i>) | <i>Gygis alba</i> | R | R | R | R | R |
| Tropicbird, red-tailed (<i>tava'e'ula</i>) | <i>Phaethon rubricauda</i> | | | | S | R |
| Tropicbird, white-tailed (<i>tava'esina</i>) | <i>Phaethon lepturus</i> | R | R | R | R | R |

- E - extinct population of formerly breeding species
- H - hypothetical record
- I - introduced
- M - migrant
- R - resident native
- S - seabird visitor
- V - vagrant
- * recorded at sea



Brown Booby

Sources: Amerson et al. 1982. Wildlife and wildlife habitat of American Samoa, USFWS; Engbring et al. 1989. A 1986 survey of forest birds of American Samoa, USFWS; Grant et al. 1994. Notornis 41:215-217; J. Seamon, pers. comm.

28. The Pacific Pigeon (*lupe*), Samoa's royal bird

The *lupe*, or Pacific Pigeon, is the king of Samoa's birds and in many ways it is the most culturally important bird in our islands. It is our largest forest bird and is the only one able to feed on, and spread, the large seeds of some of our most important rainforest trees. Its cultural significance is revealed by the many Samoan proverbs that relate to the *lupe* and the art of *lupe*- hunting. The importance of *lupe* is also shown by the amazing *tia seulupe* (star- mounds) which are massive stone platforms built by the ancient Samoans, which served at least partly as pigeon- trapping sites.

The *lupe* is a member of a group of birds called the imperial pigeons because of their large size and dignified appearance. Most imperial pigeons live in the islands of the Pacific, although a few reach the mainland of Asia and one occurs in Australia. These birds are closely related to the much smaller fruit- doves, like the *manutagi* (Purple- capped Fruit Dove) but are only distantly related to the common pigeon that waddles around the cities of the world. The *lupe* is found from the islands north of New Guinea east through Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Niue, and the Cook Islands. Interestingly, throughout most of this wide range, it is usually found on small islands and atolls, not on large 'high islands'. This is most striking in Fiji, where *lupe* are found on the small islands of the Lau group, but not on the large islands of Vanua Levu, Viti Levu or Taveuni. A closely related imperial pigeon replaces the *lupe* on those high islands.



Lupe are a common sight in forested areas of American Samoa, and can be seen flying high over villages or bays. They even visit *moso'oi* and *poumuli* trees near houses, if those houses are not too far from forests. Even when not seen, they announce their presence with easy to hear calls: a low, rising and falling moo like that of a cow, or a loud, rolling prrrrrhhh. One of the benefits of American Samoa's ban on hunting *lupe* (and *pe'a*) after the hurricanes in the early 1990s is that they become less scared of people, giving us better chances to see and appreciate these spectacular birds.

Their nests are hard to find. During all our time in the forests, we have seen only a few. We have also seen evidence of nest- building (for example, *lupe* flying with sticks in their bills) on several other occasions. All these observations were during the months of January through September. *Lupe* nests are open platforms of twigs, with no lining. They are usually placed in dense clumps of leaves high up in trees, making them very hard to see.

These birds lay only a single white egg. Both parents help incubate the egg and feed the chick once it hatches. All members of the pigeon family have an amazing ability: they feed their young a sort of "milk". This is a nutritious liquid that is a combination of digested food and other substances secreted by special glands in the bird's digestive system. Both male and female pigeons make this milk, so both parents take an equal part in feeding the young. Information from related species of imperial pigeons suggests that *lupe* eggs take about 27 days to hatch, and that the young spend about 28 days in the nest after hatching. It seems like *lupe* could nest more than once a year, but most young birds are seen from July to August, so most nesting probably occurs at just one time each year.

Lupe eat many different rainforest foods, and not just fruits from favored trees like *atone*, *ma'ali*, *malili*, *mamala*, *mamalava*, *moso'oi* or *aoa*. They also eat fruits from vines such as *mamalupe* (pigeon's mouthful) and low shrubs like *toitoi*. *Lupe* eat leaves from many different trees, including *au'auli*, *a'amati'e* and *ifi*, although in almost all cases they like the young leaves best. This makes sense, since young leaves are probably the most tender and easy to digest, and may have fewer poisonous chemicals than old leaves. *Lupe* also like flowers on occasion, both from trees like *ala'a* or *ma'ali* and from shrubs such as *ti*.

Obviously, the *lupe* is not a picky eater. This may explain why it is such a widespread and successful bird, since it will eat food from both coastal and mountain areas. In fact, after Hurricane Val in 1991, many *lupe* on the coast near Vaitogi survived by eating the fruits of *toitoi*. Thus, in times of limited food, it can find food where other birds might not. At other times, *lupe* may eat unusual foods (like leaves and flowers) to get certain nutrients, just the way people sometimes take vitamin pills to supplement their regular diets. *Lupe* are also able to eat some fruits that smaller birds cannot, and so may be important for spreading these trees to new areas or even among different islands.

Since the *lupe* is such an adaptable bird, and has been able to recover both from human activities like hunting and from natural disturbances like the hurricanes in the early 1990s, it may seem surprising that there are many fewer now than in earlier times. The most dramatic evidence for this are the many *tia seulupe*, or star mounds, that were built by ancient Samoans. A survey discovered the remains of over 60 *tia* in the eastern part of Tutuila alone. Each *tia* is a massive stone platform with one or more arms extending from it.



Pigeon-catching huts were built on top of the platform, and village chiefs competed to catch the most birds, using a tame *lupe* as a decoy, and a long-handled net to sweep up the flocks of pigeons that were attracted. Early missionary accounts tell how whole villages would spend weeks camping out in the forest around the *tia*, and that pigeon-catching season was a time of feasting and partying. *Lupe* must have been very abundant to support this elaborate cultural activity. While the *tia* certainly had ritual and religious importance in addition to their use as pigeon-catching sites, the latest studies suggest that pigeon-catching was central to their role in ancient Samoan society. A well-preserved star mound, with explanatory signs, can be visited in Ottoville, next to the Fatuoaga Catholic Church compound.

Now, though, the rainforest that once covered the Tafuna Plain have been cut down. This type of lowland forest, with its abundant *mamalava*, *tava*, *maota*, *mamala*, and *aoa* trees, was almost certainly the best habitat for *lupe* in American Samoa. Today, only scattered *aoa* remain, and *lupe* are seldom seen in Tafuna. Even though *aoa* is a valuable food for *lupe*, we can see that it was the whole forest, and not just one kind of tree, that made the Tafuna rainforest so valuable to *lupe*. However, this large area of habitat is gone, and it seems we will never see as many *lupe* as did the first Samoans. Perhaps more than any other animal, the *lupe* is of irreplaceable importance to Samoa, both because of its natural role in spreading rainforest seeds, and its cultural role in the stories, proverbs, and heritage of the Samoan people.

Pepper Trail, Joshua Seamon, DMWR

29. The rare Many-colored Fruit Dove (*manuma*)

One of the rarest birds that nest on Tutuila is also one of the most beautiful: the *manuma*, or Many-colored Fruit-Dove.

The *manuma* here is considered a different subspecies than those from Fiji and Tonga because they have a slightly different color pattern. The male *manuma* is creamy white below and pale yellow above, with a dark crimson band across the back, a crimson patch on the forehead, and a purplish-red blotch on the breast. The female is very different and looks like the much more common *manutagi*, or Purple-capped Fruit-Dove. She is mostly green above and gray below, with a crimson forehead patch. Unlike the *manutagi*, the female *manuma* doesn't have a yellow band on its tail.



The *manuma* was not rare on Tutuila in the 19th and early 20th centuries, according to the journals of the early scientific expeditions. It was usually found in flocks; in 1923 a collector killed 10 birds with a single shot into a feeding tree on Ta'u. However, when the first modern studies of American Samoa's birds were done in mid-1970, only a small number of *manuma* could be found. Follow-up in the mid-1980's confirmed the *manuma*'s rarity. They estimated that the population size on Tutuila was only about 80 birds.

After the hurricanes in the early 1990s, even fewer *manuma* were seen, and perhaps less than 50 remained on all of Tutuila. Today, however, *manuma* are regularly seen at some

locations on Tutuila, although not in very large numbers. Biologists would call their current distribution rare and local, but they are occasionally sighted at many places around American Samoa. Interestingly, *manuma* are much more common in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga, sometimes being found well away from mature forests.

We know very little about the biology of *manuma* in American Samoa, or why it is less common here than elsewhere. These are social birds, often being seen in small flocks, but they are also very protective of feeding areas, driving other *manuma* away from their spot in the canopy of a fruiting tree. One odd thing is that you rarely see the same numbers of each sex - - almost always there are several more males than females in any flocks. We do know that they seem to have a very strong preference for the fruits of banyan (*aoa*) trees, and in American Samoa it is almost always seen near or in these trees. They are also known (from Fiji and Tonga) to eat *moso'oi*, *o'a* and *magele* fruits, all of which occur in American Samoa. Perhaps there are still so few *manuma* here that they are seldom forced to eat anything but their favorite food, but would eat other fruits if necessary.

It is dangerous for animals to specialize too much on any one food, especially on remote islands like American Samoa. This can be shown with an example from business. While a store that sells only antique cuckoo-clocks might do fine in New York, Los Angeles, or another big market, it would certainly fail very quickly in American Samoa. There isn't enough business here for such a

specialized service. Similarly, an island animal that concentrates on only one kind of food may find itself in trouble when that food supply fails. An animal that lives on a continent can move in search of the food it needs, but island animals have nowhere else to go. On larger islands like Upolu, Savai'i or Viti Levu, *manuma* may be able to travel long distances to get the food they like the best. This may be difficult on small islands like those of American Samoa, and means that animals can only specialize on very reliable food trees such as banyan trees (*aoa*).



These giant banyan trees, which are so important to *manuma*, face many problems of their own. The Tafuna Plain used to have many huge banyans, but most of these have been cut down to make way for the exploding human populations in that area. Moreover, banyans, with their large size and spreading crowns, are very vulnerable to storm damage. Many were killed or severely damaged by Hurricanes Ofa and Val in the early 1990s. Even those that survived the hurricanes had their leaves and fruit stripped off, leading to a prolonged period of famine for *manuma*.



There are two things that must happen if the *manuma* is to survive and remain a special part of Samoa's wildlife. First, the birds must be protected from hunting. Although the *manuma* is too rare to be sought by hunters, a few may have been killed every year by hunters out for *lupe* and *manutagi*. When a population is as small as the *manuma*'s, even a few preventable deaths per year are a significant problem.

The second thing that must be done if the *manuma* is to survive is to protect banyan trees on which they depend. Without enough banyans to assure a year-round supply of its favorite food, the *manuma* may well become extinct on Tutuila. People need to protect these magnificent trees, which are important food sources for many other Samoan wildlife species, including the fruit bats (flying foxes).

Pepper Trail, Joshua Seamon
DMWR



30. The honey-birds

The most familiar birds of Tutuila's villages and gardens are the *iao* (Wattled Honeyeater) and the *segasegamau'u* (Cardinal Honeyeater). Although they look different, these birds are members of the same *aiga*, the family of birds called the honeyeaters. Honeyeaters are found throughout the Pacific islands, New Guinea, and Australia. As their name implies, most of them include the sweet nectar of flowers in their diet (though none of them eat real honey).

The *iao* or Wattled Honeyeater (*Foulehaio carunculata*) is the commonest forest bird in Samoa. It is also found in Tonga and Fiji. Although not a particularly beautiful bird, with its greenish-brown feathers and yellow flaps of bare skin on the face, its boundless energy and continuous song enliven our islands. Its bold and fearless nature keeps it busy chasing other birds, and its loud alarm calls warn other animals of the *lulu* (Barn Owl) or other danger. Samoan legend tells that when the *iao* calls at night, it means that ghosts (*aitu*) are near.

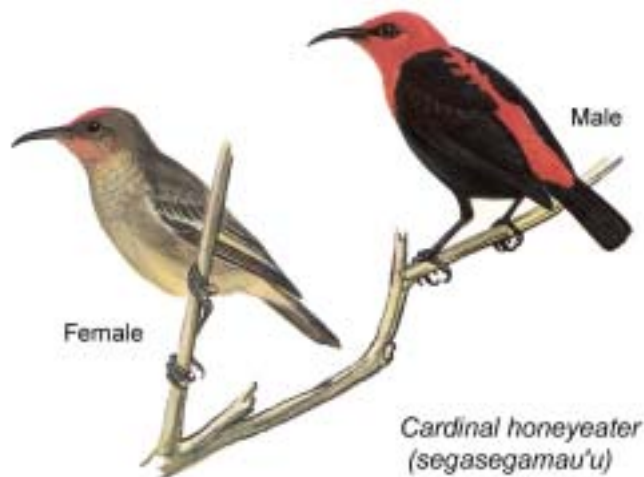
The *iao* feeds at almost all the flowers of the forest, from small *atone* (nutmeg) flowers to the large crimson blooms of *gatae* (coral tree). Christmastime is the best time of year for *iao*, because the *asi* trees are in full bloom. These white brushy flowers cover the tree crowns and are rich with nectar. At that time, the *iao* get so full of this nectar that they're like kids full of candy and cake at a party - they rush every which way through the forest, chasing each other and yelling out songs at the top of their lungs. At other times when flowers aren't quite so abundant, they eat a lot of insects as well, and also include some soft fruits and berries in their diet.

Even though the *iao* is our commonest bird, we really don't know very much about its habits. Their nests are beautifully woven cups of grass, typically well-hidden in the dense foliage of a tree. Usually only one or two eggs are laid. Most nesting appears to take place between September and December.

The *segasegamau'u* or Cardinal Honeyeater (*Myzomela cardinalis*) is the prettiest bird of Samoa's gardens. Unlike most Samoan birds, the male and female Cardinal Honeyeater look very different: the male is bright red, with black wings and tail, while the female is a dull gray, with a little bit of red on the rump. These tiny birds (the smallest in American Samoa) always seem to be active, flitting among the *aute* (ornamental hibiscus), *teuila* (ginger), and *nonu* (Indian mulberry) in our gardens, or sampling nectar at flowers high in the forest treetops. Like the *iao*, the *segasegamau'u*



Wattled
honey-
eater
(iao)



Female

Male

Cardinal honeyeater
(segasegamau'u)

is very vocal, though not as loud as its larger cousin. Its sweet warbling songs are familiar sounds in our villages and plantations.

The *segasegamau'u* is even more of a honey- bird than the *iao*. Though it will occasionally eat small insects, it seems very dependent on flower nectar at all times of year. You can see the difference in the beaks of the two birds: the Cardinal Honeyeater has a very delicate, sharp beak that is perfect for slipping into flowers but not so good for grabbing big bugs. The beak of the Wattled Honeyeater is sturdier, more all- purpose: good both for flowers and insects.

Perhaps because of its love of flowers, the *segasegamau'u* seems happy to live close to people, in gardens and plantations. Although much less common than the *iao* in the forest, it is the honeyeater that you're likely to see around villages. Around villages on Tutuila, that is; surprisingly, the *segasegamau'u* doesn't occur on any of the islands of Manu'a. Outside of American Samoa, the species is found in western Samoa, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands, and very close relatives occur in Micronesia and Fiji.

The nest of the Cardinal Honeyeater is a beautiful, delicate cup of fine grass fibers, often decorated with moss. It may be placed high in a tree or almost on the ground in thick foliage. Four to five tiny eggs are laid. The *segasegamau'u* seems to nest in all months of the year.



There used to be a third kind of honeyeater on Tutuila, the very large, blackish *ma'oma'o* or *mao* (*Gymnomyza samoensis*). This is a real mystery bird. Larger than a *fuiia* (Samoan Starling), with loud wailing calls, the *ma'oma'o* is remembered by some of the elders of Tutuila, and was collected by scientists here in the 1920s. However, except for a couple of possible sightings in the 1960s and 1970s, it has never been seen since. The *ma'oma'o* is now found only in the remote mountains of 'Upolu and Savai'i, where it is rare and little known. We will probably never know if this bird was once an important part of our forests, or if it occurred here only as a rare visitor from western Samoa. According to legends, hearing the wails and screams of the *ma'oma'o* around a village meant that misfortune or a death was about to happen. Sadly, this

prophecy seems to have come true for the *ma'oma'o* itself, which is now in danger of the greatest misfortune - extinction.

Pepper Trail
DMWR



31. Samoa's starlings

Starlings are a group of birds with a real image problem. Over much of the world, “starling” means just one thing - the Common, or European Starling. This plump, short- tailed, oily black bird was originally found in Europe, but it has spread across the cool, temperate countries of the world, from the US to China, and from Australia to Argentina. Everywhere it goes, this bird becomes a pest in both cities and the countryside, often driving out native birds and destroying fruit crops.

However, starlings are much more than this one obnoxious species. Most starlings are found in the tropics, and they are a varied, interesting and often beautiful family of birds. In the Pacific, starlings are a characteristic and important part of our native birdlife. In fact, the most unique of all our birds in American Samoa is the *fuia* or Samoan Starling.

Why is the *fuia* so special? Well, not because of its appearance. With its dull brownish- black color, the *fuia* could hardly be called beautiful. No, the *fuia* is special because it is the only American Samoan bird that is “endemic” to Samoa. This is a word used by scientists to describe something found in only one place. The *fuia* is found only in the islands of American and western Samoa. All our other birds are found in at least one other group of islands. Therefore, if the *fuia* became extinct in the Samoas, there wouldn't be a single one left in the world.



Samoan
starling
(*fuia*)

Fortunately, there is little danger that the *fuia* will become extinct.

It is a survivor, a real Samoan success story. It is the most adaptable bird we have, equally at home in Pago Pago, in small villages, in plantations and in the rainforest. The secret to its adaptability is its eating habits - a *fuia* will eat almost anything. They gobble down a wide variety of fruit, from the hard seeds of the *mamala* tree to the big stinky fruits of *nonu* bushes, from the leathery fruits of *lau pata* to the soft figs of the *mati*. They also love insects, including big stick insects, caterpillars, and other agricultural pests. Therefore, *fuia* are friends to farmers, and deserve our protection. *Fuia* even eat lizards, and indulge their taste for sweets with visits to lick up the nectar of *gatae* flowers. Because of their broad diet, *fuia* can always find food, and can live almost anywhere there are trees.

As in most Samoan birds, male and female *fuia* look almost the same. The species seems to nest in all months of the year. *Fuia* nests are usually placed in hollows in trees: snapped- off coconut trunks are favorite nest sites. They will also nest among the dense fronds in the top of a coconut, and even use man- made nest sites, like cracked telephone poles. *Fuia* eggs are pale blue.

We don't really know very much about the social life of the *fuia*: for example, do they mate for life? Do they defend territories from other *fuia*? Do they stay in one small area, or do they move all around the island? It would be interesting to know more about this most Samoan of our native birds.

The *fuia* is not our only native starling; it has a small and shy cousin, the *miti vao*, or Polynesian Starling. Although much less common than the *fuia* in Samoa, the *miti vao* has a wider range, being found in Fiji, Tonga, and Niue as well as American and western Samoa. Unlike the *fuia*, the *miti vao* is almost entirely a bird of the forest, rarely seen in plantations, much less villages. The reasons for this aren't clear. It seems to have a broad diet, though not quite as accepting as the *fuia*. It eats both insects and fruit, and is often seen feeding on hard- seeded fruit like *mamala* and *taputoi*,

though we don't know if this is because the *miti vao* prefers such food or because the more aggressive *fuia* drives it away from softer, more nutritious fruit.

Across most of Tutuila you may have some difficulty finding the *miti vao*. There are a few places where they seem to be more common: Maloata on the west end of the island, between Afono and Vatia on the north side, and along the Mt. Alava Road. Look for a small, short-tailed bird with a grayish back, a pale breast with darker streaking, and white eyes. Its quiet but musical whistles and trills are very different from the harsh screeches and piercing whistles of the *fuia*. *Miti vao* nests are placed in hollows and holes, as are *fuia* nests. They usually lay two pale blue eggs with brown specklings. So few nests have been found here that we really don't know what time of the year this species prefers to breed, or if they may nest at any time. The *miti vao* is a species that apparently declined after hurricanes in 1990-91. We can only hope that populations will increase over time, provided that enough good forest remains to give this species the wild habitat it needs.



One interesting thing about the *miti vao* is that there is a very different form of this bird in Manu'a. There, the *miti vao* are very dark on both upperparts and underparts, with heavy dark streaking on the breast. To become so different, the Manu'a birds must have been separated from those on Tutuila for a long time, probably thousands of years.

Unfortunately, the native *fuia* and *miti vao* aren't Samoa's only starlings. Since the 1980's, two other members of the starling family have invaded Tutuila, and are now among our commonest birds. These are the black and white mynas that are common from Pago Pago Harbor to Leone. Two species of mynas are established here, both of which were originally native to India. The Common Myna is brownish black, with a yellow bill and a yellow patch of bare skin around the eye. The Jungle Myna is similar, but is darker and slimmer, with an orange beak and no yellow skin around the eye. Both species have large white patches in the wings and tail. The Common Myna is a major pest in many parts of the Pacific, including New Zealand, Hawaii, Fiji, Cook Islands, and French Polynesia. The Jungle Myna has become established only in Fiji and in the Samoan islands. Both species eat almost anything and are very happy in cities and villages, where they eat garbage and nest under roofs even in occupied buildings. These unwelcome invaders can damage guavas and other fruit crops, can spread disease, and may compete with our native birds in villages. So far, the mynas have not yet spread to the Manu'a Islands. It is important that we prevent their spread, and reserve American Samoa, as much as possible, for our native birds, including our native starlings, the *fuia* and the *miti vao*.

Pepper Trail
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32. Swiftlets & sheath-tailed bats (*o le pe'ape'a*): a mosquito's nightmare

High above the villages, valleys, and mountains of Samoa flies a deadly predator, as terrifying as a tiger shark - if you're a mosquito (*namu*), that is. This is the *pe'ape'a*, the only bird in Samoa that lives entirely on a diet of insects.

But wait a minute - *pe'a* means bat: isn't the *pe'ape'a* a kind of small bat? Well, yes and no. Actually two completely different creatures share the name *pe'ape'a* in Samoa. One is a bird, the common White-rumped Swiftlet that is seen flying by day all over our islands. Like all birds, this *pe'ape'a* has feathers and lays eggs. The other *pe'ape'a*, more properly called *pe'ape'ava'i*, is a tiny bat, the Sheath-tailed Bat that is active only at night. This animal is now almost extinct in American Samoa. Like all bats, this *pe'ape'a* is a mammal and has fur and gives birth to live young that it feeds milk. The confusion arises because both creatures are tiny, active insect-eaters that are almost always in flight, and look similar as they dart and swoop after their prey.



First let's talk about the common *pe'ape'a*: the bird. It belongs to a family of birds that are truly creatures of the air, the swifts. They have tiny legs and feet, and never land except at nests or in their roosting caves. Capturing and eating food, drinking, gathering nesting material, and yes, even mating, are all done in flight. In fact, it is likely that the *pe'ape'a* is like many other kinds of swifts and actually sleeps while flying. With their long, powerful wings and perfectly streamlined bodies, *pe'ape'a* are beautifully adapted for a life of flight.



As they fly, *pe'ape'a* are continually hunting for small insects, especially mosquitos, flies, and flying ants and termites. These are scooped up in the swift's huge mouth, which is made into an even larger trap by long bristle-like feathers around the mouth. The swiftlet is a very useful bird because of all the insects it eats.

When the *pe'ape'a* finally does decide that it's time to land, it heads for a cave or a protected overhang on a cliff. There it flutters in to grasp the rock, usually hanging vertically. These caves and sheltered overhangs are also the nest site for the swifts. The nest is a small platform made of moss and fine twigs cemented together with the bird's saliva, attached to the rock. Some close relatives of the *pe'ape'a* make their nests entirely from dried saliva, which (believe it or not) are collected and cooked up to make that famous delicacy, bird's nest soup. The nests of our *pe'ape'a* are not suitable for this, so anyone with a taste for bird saliva will have to look elsewhere.

Swiftlets lay one or two white eggs, and appear to nest at any time of year in Samoa. Although most nests are placed where at least a little light penetrates the cave, some are far back, where it is completely dark. How do the swifts find their way in and out? The answer is that these birds, like many small bats, have the amazing ability to echo-locate. They give loud clicking calls, and then listen to the echoes to orient themselves and avoid the walls of the cave. This ability is fairly undeveloped in birds, and the swiftlets don't use it to locate their insect prey, which is why they hunt during the daytime. In many small bats, however, echo-location is incredibly advanced, and is used to hunt tiny insects in complete darkness. One bat with this ability is the Sheath-tailed Bat, which brings us to our second *pe'ape'a*.

The Sheath-tailed Bat (*Emballonura semicaudata*) also feeds on mosquitos and other flying insects. But unlike the swift, this small bat does not seem to accept sheltered cliffs as roosting or breeding areas, inhabiting only deep and protected caves. There are few such caves in American Samoa, and therefore few good homes for the bat. Ever since Hurricane Ofa in 1990, the known bat caves on Tutuila have been almost deserted. Hurricanes Ofa and Val swept water and debris into several caves, and the days of strong hurricane winds may have made it impossible for the bats to find food. Unless more bats survive in caves that we don't know about, the long-term survival of this useful and fascinating animal in American Samoa is doubtful. There is little we can do to help the bat except to stay away from their caves to avoid disturbing the few surviving animals. Sadly, the Sheath-tailed Bat seems to be endangered throughout most of its range, including in western Samoa and the Marianas, as well as here.



Sheath-tailed bat
(pe'ape'a)

And what about the swift? Although the population of these birds was reduced by hurricanes in 1990- 91, the species seems to be in no danger of extinction. It is still possible to see flocks of hundreds of swifts swirling together in areas where winds collect large numbers of insects, for example in Malaeimi Valley and in such highland areas as Aoloau and Afono Pass. There is every reason to believe that these birds will always enliven the Samoan sky - and strike terror into the hearts of mosquitos everywhere.



Pepper Trail
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33. Familiar and mysterious birds - the rails

The *ve'a*, or “roadrunner”, is one of Samoa's most recognizable birds. It is a familiar sight tiptoeing out of the grass or running crazily across the road, its neck stretched out and its big feet trying to keep up. And its loud, screeching voice is a familiar sound, seeming to complain at the disturbance as we walk to the taro patch. However, for all its abundance, the *ve'a* is still a little-known bird, quickly disappearing from view when disturbed and impossible to follow in the thick grass it favors. What's more, the *ve'a* has two even more mysterious cousins in American Samoa, and another in western Samoa that, as we will see, is the most mysterious Samoan bird of all.



Banded rail
(*ve'a*)

The *ve'a* and its cousins belong to the family of birds known as the rails (named from a old English word meaning to screech - many of these birds have loud, harsh voices). The *ve'a* is called the Banded Rail, because of the black and white bands on its sides and underparts. It is found all across the Pacific from the Philippines and Indonesia to Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, and on to Australia and New Zealand. It is usually common wherever it occurs, with the exception of Fiji. On Fiji this formerly abundant bird has been exterminated on the large islands of

Vanua Levu and Viti Levu by an introduced predator, the mongoose. This shows how important it is to keep Samoa free from such destructive introduced animals.

The *ve'a* is a very useful bird, eating many insects that can harm crops. In fact, it will eat almost anything, including fruit, worms, snails, mice, and even toads squashed flat on the roads. It sometimes can be seen deep in the forest, but prefers open areas with dense grass. Therefore, taro and banana plantations are some of its favorite places. The nest of the *ve'a* is very hard to find, being built on the ground well-hidden in thick grass. The *ve'a* lays 4 to 6 eggs. Like young chickens, young *ve'a* can run around almost as soon as they hatch, and they leave the nest immediately. It is common to see one or two fuzzy, dark gray chicks being led into the grass by their watchful parents.

The other Samoan rail that most people know is the *manu ali'i*, known as the Purple Swamphen. This large and beautiful bird is a dark purple, with a bright red beak that extends up over the forehead. It is even more widely distributed than the *ve'a*, occurring from southern Europe through Africa and all the way to Australia and New Zealand. It is much less common than the *ve'a* in American Samoa, but occurs in low numbers almost everywhere, especially in more remote plantation areas. This bird is more often heard than seen; it gives a loud screech with an echoing, honking quality.



Purple swamphen
(*manu ali'i*)

Like the *ve'a*, the *manu ali'i* prefers areas with thick undergrowth rather than true forest. It has a very wide diet, including many insects and much plant material. It sometimes gets into trouble with farmers because of its fondness for green bananas and taro tops. However, usually it does little damage, and repays it by eating soldier worms and other crop pests. In former times, the *manu ali'i* was sometimes hunted, and this may be why it is so shy, usually running or flying off with loud screams as soon as it sees you. Like the *ve'a*, it nests in thick vegetation, either on the ground or in a low bush. It lays 3 or 4 eggs, and the young leave the nest to follow their parents as soon as they

hatch.

Our third kind of rail is a real mystery bird, as shown by the fact that it has no Samoan name. In English it is called the Spotless Crake. Although its wide range in the Pacific is very similar to the *ve'a*, in American Samoa it has only been sighted on the island of Ta'u. The Spotless Crake is very small, only about half the size of a *ve'a*, and is all dark gray except for red legs and eyes. It lives in dense grass, almost never flies, and is active at dawn and dusk. All this makes it a very hard bird to find. In fact, only a single bird was seen by biologists in 1986, and another was sighted in 2001.



There is one more kind of rail to mention, and this is the most mysterious Samoan bird of all. It is the *puna'e*, or Samoan Woodhen. This bird was first described by scientists in 1874, and last seen in 1908. In the whole world, only 11 preserved specimens of it exist. It apparently occurred only on Savai'i in western Samoa.

Old stories tell that the *puna'e* lived in burrows in the mountain forests, and that it was formerly so abundant that it was hunted with nets and dogs specially trained to tell which burrows were occupied. If these stories are true, the *puna'e* was a very special bird indeed, since no other rails live in burrows. In the last ten years, there has been an unconfirmed report of the *puna'e* being seen in the mountains of Savai'i. These remote forests have been rarely visited by biologists, and we can hope that this unique bird may yet survive in the depths of that misty wilderness.

Pepper Trail, DMWR

Pola, Tutuila Island



34. Our strange winter visitor, the cuckoo (*aleva*)

The *aleva* or Long-tailed Cuckoo is a very odd bird, no doubt about it. For one thing, when the weather starts to get cold in its summer home, the *aleva* migrates north for the winter. For another, it has a highly unusual home life: it doesn't build its own nest or care for its own young, but abandons its eggs in the nests of other birds, to be raised not only by strangers, but by completely different kinds of birds. The *aleva* lives and breeds in New Zealand for half of the year. But when winter approaches, around March or April, the *aleva* leaves its chilly home islands, and flies north into sunny Polynesia. In fact, it is the only land bird to migrate north to spend the winter with us (although a few *aleva* may be found here year-round). The *aleva*'s winter range extends all the way from Palau on the west to Pitcairn Island on the east, but the largest numbers winter in Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga. Here it can be found on any island, from the mountainous interiors of the largest high islands to the coastal vegetation of tiny atolls. Wherever it ends up, the *aleva* feeds mostly on large insects, including caterpillars and stick insects, but also small lizards.



The *aleva* is a hard bird to see, usually creeping without a sound through dense foliage. In fact, we most often see *aleva* because they are being chased by other birds, especially the *iao* (Wattled Honeyeater). *Iao* seem to hate *aleva*, and chase them vigorously, with loud scolding cries. It is very interesting to try to figure out why they do this. There are at least three possibilities. It may be that *aleva* will eat eggs if they get the chance; however, this has never been observed. Second, in flight the *aleva* looks much like a hawk, with its pointed wings and long tail. Perhaps *iao* mistake the *aleva* for a hawk, and think they are chasing a dangerous predator away. But there are no hawks in Samoa. Therefore, this explanation would mean that *iao* still have an instinctive fear of hawk-like birds thousands of years after they last saw a hawk (which was probably when the ancestors of our *iao* came here from Fiji). The last explanation seems even more far-fetched. This is that the *iao* chases the *aleva* because it is afraid that the cuckoo will lay its eggs in the *iao*'s nest. To understand this possibility, we must discuss the strange breeding behavior of the *aleva*.

Like many other members of the cuckoo family, the *aleva* is a nest parasite. This means that it secretly lays its eggs in other birds' nests. The unlucky host birds think that the cuckoo egg is their own, and raise it alongside their own babies. Usually the baby cuckoo is much larger than the babies of its hosts, who are unable to compete and starve to death. Many New Zealand birds, including honeyeaters related to the *iao*, recognize the *aleva* and chase it away. This makes a lot of sense in New Zealand, where the *aleva* breeds. But the *aleva* never breeds on its wintering grounds in Polynesia. Therefore, the *iao* has no reason to fear that the *aleva* will lay eggs in its nest. Could there be an instinctive hatred of cuckoos in all members of the honeyeater family? Like many questions in biology, this one would be hard to answer, but it's still fun to think about.

Many older Samoans say that *aleva* used to be much more common than they are today. The *aleva* is now a rare sight on Tutuila. It's hard to know just how rare the bird really is because of its secretive habits. If you see one, consider yourself lucky, and take a moment to think about the many mysteries in the life of this strange visitor to our shores.

35. Barn owls (*lulu*) - spirit of the night

The barn owl or *lulu* is a highly beneficial bird in American Samoa, but some people fear it because they associate it with ghosts or *aitu*. Its ghostly white appearance and its preference for flying at night enhance its reputation as a mysterious bird. It is not uncommon when driving around Tutuila at night to see one perched on a telephone pole or gliding across the road. Its eerie screech pierces the night and can be frightening if you are not expecting it.

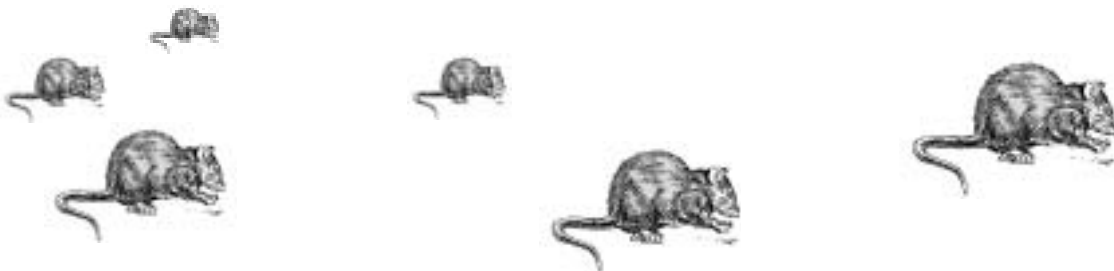


Owls are carnivores that usually swallow their prey whole. A few hours after swallowing a rat (*isumu*) or some other prey, owls regurgitate or spit out a pellet of indigestible bones and hair about two inches long and one inch in diameter. By examining these pellets, we can determine what the *lulu* eats. In the remains of 482 meals, rats made up most (81%) of those meals, followed by mice (9%), geckos (7%), and bones of a few birds (2%), which consisted of White Terns (*manu sina*), Wattled Honeyeaters (*iao*), mynas, and Samoan Starlings (*fua*).

No chicken remains were found, but this was not unexpected because owls do not generally attack large prey. Chickens and fruit bats (*pe'a*) are too heavy for an owl to carry and too large to swallow whole. Instead, they would typically eat the meat and viscera at the site of the kill. Soft tissues such as these would be totally digested and not be found in pellets. We have other evidence that one flying fox was killed and partially eaten by an owl.

Even though *lulu* occasionally take a bird, bat or even a chicken, their value in controlling rat populations is tremendous. One pair of owls may catch 2- 4 rats per day. Without owls, Tutuila and Manu'a would probably be over- run with rats. A *lulu* seen flying through a village should not be feared or hated but welcomed, because it will probably mean one less rat near your *fale*.

Gilbert S. Grant
DMWR



36. Birds of wetland and reef: Gray Duck and Reef Heron

Two very different birds depend on Samoa's shallow water habitats. One is the familiar *matu'u*, or Pacific Reef- Heron, a bird that is seen nearly every day by anyone visiting Samoa's shoreline. The other is Samoa's only duck, the *toloa* or Gray Duck, a bird that is so rare that most young Samoans have probably never seen one.

It comes as a surprise to some people that we don't have more kinds of ducks in Polynesia. After all, ducks like water, and we've got plenty of that, right? Well, we've got plenty of salt water, but very few lakes, marshes, or large streams of fresh water. Almost all ducks prefer fresh water, and even the few kinds of "sea ducks" eat mostly seagrass and other plants that aren't found around Samoa's coral reefs. Therefore, there aren't many suitable homes for *toloa* in American Samoa. These suitable homes are the fresh and brackish (fresh/saltwater mix) water wetlands.



"Wetlands" is a word that we've been hearing a lot lately. It refers to areas of land that are permanently or periodically flooded or submerged in shallow water. So much wetland habitat has been lost in the United States, primarily through draining and filling, that strict federal laws have been passed protecting wetlands. Locally, the Coastal Zone Management Program is responsible for protecting our remaining wetlands, which serve vital roles as nurseries for fish and crabs, natural water purification and recharge areas, sites for taro production, and homes for rare plants and wildlife. There used to be extensive mangrove (*togo*) swamps bordering Pago Pago Bay, but these were filled in long ago, before the negative environmental consequences of such activities were understood. The largest remaining wetland areas here are the *pala* lagoons in Nu'uuli and Leone and the marshes and Pala Lake on Aunu'u Island. There are also many other small but important wetlands remaining in both Tutuila and Manu'a.



All of these areas were once home to *toloa*. However, as wetlands were filled in and as shotguns became available, this once- popular game bird became rarer and rarer. During a major survey of Samoan birds in 1986, not a single *toloa* was seen, leading to the concern that this bird might be extinct in American Samoa. Happily, this is not the case. A few *toloa* still live in the territory, mostly on Aunu'u, where the village leaders have taken an active role in protecting their ducks. This bird, and the wetlands it depends upon, need our continued protection if it is ever to recover to healthy population levels.

The *toloa* is a "dabbling duck". This means that it doesn't dive under the water to feed, but rather tips down, with its tail in the air and its neck stretching under the water, to reach the plants and small insects and snails that it feeds on. Although it sometimes swims in the sea, it does not feed there, and, like most ducks, it does not eat fish.

One interesting thing about the *toloa* is that it doesn't always nest near the water. It may build its nest in tall dense grass, or place it in a low tree hollow. Five to ten pale green eggs are laid. The journey of

the young ducks from the nest to the safety of the water is a dangerous one, and usually only one or two ducklings make it.

The *toloa* is a great wanderer. The bird is found across a huge geographic area, extending from Indonesia to French Polynesia, and south to New Zealand and Australia. The *toloa* is a strong, fast flier, and commonly flies between islands. It seems likely that the small population on Aunu'u, which was apparently absent in the late 1980's, may have recolonized American Samoa from western Samoa, where the duck is slightly more common. This gives us reason to hope that the *toloa* may return to areas that it formerly used, if the wetlands are preserved, and the duck is protected from hunting. So ... if you see a *toloa*, consider yourself lucky, and please don't disturb it. Perhaps one day Samoa's special duck will once again be a common sight.

The *matu'u*, or Pacific Reef- Heron, is a common sight today. With its long legs and long neck, often curved in an S- shape, the *matu'u* is one of Samoa's most recognizable birds. One interesting fact about the *matu'u* is that it comes in two color forms, either dark gray or pure white, although almost all the *matu'u* in Samoa are dark gray. In other areas, particularly atolls like Swains Island or Rose Atoll, almost all the *matu'u* are white. It seems that in Polynesia the dark forms are found on volcanic islands, with dark lava rocks, while the white birds occur on atolls with white sandy shorelines. In many other parts of its range, however, including Fiji, both white and gray forms occur commonly in the same area. The reason for the *matu'u*'s two color forms remains a unclear.



Reef Heron
(*matu'u*)

The *matu'u* is the master spear fisherman of the bird world. It stalks slowly across the reef flat, scanning for the slightest movement, and then throws its long neck forward as fast as lightning, catching its prey with its long sharp beak. It feeds on a wide variety of reef creatures, including fish, crabs, and snails.

Although the *matu'u* usually makes its living feeding on the coral reef, it also uses the freshwater wetlands of Samoa. Mangrove areas like the Nu'uuli Pala are frequent feeding sites, and the birds will also hunt for food in freshwater streams. These rainforest stream valleys are the *matu'u*'s favored nesting areas, where the herons build their large nests high in the trees. Some *matu'u* also nest on offshore islets, and have even been reported to nest on ledges in caves. Usually three pale green eggs are laid.

Strict protection of Samoa's wetlands is essential if the *toloa* is to regain its place among our familiar native birds and if the *matu'u* is to continue to be a common resident of our shoreline villages. Please help spread the message that landfills kill a very important part of Samoa's natural environment - our wetlands.

Pepper Trail
DMWR

37. Shorebirds (o *tuli*): incredible voyagers

April/May is the time of year when some familiar visitors leave American Samoa and begin an incredible and perilous journey home. These visitors are the shorebirds, or *tuli*. Three different kinds of *tuli* are common visitors here between the months of September and April: the Pacific Golden Plover, the Wandering Tattler, and the Ruddy Turnstone.

During the northern summer, all three *tuli* nest in Alaska and northern Canada. The plover and the turnstone nest in the tundra, where their neighbors are caribou and grizzly bears. The tattlers nest by icy mountain streams, sharing their world with mountain sheep and golden eagles. But when the northern days grow shorter and colder, the birds probably begin to dream of the beaches and reefs of Polynesia, for they set out on one of the greatest of all animal journeys. From gathering places on the coasts of Alaska, the *tuli* take off to fly non-stop over 3,000 miles of open ocean to the Hawaiian Islands. These birds cannot land on the water and take a rest - - their feathers are not waterproof, so if they land in the water, they drown. Not only is this flight an amazing physical feat, but it requires tremendous navigational abilities to find tiny specks of land lost in the featureless sea. After a well-earned rest in Hawaii, the *tuli* take off again for another flight over thousands of miles of ocean to reach Samoa.

Here, each kind of *tuli* takes up a slightly different lifestyle. The Golden Plover is often seen on the beaches, but even more commonly can be found searching for food on the short grass of *malae*, parks, the golf course, and the airport. We can only hope it will not be harmed from competing with the many myna birds that now occupy these areas.

Although this plover is plain brown during most of its stay in American Samoa, it gets a beautiful new set of feathers just before it heads north: a golden-spangled back and jet black underparts. The plover is the commonest *tuli* in Samoa, and it features in many myths and legends. *Tuli* the Messenger is one manifestation of Tagaloa, the supreme god of the ancient Samoans, and in one version of the Samoan creation story, Tagaloa created the first dry land as a resting place for *tuli*.

The Wandering Tattler is a beachcomber. It is almost always seen on beaches or the reef, using its long beak to pry small crabs, worms, and other delicacies out of the sand or coral. It is a solitary bird, soberly dressed in gray. When disturbed, the tattler's loud cries explain how it got its name.

The turnstone was named for its way of feeding. These small, energetic, sociable birds like to vigorously flip over small stones, bits of seaweed, or debris in search of food hiding beneath. They



Golden Plover



Wandering Tattler

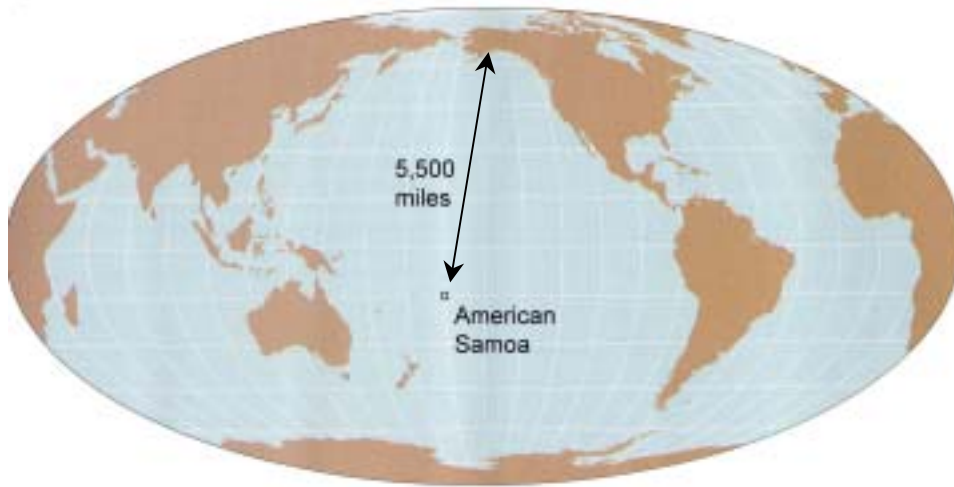


Ruddy Turnstone

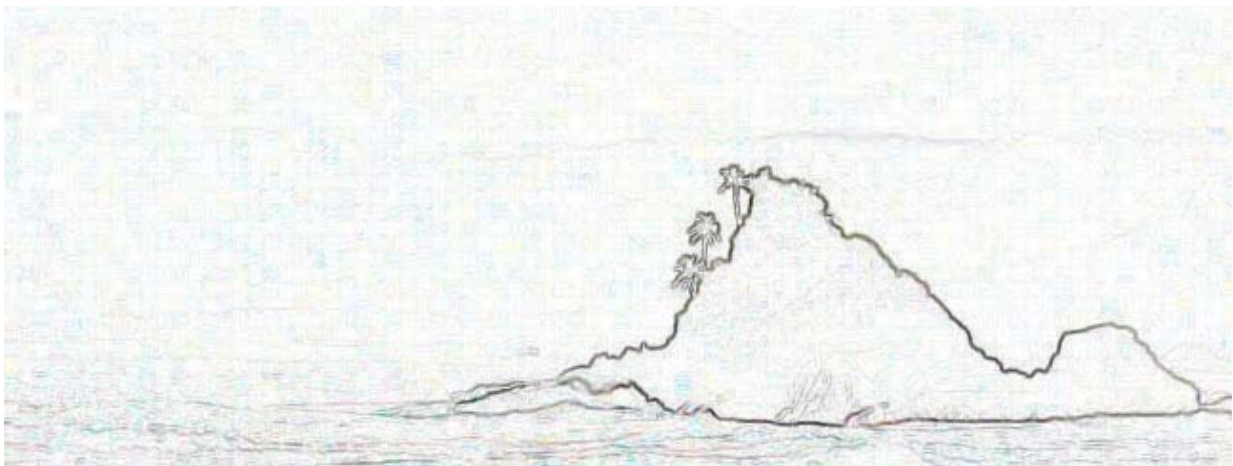
can be seen either on the beach or in grassy areas. The turnstone has a beautiful pattern of black and white patches on its back when it flies, and in breeding plumage, it is a handsome bird with orange- brown, black, and white patterning.

All these *tuli* can usually be seen in such places as Sliding Rock and Pala Lagoon from September to April. But in April/May, all but a few stragglers will have left Samoa to take their long, long trip back to Alaska. So, the next time you see some *tuli*, wish them a safe journey and try to imagine, maybe with a little envy, their great adventure.

Pepper Trail
DMWR



Incredible flight of shorebirds (*tuli*) from American Samoa to Alaska and Canada, with a stopover in Hawaii.



38. Samoa's seabirds: *tava'e*, *gogo* and *manu sina*

The islands of Samoa are true oceanic islands: they are not riders on the skirts of any continent, but are the tops of huge mountains, rising up through the great ocean depths. Surrounded as they are by thousands of square miles of ocean, it is not surprising that the Samoan Islands have more kinds of seabirds than any other type of native wildlife. In all, 20 species of seabirds are known to nest in Samoa (and many more can be seen passing through our area), compared to 18 kinds of landbirds and only three kinds of mammals (all bat species).

Our seabirds are a diverse group. Some, such as shearwaters and petrels (*ta'i'o*), are rarely seen, but nest in burrows on the tops of mountains like Lata and Pioa. Their eerie calls can be heard at night in places such as Afono Pass. Others like frigatebirds (*atafa*) and boobies (*fua'o*) are seen flying around our coasts, but nest on the high cliffs of Pola or in trees on the remote north side of Tutuila. The tern family has many different looking birds living here, including the solid black and brown noddies (*gogo*), the beautiful blue- grey noddy (*laia*), the white tern (*manu sina*), and the grey-backed tern (*gogo sina*). Here we will discuss the three most common and conspicuous seabirds of Tutuila: the *tava'e*, *manu sina*, and *gogo*.

The *tava'e* (*tava'esina*), or White- tailed Tropicbird, is one of Samoa's most beautiful creatures. The sight of a *tava'e* soaring overhead is unforgettable, as its gleaming white feathers and graceful tail streamers blaze against the deep indigo of the Polynesian sky. Happily, it is also a familiar sight, as these birds are common all around Tutuila.



The *tava'e*, so graceful in the air, is comical and awkward on land, so much so that Samoan legends describe the bird as lazy or dim- witted. In fact, *tava'e* are probably as industrious and intelligent as your average bird. Their awkwardness results from the fact that their legs and feet are tiny for the size of the bird, and are placed far back on the body. Thus, all *tava'e* can do on land is to shuffle along, bumping their powerful chest muscles on the ground. Luckily for them, *tava'e* spend little time on land.

They typically nest high in rainforest trees, preferring protected sites such as large hollows or clumps of ferns or other plant material. Here they lay a single large egg. At hatching, the young tropicbird is one of the cutest of all baby birds - a completely round ball of silvery fluff. As they grow, they molt into their juvenile plumage, with black and white barred feathers across their back. This is their appearance when they leave the nest on their first flight toward the sea, often a mile or more away. The fledglings often seem to have problems with this flight, based on the number of young *tava'e* that are brought in to our office, unable to fly. These youngsters are usually very gentle, and with several days of feeding with sardines or other fish, they often regain their strength and are able to fly away.

Tava'e are master fishermen, making plunging dives for squid and a variety of small fish. One of their favorites are flying fish - I've often wondered whether they catch the flying fish in the air or while they're swimming. The *tava'e* is well known to Samoan fishermen, who watch its behavior at sea to help them locate schools of *masimasi* and other fish. The *tava'e* is important to human fishermen for another reason: its feathers are prized for fishing lures. The gleaming white breast feathers are tied to hooks and used to attract *malau* (squirrelfish) and other fish. It is a traditional belief that only feathers from living birds stay dry and shiny after repeated use, and it was a badge of honor for a

Samoan youth to climb a *tava'e* nesting tree and pluck out the plumes. This supplied a lure while causing no harm to the birds.

The *tava'e* has a close relative, the Red-tailed Tropicbird, or *tava'e'ula*, that nests on Rose Atoll. This bird is larger and heavier than the *tava'e*, with shining pinkish-white feathers and red tail plumes. It typically nests on the ground among rocks, roots, or logs. In former times, this bird apparently nested on Tutuila, but it no longer does so. The reason may be the abundance of introduced animals such as rats, cats, and dogs that attack ground-nesting birds on Tutuila.

Our next seabird, the *manu sina* or *manusina* (also called the white tern or common fairy tern) is perhaps Samoa's most familiar bird. At almost any time of day you can lift your eyes to the mountains and see these pure white birds circling effortlessly over the green forest. I recommend contemplation of this lovely sight to anyone feeling burned out by the noise and ugliness that sometimes surround us at eye level. It's always a nice reminder of the beauty of the natural Samoan environment.



The *manu sina* is found throughout the tropical oceans of the world and seems able to adapt to human-altered landscapes better than do many seabirds. Those of you familiar with Honolulu may have noticed *manu sina* fluttering in the trees along Kalakaua Avenue, where they actually nest in the middle of Waikiki.

The nesting behavior of *manu sina* is remarkable indeed. In fact, “nesting” is being a bit generous, since *manu sina* make no nest at all. Instead, they balance their large single egg in a knothole, stub, or other more or less precarious perch in a tree. They will even accept man-made structures like rooftops and ledges. It is amazing to see a *manu sina* stubbornly sitting on its egg as a strong tropical storm swings its branch wildly. Risky though it seems to us, this nesting strategy certainly works, as the White Tern is a common and widespread bird.

Manu sina feed on a variety of small ocean fish, which they pluck from the surface. Unlike all the other seabirds of Samoa, the *manu sina* carries fish back to its chick in its beak, rather than swallowing them first. In fact, they have the incredible ability to capture several tiny fish in a row, shift them crosswise in their bill, and carry them back home, without dropping a one. How do they do it?

The final seabird to be discussed is the *gogo*, or Brown Noddy. Like the *manu sina*, this bird is a member of the tern family, but these two cousins are different in many ways. For starters, the *gogo* is as dark as the *manu sina* is light. It is dark chocolate brown all over, except for the top of the head, which is a whitish-gray cap. It is also more sociable than the *manu sina*, usually nesting in loose groups, or colonies. The *gogo* is very flexible in its nesting behavior. On Tutuila, *gogo* usually nest high in trees in forested stream valleys, building bulky nests of dead leaves and other plant material. They also sometimes nest on cliffs, for example at Fagatele Bay. On Rose Island and other atolls, *gogo* are happy to lay their eggs on the ground, making only a small scrape in the coral rubble, which they



often decorate with empty seashells and even bones. Like other tropical seabirds, the *gogo* typically lays only a single egg.

There is another *gogo* here, the Black Noddy, which is smaller and blacker than the Brown Noddy, and has a different way of flying. In good light they are separated from Brown Noddies that have a distinct brown and black pattern on the wings. Black Noddies are more often seen feeding in flocks with *manu sina* than are Brown Noddies. The diet of the *gogo* is apparently similar to that of the *manu sina*, since both birds feed on small fish and squid captured near the surface. How do different birds with such similar food habits coexist? Maybe each catches just a particular kind or size of fish, or dives to a certain depth.

One of the most interesting sights in American Samoa is a foraging flock of seabirds. These groups can have from five or ten to hundreds of birds. They are a great chance to see the many different ways seabirds catch fish: *laia* flutter above the waves, sometimes dangling their feet into the water, *gogo* swoop low over the water, *fua'o* dive into the water with a huge splash, and *atafa* wait until a *fua'o* catches some fish, then chase it and take the fish from it. The birds you see in such a flock are a good indication of which fish are below the water, something Samoan fishermen use to locate schools of fish. A flock of small birds like White Terns and Black Noddies usually indicates skipjack or small tuna, while large flocks of *fua'o* indicate larger fish.

As fishing partners or simply as beautiful neighbors on our islands, Samoa's seabirds are a special part of our wild heritage.

Pepper Trail
DMWR



Booby (*fua'o*)



Sooty terns at Rose Atoll



Frigatebird (*atafa*)

39. The special birds of Manu'a

The Manu'a Islands are famous for their history, culture, and spectacular beauty, but the wildlife of Ta'u, Ofu, and Olosega is also special. Given that these islands are only 60 miles east of Tutuila, you might expect that the same kinds of birds and animals would be found in both places. But in fact there are four kinds of birds living in Manu'a that do not occur on Tutuila.

The most beautiful of these is Samoa's only parrot, the *segavao*, or Blue-crowned Lory. This is a tiny jewel of a bird, only 7 inches long, but colored with emerald green back and wings, ruby red face and throat, and a sapphire blue crown. In historic times, these colorful feathers were used to decorate finemats.

Segavao often come in to villages to feed on the nectar of coconut (*niu*) and coral tree (*gatae*) flowers, but they are not easy to see in spite of their bright colors. Your first clue to their presence is often their high-pitched whistles, given as they fly overhead or scramble in the top of a coconut tree. This pretty little parrot is also found in western Samoa, but does not live on Tutuila. We don't know why. Tutuila seems to have some of the food *segavao* like, including *aoa* fruits, but perhaps there are not enough flowers all year round. In the forests of Manu'a, *segavao* particularly like the flowers of *Astronidium pickeringii*, a species for which we know no Samoan name. This tree of the melastome family is common in the high forests of Manu'a.



Blue-crowned Lory
(*segavao*)

Another special bird of Manu'a is the *sega o le vau*, the Lesser (Fiji) Shrikebill. This is a charcoal-grey bird with tiny white corners on its tail, although if you get a very good look you might see a little brown along its sides, or its blue-grey legs. *Sega o le vau* are about the same size as *iao*, but are stockier and have bigger heads and wider beaks. This bird is found nowhere else in the Samoan islands. It also occurs in Fiji, but birds there look very different and are mostly brown. *Sega o le vau* can be seen on all three islands of Manu'a, but they are not closely tied to a particular habitat. They are usually heard before they are seen, as they often make a loud chatter as they poke through dead vines or *ie'ie* leaves. They also make a clear two-toned whistle, and may answer if you imitate this call. These birds seem sociable and often move through the forest in small groups of two or three. They often ignore people, and if you sit very still they will sometimes feed within arms reach.



Fiji Shrikebill
(*sega o le vau*)

The Spotless Crake is a small black bird that looks like a half-grown Banded Rail (*ve'a*). It is extremely rare and has only been found in American Samoa on Ta'u Island. It lives in dense grass, is active mostly at dawn and dusk, and is very shy. All these habits makes it very hard to see, and only two birds have been sighted in recent years.



Spotless
crake

Another rare land bird in American Samoa is the *tuaimo*, the Friendly Ground-Dove. This bird gets its name because it was first discovered in Tonga, once called the Friendly Islands. A better name would probably be the Shy Ground-Dove, as this bird will sit very still on a low branch and hope you do not notice it. Your best chance of

seeing one is if it happens to be walking in the path you are using, as it may run ahead of you or fly up onto a tree limb. You may also hear its call, a single, drawn-out coo that is slightly lower and much longer than the rapid, short coos of the fruit-doves *manutagi* or *manuma*. If you are very close, you can hear a slight variation in the tone of the call.

Tuaiméo are mostly dark brown birds, although like many doves the males can be very pretty if seen in good light.

Unlike other doves or pigeons in American Samoa, this bird spends most of its time on the ground, where it feeds on fallen seeds, fruit, and buds. *Tuaiméo* can be seen on Ofu and Olosega, as well as in Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa.



Birds are not the only unique wildlife of Manu'a. For example, Ta'u is home to American Samoa's only native snake, the *gata*, or Pacific Boa. This dark brown snake is harmless to people, apparently living mostly on a diet of lizards (*mo'o* and *pili*), birds and bird eggs. It is rare, or at least very hard to find in the deep forests of Ta'u, and should be left undisturbed whenever it is found.

Why is the wildlife in Manu'a so different from that on Tutuila? One reason could be the wildness of Manu'a: large areas, mostly on Ta'u, are untouched by villages, plantations, and roads. Another reason may be that in Manu'a the native birds have fewer problems caused by introduced birds, animals, diseases, or plants. Or, it could be that the terrain in Manu'a, which has many areas with steep yet forested ridges that have quite different plants than similar ridges, such as Alava, on Tutuila. Each of the special birds of Manu'a may have different reasons for being there, but the absence of all of them from Tutuila suggests there might be a single explanation for this pattern, and this remains an interesting biological question about American Samoa.

Joshua Seamon, Pepper Trail
DMWR

Manu'a



Index of some Samoan plant names used in text

| Samoaan | Common | Scientific |
|-----------|---------------------|----------------------------|
| a'amati'e | | Elaeocarpus floridanus |
| ala'a | | Planchonella garberi |
| aoa | banyan | Ficus prolixa/obliqua |
| asi | | Syngium inophylloides |
| atone | nutmeg | Myristica inutilis (fatua) |
| au'auli | Samoaan ebony | Diospyros samoensis |
| esi | papaya | Carica papaya |
| fa'i | banana | Musa x paradisiaca |
| fetau | | Calophyllum inophyllum |
| filimoto | Indian plum | Flacourtia rukam |
| futu | | Barringtonia asiatica |
| gasu | | Palaquium stehlinii |
| gatae | coral tree | Erythrina variegata |
| ie'ie | | Freycinetia spp. |
| ifi | Polynesian chesnut | Inocarpus fagifer |
| ifilele | | Intsia bijuga |
| ma'ali | | Canarium vitiense |
| magele | | Trema cannabina |
| malili | | Terminalia richii |
| mamala | | Dysoxylum samoense |
| mamalava | | Planchonella samoensis |
| mamalupe | | Faradaya amicorum |
| maota | | Dysoxylum spp. |
| masame | | Glochidion ramiflorum |
| mati | fig | Ficus spp. |
| moso'oi | perfume tree | Cananga odorata |
| niu | coconut | Cocos nucifera |
| nonu | Indian mulberry | Morinda citrifolia |
| o'a | | Bischofia javanica |
| olioli | tree fern | Cyathea spp. |
| palulu | morning glory | Operculina turpethum? |
| poumuli | | Flueggea flexuosa |
| pua lulu | | Fagrae berteroaana |
| pulu | Mexican rubber tree | Castilla elastica |
| soga | | Pipturus argenteus |
| talo | taro | Colocasia esculenta |
| taputoi | | Elatostachys falcata |
| tava | island lychee | Pometia pinnata |
| ti | ti plant | Cordyline fruticosa |
| togo | mangrove | Bruguiera/Rhizophora |
| toitoi | | Scaevola taccada |
| ulu | breadfruit | Artocarpus altilis |
| vaepovi | orchid tree | Bauhinia monandra |
| vavae | kapok tree | Ceiba pentandra |



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