

Midway.

There's something about this experience that is extremely intense on many levels. As a Fish and Wildlife Service ranger here I've been learning constantly from the people around me and from visiting researchers, writers, photographers and naturalists. This has been a boon for the brain. Also, I am deeper into my love for the natural world than I have ever been. In the company of biologists, wildlife photographers, essayists, researchers and dedicated environmental advocates I have been snuggled down among my "people", and in many ways there is nothing more exhilarating.

The effect of the wildlife and birdlife here is nearly impossible to describe. We all lament our inability to capture it in words in letters to friends and family. I can tell you that there are 2 million various seabirds here, but you can't hear them talking to their eggs or watch them cartwheel in the wind over an azure lagoon, with the creamy smudge of water breaking over the reef 3 miles away as backdrop. You can't know what it's like to have them talk to you from every tree in a kaleidoscope of burrs, grunts, eeps, squawks and scoldings. You can't see the yellow ball of tern down with the indignant face that falls asleep on its feet in the sun in the fork of a tree at human-eye level, replete and satiated with the oodles of small silvery fishes its snow-white parents have been ferrying to it all morning. Half-grown albatross chicks, part grey down and part grown-up black and white feathers, will preen your toes if you stray close to the sides of the fields on a day they're all waiting for their parents, and are bored, en masse. Somewhere their keen-eyed parents are on the wing, off the coast of California or Japan, filling up with squid and fish eggs (and, most horribly, plastic), focused on bringing the load home to their peeping, lumbering teenager chick. One such adolescent is right outside my front door--appropriately named Doorchick, it snoozes up against the warm cinderblock of the 1950's-era house.

Last week I was on a pontoon boat all afternoon in the heart of the circular lagoon, hanging my head over the flat front of the boat, getting breathed on in moist bursts by spinner dolphins. They were close enough to lick. I had to keep my fingers curled up out of the way under my chin, as I was laying on my stomach gazing down into their blowholes. There were 300 or more of them. We were together all day. I could look into their dark brown eyes from inches away. Their enthusiasm for bowriding never waned. Calves were tucked in close to moms, amorous couples swam belly-to-silverpink belly, and always the precision of their movements in reference to each other was exquisite. That delphinic swimming precision reminded me, as it always has, of the experiments physicists ran about 10 years ago, in which they split an atom and sent different particles of the same atom down different conduits. When one particle was acted on by some force interjected by the researchers, and reacted, the OTHER particle waaaaaaaaaaaaay down some other tube

somewhere reacted as well in the same way. Connected by something we don't understand, those particles shifted in unison. And so too 10's and 20's of tricolored spinner dolphins shifted all day, creasing the waves in that way that they have.

And if only you could have seen the water. Just blue is not it, and neither is crystal enough to describe it. Clear is a laughable adjective, and heavenly doesn't help me help you see it. As seen from the shore it is breathtaking enough--someone this week said "That beach, it's unbelievable, when you see it it's like you've gone to the Heaven of Beaches"--but the water FROM the water, it's like the thing you hope you see in your mind when you die. Suspended in that color, your soul would rejoice, lift and spread out, and you would become then maybe, as Mary Oliver once wrote, "less yourself than part of everything."

When I take the 3 hours to walk around the island I go through dense stands of stiff ironwood trees, over gentle hummocks of white sand by the arc of beach. I meander through snappy gauntlets of indignant albatross chicks, gain a living halo of bright white terns all intent on frightening me away with their diaphanous hovering flight around my head. This only inspires the urge to want to stand there transfixed by them, instead of the urge to run away, which is what they want me to do...I have been watching a female monk seal, a really large and wonderfully healthy female, wean her saucy black pup on the restricted beach that they have all to themselves. I have been taking the time to lay down on my back and let the Laysan and black-footed albatross coast over me, inching closer to me all the time, dropping altitude to see what I am, tilting a head to make sense of me, next time flying so low you hear the wind in their feathers--six feet of wing made of light and grace. I see the old cement pillboxes tilting in the ever-building dune, scuff over the cracking cement floors of what were once seaplane hangars and are now only the big bare parts of a meandering path, all the rest of the once militarily bustling area surrendering to verbecina weeds and salty weather. Sometimes it is so still you are tempted to swear you are someplace not real, but perhaps wandering the visions of some sleeping seeker. Sometimes the wind is so loud and relentless the sand stings your calves, and the tops of the trees sigh like one large soul departing.

When I got here for the very first time, as I stepped down from the plane and looked into the tops of the trees around the old airfield I saw faces in a row. Then they were gone. Between the many eras of wars and peacetime in the 20th century, countless bodies both alive and dead travelled through Midway. Who are these young men whose faces haunt the trees?

Green sea turtles graze the waving seaweeds off the rusting seawall. One lone blacktip reef shark, about 4 lithe feet from blunt grey head to sleek tail, patrols the shallows while the mullet flee like shredding storm clouds. Sitting on the beach, it is too stunning to allow for reading after all. Walking around

the island, it is too seething, too humming with life energy, to allow for much introspection. I try to detangle my problems on walks and find myself, instead, holding really still to hear the shearwater moan again, over there by the fallen-in gun emplacement. Stopped in my tracks I don't even remember what I was thinking about. The frigatebirds hang motionless on seven feet of silent wing above me and the trees while I stand earthbound on ironwood needles, and on sand made from the pulverizing of reef by waves that have been throwing themselves against this place for 27 million years. The frigatebirds on their great wings will make not a sound. The shearwater on the ground moans again and its mate moans back. I ponder the mystery and feel of a pair-bond. I can't begin to imagine wings like ailerons, blades, so silent and perfect as to seem impossible.

Tonight it's raining. I can hear the soft clack of albatross biting upward at the rain. Out there in the wet dark they are huddled down into their nest cups looking elegant and frowny. Two white terns are bickering on the windowsill. There is an irritated black noddy in the ironwood tree outside, it sounds like the sound you make dragging your fingernails down a washboard. For some reason, a few of the 90,000 nesting sooty terns are on the wing tonight and vocal over the house. They have just begun the process of this season's nesting, settling down in a cloud of shrieks and sharp, flat calls over on Eastern Island. Walking near the colony sends up wave after wave of elegant small birds, all of them goaded into anxiety by their neighbor's anxiety, none of them sure what the alarm is exactly but all of them sure of their ability to out-manuever the threat. Over on Eastern, the red-footed boobies preen with their powder-blue bills and shield their nearly naked chicks from tonight's rain, the tuxedo'd grey terns hunker down to the crumbling runways, the paired frigatebirds snooze on their massive and messy nests of sticks, and the monk seals grunt maybe a little in their sleep, dreaming perhaps of slow and careless fish.

When seen from the space shuttle, Midway atoll looks like a bluegreen, more or less triangular gem trimmed in white on a field of endless azure. Two of them would make fine earrings, I've always thought to myself. I could envision them made from lapis, trimmed in crushed pearl, maybe. Seen from that height you cannot imagine the life below you, on so little land. It took 27 million years for a volcano to form, build through 18,000 feet of ocean, crest the waves and build some more, cool, collect itself a fringe of coral reef, and then commence the inescapable task of sinking. All the while, the crown of reef reaches and builds for the light. Waves pound the reef and crush and carry, sand builds in mounds that pile up above the waterline and birds come to claim the sandbars. We people come and poke around, throw the whole balance off usually, stand transfixed by the beauty and come away without sufficient vocabulary to tell anyone anything really, about LIFE there. Although we all admit to being affected.

For instance, get this: The frigatebird, with the wingspan of 7 feet, weighs only 3 pounds and its bones weigh less than 5 ounces. Frigatebirds are kites. They have an affair with the wind that is older than anything I can think of in the human dynamic.

We are unequipped to talk about the meticulous, greypink ghost crabs who fling the white sand from their beach burrows in the evenings as if they were doing the most important thing in the world. Which, of course, they are. When the wave eases up over their burrows, clear frisky bubbles come up from their former front doors. When I walk on the beach in the wet sand, I wonder how many hard-dug houses I endanger.

I absolutely surrender to my inability to tell you anything worth knowing about the grace and presence of the black-footed albatross, about its royal, courtly dance, its proud demands, and its fantastic haughty dignity. Usually I just stare helplessly at them, utterly in awe, utterly in love. My eyes are hungry for them. I will miss them profoundly.

I doubt you will come here, although I can't rule that out. There have been many impossible events in my own life, who am I to assume that you will not wake up and find yourself here one day? If you one day do awaken here, go down to the mile of powdered sugar beach. Walk into the azure crystal dream of water, float on your back. Keep your eyes open, watch the birds stitch the ocean to the sky. Listen to your mind hush up. You will hear the albatross court each dignified other. You might hear the soft hiss of sand flung out of a ghost crab burrow. Over the murmurs of the silly people and the wind in the trees and the yawn of a dreaming monk seal you may hear, in your cells, the waves shift over the reef all around you as you drift in the heart of a structure five miles in diameter, yourself a bit of human plankton lazing about in the center of a living crown on the brow of a mighty, dying mountain. Out there by the reef, perhaps, the newest spinner dolphin calf is probably drifting too, wide brown eyes on its mother, unaware that there was ever a world before it was born, linked to you by the salt water that cradles you both, linked to you by the ocean in your veins.