

TAHITI TO EASTER ISLAND
Marquesas, Tuamotus & Pitcairns
Aboard the *Island Sky*
October 10–29, 2019



The Beautiful Bay at Fatu Hiva in the Marquesas © Brian Gibbons

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Crystalline waters, soaring volcanic peaks, windswept atolls blanketed in coconut palms, gorgeous corals and swarms of reef fishes, amazing seabirds, and a variety of rare endemic landbirds is the short summary of what we witnessed as we sailed across the South Pacific. We sampled the Society, Marquesas, and Tuamotu islands in French Polynesia and three of the four Pitcairns before we ended in the legendary realm of giant Moai on Rapa Nui (Easter Island). Tawhiri (Polynesian god of wind and storms) was good to us, as we had fine weather for most of our shore excursions and smooth sailing for nearly the entire 3,700 miles of Pacific we crossed in making our way from Tahiti to Easter Island.



Our first spectacular Polynesian Sunset as seen from Tahiti at the Intercontinental Resort

© Brian Gibbons

Before we even boarded the *Island Sky*, we sought some great birds in Papehue Valley where Tahiti Monarchs, critically endangered, have a population around eighty birds, up from a low of 12 in 1998. In the parking lot, the Society Kingfishers chattered and sat up for scope views, then Gray-green Fruit-Doves floated past, and just like that we had witnessed two endemics. We started hiking up the trail, into the verdant forest and crossing the stream as we climbed into the narrow canyon. Soon we were into the realm of this very rare endemic. The adults are all glossy-black, and the immatures range from buffy to rusty-orange. We saw one of each plumage, and as we reveled in our luck, we noted some Polynesian Swiftlets overhead. With all our targets in the bag, we retraced our steps down the valley and then joined the rest of the cruise passengers for a brief tour of Papeete before embarking on the *Island Sky*. As we left the port behind, Tahiti Petrels and Tropical Shearwaters were sighted during our safety briefing.

Sailing into the Tuamotu Archipelago, the largest atoll chain in the world, we sighted our target for the day Apataki, home to the charming little Blue Lorikeet, Atoll Fruit-Dove, and the Tuamotu Reed Warbler, our quarry for the day. The howling southeast Trade Winds were not in our favor, but persistence paid off, as we eventually saw all of our targets well, even with the winds whipping the coconut palm fronds the whole time.



Atoll Fruit-Dove at Apataki, the first coral atoll that we landed on in the Tuamotus © Brian Gibbons



Marquesas Imperial-Pigeon at Nuku Hiva © Brian Gibbons

After a day at sea, I spotted the mountainous Nuku Hiva just before breakfast, our first view of the spectacular Marquesas. We noted the typical nearshore seabirds as we approached through the morning. White Terns, Red-tailed Tropicbirds, Black Noddy, and Brown Booby were all seen around the ship as we neared the rugged coastline. Hatiheu Bay provided an idyllic image of Polynesia: soaring volcanic ridges, forested slopes, and a beach with coconut palms along the shore. The Marquesas were some of the first islands settled in Polynesia around 1,500 years ago. The locals greeted us with music at the landing and presented a great show of their culture with their dances and drum work. For birding, we would board a variety of trucks and make our way to the highest forest along the road. Here we wandered around taking in the sight of the bay below us and the Marquesan Swiftlets fluttering overhead. We also saw many of the hulking Marquesas

Imperial-Pigeons sitting nearby or flying overhead; we were never far from their growling and barking calls. We even had such close views to admire their unique feathered bill knob! Virtually the whole time we were birding we could hear the raucous call of the Northern Marquesan Reed Warbler. Eventually a few came out for us to admire their rarity, as their looks are somewhat lacking. The White-capped Fruit-Doves were around too, and eventually everyone caught up with this endemic. The best looks were had at Hikoku'a Tohua archaeological site where they clambered around in the ylang ylang trees getting fruit. The delicious



Hatiheu Bay at Nuku Hiva © Brian Gibbons

scent of the ylang ylang pervaded the forest as we took in the petroglyphs and tikis of this restored site. The Marquesan Swiftlets were easily seen here as they fluttered around at eye level trying to steal our attention from the local guide interpreting the area. After all this action, the locals even hosted us for snacks of fruit, coconut, banana fritters, and juice. I couldn't stop myself from slaking my thirst with glass after glass of the amazing fragrant limeade.

Our next stop in the Marquesas was Hiva Oa; here we called on Atuona first. Above a little village we found the Calvary Cemetery where Paul Gauguin and singer Jaques Brel are buried. Wandering the grounds of the Gauguin museum, we found a few birds: Red-

browed Firetail and Chestnut-breasted Munia. In the afternoon we sailed over to Puamau where we saw the largest tiki in the Marquesas at l'ipona me'ae.



Sunrise at Fatu Hiva, our final island in the stunning Marquesas © Brian Gibbons

Our final stop in the Marquesas would be Fatu Hiva, home to one of the rarest landbirds on earth, the Fatu Hiva Monarch, population 24! The birders departed early for our hike to seek the Monarch; we had a long Zodiac ride over to Omoa that was interrupted by some energetic Spinner Dolphins and Blue-gray Noddies. After a short ride in trucks, we



White-capped Fruit-Dove at Fatu Hiva © Brian Gibbons

started hiking up the brilliant green valley with a clear stream crashing over boulders that we had to cross three times during our ascent. We stood around for quite a while waiting for this rare bird to appear, but nothing. One little peep, then nothing. Our local



Fatuhiva Monarch juvenile (L) and adult (R) © Brian Gibbons

guides split off to check adjacent territories, and word of the affirmative came back, so we raced up a muddy trail to the next spot. We heard the birds, but they disappeared upslope as we arrived. So, we stood around. Of course, word comes that the birds are back at the original spot; some smart folks stayed there and were enjoying great looks when we arrived. The month-old juvenile was calling, and the

adults came in several times, feeding insects to the gray fuzzball. We hoped this pair would be successful in raising this young bird; every individual is crucial when a bird is this rare. Before we started our hike, we had great views of the Southern Marquesan subspecies of White-capped Fruit-Dove. Singing in the bushes and scrambling through coconut palms was the Southern Marquesan Reed Warbler; another endemic, their

world range is five islands in the Marquesas. Before returning to the ship we witnessed a rousing dance session accompanied by local musicians.

Sailing from the Marquesas to the Tuamotus gave us some of our best seabirding of the trip for those willing to spend many slow hours



Tahiti Petrel was a regular sighting early in our voyage © Brian Gibbons



Local girl from the Puka Rua dancers © Brian Gibbons

tree branch-running, nectar-feeding, oddball of a sandpiper quite well. I was delighted; as we wandered through the woods, the sandpipers were common. On the beach we had several Bristle-thighed Curlews patrolling and flying over giving their distinctive whistles, which I had heard last in June on the dry tundra of the Seward Peninsula in Western Alaska, where they breed. Many of us fought our way through the pandanus and coconuts to see the lagoon; of course, it was filled with clear turquoise waters, and Red-footed Boobies whizzed past overhead as Great Frigatebirds floated on buoyant wings, some males with their blood-red throat pouches inflated.

on the deck between sightings. We tallied many Bulwer's Petrels, Tahiti Petrel, Gould's Petrel, Collared Petrel, Tropical Shearwaters, and the usual complement of tropicbirds, terns, noddies, and frigates. Puka Puka and Puka Rua were primarily cultural visits and snorkeling spots, as we didn't have any organized birding outings. We did see Pacific Reef-Herons and Wandering Tattlers on the coral flats near our landings and Brown Noddies overhead.

Tenararo held one of the most alluring birds of our entire voyage, the Tuamotu Sandpiper. I was relieved when one flew in and checked out the scouting party, as if curious about these bipedal invaders. By the time all the birders were ashore everyone had seen this



Great Frigatebird © Brian Gibbons



Tuamotu Sandpiper was a fantastic endemic we found on Tenararo © Brian Gibbons

Tenararo is just one of five islands that still host the Tuamotu Sandpiper, and being rat-free, is so important for landbirds and seabirds alike.

Our most interesting island in terms of European history was no doubt Pitcairn Island—home, for more than 200 years, of the descendants of Fletcher Christian, his fellow mutineers, and the Polynesians that joined them on their 8,000-mile odyssey seeking refuge from British capture. The fairy tale ended in the years shortly after their arrival. Many murders, suicides, and revenge killings nearly doomed the settlers on Pitcairn, but here we are in 2019 visiting their island, and they persist. We easily found the Pitcairn Reed Warbler near Adamstown, the main settlement on the island. This reed warbler has to have one of the smallest world ranges of any bird in the world. The large trees and shady roads made wandering the island very enjoyable as we contemplated their burning of the only way out, the *HMS Bounty*, more



Pitcairn Reed Warbler © Brian Gibbons

than 200 years ago. We hiked up to Christian's Cave, one of their early hideouts where they could watch for passing ships. Red-tailed Tropicbirds wheeled overhead, honking like geese, while small flocks of Gray Noddies chased in front of the cliff face. We could see in the distance the *Island Sky*; she wasn't burning.



Pitcairn Island looks like paradise from the air; *Island Sky* is in the upper left

© Mike Moore (drone photo)

Henderson Island held the allure of this adventure more than any other island we would land on. The Henderson Island Crake, a small flightless rail, would be the trophy of a landing on Henderson, if we could make it ashore. Islands in the Pacific once held 800 species of rails; Polynesians, their pigs, dogs, and rats decimated that number, and Europeans further reduced



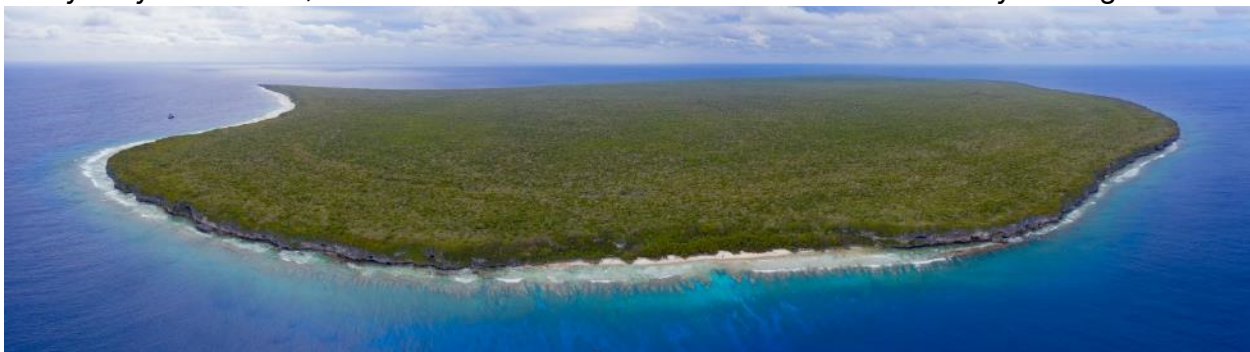
The Grail Rail, Henderson Island Crake © Brian Gibbons

it to a small fraction of the original diversity. Miraculously, the Henderson Island Crake has held on with its solid coral-red legs and a tenacity to live. We saw several of these black rails with their red eyes and red eye rings. Before we even made it into the woods,



Henderson Island Fruit-Dove, one of four fantastic landbird endemics we found at Henderson © Brian Gibbons

we heard the chatter of Stephen's Lorikeet, another Henderson endemic. Then a Henderson Island Fruit-Dove landed on a bush on top of the plateau of this uplifted coral island. Masked Boobies and their young lounged just off the beach, unconcerned by our presence. Finally, we found our final endemic, the Henderson Island Reed Warbler, in the woods while we were seeking the crake. A very successful visit to this island was facilitated by a great crew of folks that help land the Zodiacs in challenging conditions. I think at least four of the landing party had PhDs! Another highlight for me at Henderson was seeing the Coconut Crabs; some even used old coconuts for shells. We did see many Polynesian rats, indicative of the failed eradication effort several years ago.



Henderson Island, an uplifted coral island called a makatea; *Island Sky* in the upper left © Mike Moore

Our final landing in the Pitcairn group would be Ducie. It would also be our final birdy landing, as Easter Island is nearly devoid of native bird life. Again, we had challenging



The lagoon at Ducie Atoll, 250,000 Murphy's Petrels nest here © Brian Gibbons

conditions, but we landed, and we knew there would be spectacle on this island judging by the swarm of Murphy's Petrels overhead. Brent's first report crackled over the radio, "There are chicks everywhere!" As we slowly ducked under the shrubs, we found Brent's assessment quite accurate. I tried shooing Murphy's Petrel chicks off the trail to no avail; they just waddled right back to their little patch of packed leaves. Current



Murphy's Petrel at Ducie Atoll © Brian Gibbons

estimates were a quarter million pairs of Murphy's nesting on the island! Adults wheeled overhead everywhere, their owl-like coos emanating from the brush, and the chicks



Murphy's Petrel chick at Ducie Atoll © Brian Gibbons

squawked, demanding to be fed. As we strolled the edge of the lagoon, we found a few Kermadec Petrel chicks; they seemed to be further along than most of the Murphy's as they were practically fully feathered. The Murphy's chicks ranged from 3-week-old fluffballs to nearly fully feathered like the Kermadecs. We found a few Christmas Shearwaters on nests, and many White Terns perched in the trees

as well, their chicks clinging to their nestless branches for dear life. This was an amazing experience to see a rat-free island and how productive it can be for seabirds. Those that went snorkeling reported the most amazing snorkel of the trip! Intact ecosystems are something to treasure.



White Tern chick waiting patiently on its branch on Ducie Atoll © Brian Gibbons

I had hoped that the nearly three days at sea on the way to Easter Island would produce many seabird sightings; in short, it didn't. It did allow me time to process many of my thousands of photographs from our amazing journey across Polynesia to the southeasternmost outpost at Rapa Nui. At anchor off Hanga Roa, we could see the moai at ahu of Tahai. We had arrived at the most isolated island in the world, and yet the amazing seafarers, the Polynesians, had been there for more than a thousand years! Our first outing would just scratch the surface of amazing sights of Rapa Nui. My favorite was, of course, the quarry where a dozen erect moai stood over partially carved cohort still lying prone in the rock. Site after site amazed us and had us pondering, what happened hundreds of years ago to make the denizens of Rapa Nui topple their amazing creations? Of course, as a birder I was thrilled to learn more details of the Birdman cult, where a king for a year would be crowned when a young man was able to return to the main island with an unbroken bird egg from an offshore islet, which involved scaling cliffs, a half-mile swim or paddle, scaling jagged offshore islets, and returning.

I felt privileged to undertake this voyage with you all, and I look forward to our next birding adventure...wherever in the world that might be.

Brian Gibbons

ITINERARY

10 October – Welcome reception at Intercontinental Resort Tahiti

11 October – Birding tour to Papehue Valley Tahiti Monarch Reserve. Island tour to Venus point and embark on the *Island Sky*

12 October – Apataki, Tuamotus birding among the coconut palms

13 October – At Sea en route to the Marquesas

14 October – Nuku Hiva, Marquesas. Birding into the hills, Cultural show, visit archaeological site at Hikoku'a Tohua

15 October – Hiva Oa, Marquesas. Atuona cemetery of Paul Gauguin and Jacques Brel. Then we visited the village of Puamau where we saw the archaeological site l'ipona Me'ae.

16 October – Fatu Hiva where we saw one of the rarest birds in the world Fatuhiva Monarch. Then a cultural show before returning to the ship.

17 October – Puka Puka, Tuamotus. Cultural show and village visit, some folks went swimming in the lagoon.

18 October – Puka Rua, Tuamotus. Cultural show and village tour, swimming in the lagoon.

19 October – Tenararo, Tuamotus. An excellent birding atoll where we scored Tuamotu Sandpiper among others

20 October – At Sea en route to the Pitcairn Group

21 October – Pitcairn Island all day Cultural and historical visit as well as a little birding

22 October – Henderson Island another excellent birding island where we saw all four island endemics

23 October – Ducie Island the most exceptional seabird display we witnessed for the entire voyage both onshore and offshore.

24 October – At Sea en route to Easter Island

25 October – At Sea en route to Easter Island

26 October – Easter Island or Rapa Nui. We visited the seaside ahu at Tahai, Puna pau quarry, and finally Ahu Akivi with seven seaward facing Moai.

27 October – Full day island tour, Archaeological Museum, the spectacular Rano Raraku quarry, Ahu Tongariki, and lunch from a traditional umu, afternoon shopping and return to ship.

28 October – Our final visit to Easter Island. We visited the Orongo Ceremonial Village (home of the Birdman cult) and the Rano Kau crater overlooking Motu Nui where the Birdmen would seek the first egg of the year. Start the long road home this afternoon or the Santiago Humboldt Extension on the mainland.

BIRDS

Tinamous	Tinamidae	
Chilean Tinamou (E)	<i>Nothoprocta perdicaria</i>	Easter Island, where introduced
Pheasants, Grouse & Allies	Phasianidae	
Red Junglefowl	<i>Gallus gallus</i>	Calling in Papehue Valley, Tahiti
Pigeons & Doves	Columbidae	
Rock Pigeon (I)	<i>Columba livia</i>	Tahiti
Zebra Dove (I)	<i>Geopelia striata</i>	French Polynesia
Gray-green Fruit-Dove (E)	<i>Ptilinopus purpuratus</i>	Tahiti
Atoll Fruit-Dove (E)	<i>Ptilinopus coralensis</i>	Apataki & Tenararo

White-capped Fruit-Dove (E)	<i>Ptilinopus dupetithouarsii</i>	Nuku Hiva had <i>viridior</i> ssp & Fatu Hiva had <i>dupetithouarsii</i> *note this is reverse from what's in Birds of Eastern Polynesia, not sure which reference is correct.
Henderson Island Fruit-Dove (E)	<i>Ptilinopus insularis</i>	Henderson
Marquesas Imperial-Pigeon (E)	<i>Ducula galeata</i>	Nuku Hiva
Swifts	Apodidae	
Polynesian Swiftlet (E)	<i>Aerodramus leucophaeus</i>	Papehue Valley, Tahiti
Marquesan Swiftlet (E)	<i>Aerodramus ocistus</i>	Nuku Hiva
Rails, Gallinules & Coots	Rallidae	
Henderson Island Crane (E)	<i>Zapornia atra</i>	Henderson
Plovers & Lapwings	Charadriidae	
Pacific Golden-Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	Tahiti
Sandpipers & Allies	Scolopacidae	
Bristle-thighed Curlew	<i>Numenius tahitiensis</i>	Tenararo & Henderson
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	Chuck had one with BTCUs
Tuamotu Sandpiper (E)	<i>Prosobonia parvirostris</i>	Tenararo, wonderful sightings
Sanderling	<i>Calidris alba</i>	Gabi had one, Hiva Oa
Wandering Tattler	<i>Tringa incana</i>	Seen at many landings
Skuas & Jaegers	Stercorariidae	
Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua)	<i>Stercorarius parasiticus</i>	A few jaegers seen
Gulls, Terns & Skimmers	Laridae	
Brown (Common) Noddy	<i>Anous stolidus</i>	Common
Black Noddy	<i>Anous minutus</i>	Common
Gray Noddy	<i>Anous albivitta</i>	Pitcairn & Henderson
Blue-gray Noddy (Gray Ternlet)	<i>Anous cerulea</i>	Marquesas
White Tern	<i>Gygis alba</i>	Common throughout voyage, <i>microrhyncha</i> ssp in Marquesas
Sooty Tern	<i>Onychoprion fuscatus</i>	Marquesas & Tuamotus
Great Crested Tern	<i>Thalasseus bergii</i>	Tahiti & Tuamotus
Tropicbirds	Phaethontidae	
White-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon lepturus</i>	Tahiti and other volcanic islands
Red-tailed Tropicbird	<i>Phaethon rubricauda</i>	Most numerous around Pitcairn
Southern Storm-Petrels	Oceanitidae	
Polynesian Storm-Petrel	<i>Nesofregetta fuliginosa</i>	A couple seen at sea around the Marquesas
Shearwaters & Petrels	Procellariidae	
Kermadec Petrel	<i>Pterodroma neglecta</i>	Ducie, offshore & nesting
Herald Petrel	<i>Pterodroma heraldica</i>	Ducie offshore

Murphy's Petrel
Henderson Petrel
Juan Fernandez Petrel

Cook's Petrel
Gould's Petrel
Collared Petrel
Phoenix Petrel
Bulwer's Petrel
Tahiti Petrel
Gray Petrel
Wedge-tailed Shearwater
Christmas Shearwater
Tropical Shearwater
Procellariid sp.

Frigatebirds

Lesser Frigatebird
Great Frigatebird

Boobies & Gannets

Masked Booby
Brown Booby
Red-footed Booby

Hérons, Egrets & Bitterns

Pacific Reef-Heron
Striated (Little) Heron

Hawks, Eagles & Kites

Swamp Harrier

Kingfishers

Society Kingfisher (E)

Falcons & Caracaras

Chimango Caracara

Old World Parrots

Stephen's Lorikeet (E)
Blue Lorikeet (RE)

Monarch Flycatchers

Tahiti Monarch (E)

Fatuhiva Monarch (E)

Swallows

Pacific Swallow

Bulbuls

Pterodroma ultima
Pterodroma atrata
Pterodroma externa

Pterodroma cookii
Pterodroma leucoptera
Pterodroma brevipes
Pterodroma alba
Bulweria bulwerii
Pseudobulweria rostrata
Procellaria cinerea
Ardenna pacifica
Puffinus nativitatis
Puffinus bailloni

Fregatidae

Fregata ariel
Fregata minor

Sulidae

Sula dactylatra
Sula leucogaster
Sula sula

Ardeidae

Egretta sacra
Butorides striata

Accipitridae

Circus approximans

Alcedinidae

Todiramphus veneratus

Falconidae

Milvago chimango

Psittaculidae

Vini stepheni
Vini peruviana

Monarchidae

Pomarea nigra

Pomarea whitneyi

Hirundinidae

Hirundo tahitica

Pycnonotidae

Pitcairns, 1000s at Ducie
Henderson offshore
Several sightings around
Pitcairns
Offshore between Marquesas
Offshore between Marquesas
Offshore between Marquesas
Ducie offshore
Around the Marquesas
Societies & Marquesas
Offshore from Henderson

Ducie, offshore & nesting
Many sightings early in trip

Most numerous early in trip
Throughout trip

Nesting at Tenararo & Pitcairns
Many seen offshore
The most numerous booby

Puka Puka & Puka Rua
Intercontinental Resort Tahiti

Glimpsed Papehue Valley,
Tahiti

Papehue Valley at the Tahiti
Monarch Reserve

Easter Island

Henderson in the coconuts
Apataki in the Tuamotus

Papehue Valley at the Tahiti
Monarch Reserve
Fatu Hiva, Extremely rare

Papehue Valley, Tahiti

Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	Tahiti
Reed Warblers & Allies	Acrocephalidae	
Pitcairn Reed Warbler (E)	<i>Acrocephalus vaughani</i>	Pitcairn
Henderson Island Reed Warbler (E)	<i>Acrocephalus taiti</i>	Henderson
Northern Marquesan Reed Warbler (E)	<i>Acrocephalus percernis</i>	Nuku Hiva
Tuamotu Reed Warbler (E)	<i>Acrocephalus atyphus</i>	Apataki in the Tuamotus
Southern Marquesan Reed Warbler (E)	<i>Acrocephalus</i>	Fatu Hiva
White-eyes, Yuhinas & Allies	Zosteropidae	
Silver-eye	<i>Zosterops lateralis</i>	Tahiti
Starlings	Sturnidae	
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Tahiti
Tanagers & Allies	Thraupidae	
Crimson-backed Tanager	<i>Ramphocelus dimidiatus</i>	Tahiti for some folks
Common Diuca-Finch	<i>Diuca diuca</i>	Easter Island
Old World Sparrows	Passeridae	
House Sparrow (I)	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Tahiti & Easter Island
Waxbills & Allies	Estrildidae	
Common Waxbill (I)	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>	Tahiti
Red-browed Firetail	<i>Neochmia temporalis</i>	Tahiti & Hiva Oa, Marquesas
Chestnut-breasted Munia	<i>Lonchura castaneothorax</i>	Tahiti & Hiva Oa, Marquesas
MAMMALS		
Rorquals	Balaenopteridae	
Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	Many sightings & breeches
Marine Dolphins	Delphinidae	
Bottlenose Dolphin	<i>Tursiops truncatus</i>	Puka Puka
Spinner Dolphin	<i>Stenella longirostris</i>	Fatu Hiva Landing