

Hopes Were High in Kauai

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No sign of Puff the Magic Dragon in the town of Hanalei, but this green anole was there. Another species that has been introduced to Kauai is the cane toad. This one briefly resided in a Styrofoam to-go container. Spring is here, with summer close behind. And with summer, of course, thoughts turn to vacation, a chance to head off for adventuring or relaxation, or maybe a combination of both.

This year I'm planning a vacation in a land that's pretty devoid of reptile life: Alaska. But last summer I was in Kauai, and while there I had a few herp encounters.

Kauai is not known as the Garden Isle for nothing. It is the lushest of the Hawaiian islands. The wettest spot on Earth is on Kauai: an area on Mount Waialeale gets an average annual rainfall of more than 450 inches! There's a saying: "If you don't like the weather in Kauai, wait 10 minutes." My friends and I lucked out because, though it did rain occasionally, the rain we did experience did not ruin any of our plans.

If you're looking for a paradise on Earth, and enjoy beautiful beaches and tropical scenery, I highly recommend Kauai. (For those interested in some of the scenery and local Kauai sights, check out my vacation pics slideshow at the end of this blog.)

The first herp I encountered was a green anole, sitting on a leaf outside of a store in the town of Hanalei. I know some people in parts of the U.S. would find a green anole less than thrilling, but as I'm from California I'm always delighted to see green anoles in the wild during my travels to the southern states. So this anole in Hawaii was a pleasure to see, even if it is an introduced species.

The second up-close encounter was another introduced species: a cane toad. I found it on the grounds of my friends' hotel, as I was walking back to my resort late one night. I decided to take the toad back to my room and keep it overnight so I could show it to my friends' kids (ages 7 and 12) the next morning. For my morning walk back to their hotel I washed out a Styrofoam to-go container that had previously housed some leftover BBQ ribs. I placed the toad in the container with the lid closed, and when I got to my friends' room, I asked Kyle, their 12-year-old, if he would like to share my leftovers.

"What are they?" he asked.

"This!" I said, as I opened up the container to show him the fat toad inside.

Let's just say the reaction was worthwhile. The toad was admired and gently handled by the kids for awhile. It cooperated by not peeing on anybody, although the toad remained fully puffed up while being passed around. It was soon released safely back where I found it the night before.

During my research prior to the trip I identified some beaches where, according to the myriad guidebooks I was reading, we stood the best chance of seeing some green sea turtles. Observing sea turtles in their native habitat has long been an ambition of mine, one that just never happened. I've always been fascinated by sea turtles, especially after, when I was a little kid in Michigan, a girl on my school bus showed me a hatchling she had in a cup of water. She was taking it to school for show and tell. I very much envied her having that turtle. She said her dad gave it to her. Thinking about it today I assume he removed it from a hatching event on a beach somewhere. I wonder how long that poor turtle survived...a week, maybe? Or maybe it got turned over to a public aquarium, or even set free, and it roams the sea to this day (one can hope).

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Here is the green sea turtle we encountered swimming through the gap in the reef. My longtime dream of seeing a sea turtle up close came true in Kauai.

During our last dinner on the island, feeding geckos entertained us while we ate. While attending the annual National Reptile Breeders Expo in Daytona Beach I would sometimes hear that turtles were nesting down the beach, yet I never got a chance to go look for them. I live in Southern California, about 10 minutes from the beach, but turtles don't frequent the areas to which I have easy access. They're too crowded with swimmers, surfers, jet skiers and port traffic. I did recently learn about a group of sea turtles that have been sighted in the San Gabriel River channel in Long Beach. Reportedly they're attracted to warm water discharge from a power plant. I'll have to go see if I can spot any. Click on the link to read about these "urban sea turtles."

So in Kauai my hopes were high that I would get to see some sea turtles. And – hooray! -- I did get to see a couple on our first day. We were walking along the cliff-top paths leading to the Kilauea lighthouse, when someone spotted a couple of turtles in the ocean far below. I saw them, but they were hard to distinguish...mere brown splotches beneath the surface of the wavy water. Still...sea turtles were down there!

The next day it was time to do some snorkeling. This was when I really hoped to see some turtles up close. We went to Tunnels, a beach on the north shore that was highly recommended for excellent snorkeling, with a chance to see turtles. My friend Ken and I entered the water and almost immediately we began seeing schools of fish. There weren't very many among the rocks we were initially inspecting. It was a little later, as we explored further along the shore, that we came upon a proper reef that was teeming with all types of colorful fish: needlefish, goatfish, damsels, groupers, various butterflyfish, tangs, triggerfish and more.

But after a couple hours of snorkeling, still no sign of any turtles. Oh well, the fish were active, beautiful and abundant.

Suddenly Ken gave a shout underwater. I knew what that meant! I swam over to him and looked to where he was pointing. There it was: the first sea turtle I had ever seen in its native habitat. A green sea turtle with a carapace length of about 3 feet was browsing along the rocks and coral, searching for food. I got as close as I could without spooking it, and swam alongside from a distance as the turtle investigated the reef. I followed it as it headed further out, and was content to continue doing so, until I lifted my head out of the water and realized how far from shore I had gotten. So I said goodbye to the turtle and snorkeled my way back in.

I finally got to see a wild sea turtle, and I was elated! Little did I know what would happen a few days later.

On our last full day on the island, Ken and I decided to have one last snorkeling experience. Ke'e Beach, located where the road ends at the northern shore, was supposed to be another good place to see turtles. Ke'e is an especially beautiful beach in Ha'ena State Park, at the west end of Highway 56, leading eventually to the stunning Napali Coast. The beach featured many ironwood trees spreading low-hanging, heavily leaved branches far out, beneath which beachgoers spread their towels. According to one guidebook (The Ultimate Kauai Guidebook by Andrew Doughty, highly recommended), our best bet to see turtles was to exit the lagoon through a gap in the reef on the west side. We would then be in deeper water, and if we swam along the front of the reef to the right, supposedly we would see turtles.

As we were swimming through the gap that joined the lagoon to the open ocean – bingo! – we came upon a sea turtle. This one was about 4 or 5 feet long. While the turtle we saw at Tunnels was quite wary of us, this one didn't seem to be bothered by our presence at all. It allowed us to get quite close.

We left this turtle, and began snorkeling our way along the front of the reef. And then all my sea turtle prayers were answered.

There, browsing all along the reef ahead of us, among throngs of colorful fish, we could see at least 20 green sea turtles of all sizes. What a stunning sight! They were grazing along the shallows above the reef, poking their heads deep into holes within the coral and rock to get to the vegetation inside. Some would assume a completely vertical position as they pushed their bulky heads deep inside the holes. They were very calming to observe, these majestic creatures. They took no notice of us and we were able to get very close to them. The sun was shining through the shallow water, and it was beautiful as it dappled the reef and the turtles' brown and green shells. This truly was a dream come true.

I had a cheap, disposable underwater camera with me, but wouldn't you know it, I used up all the shots in my excitement during our close-up encounter with the first turtle. So I don't have a single photo of the feeding turtles – my one big regret.

We snorkeled among the turtles for a good hour or so, and it was great because most of the time it was just us and the turtles. Eventually a few other snorkelers showed up, but then the tide started coming in and we had to exit the water. One thing you don't want is to have a wave crash you into the reef. Oddly, we were unable to find the channel we had

swum through on our way out. This was scary, as the waves were growing in size and force, and Ken and I were tiring out swimming back and forth looking for the gap. Finally, to get back to the lagoon, we had to resort to swimming directly over the reef, our stomachs clearing the coral beneath us by mere inches.

As far as I was concerned I could leave Kauai right then and there. My reptile quest had been accomplished.

The next day we were leaving. But I did have one more reptile encounter. While having a delicious kalua pork dinner on our last night, I was able to observe a gaggle of geckos running around the walls next to our table, feasting on the bugs that were attracted to the patio lights. One of them was a gravid female. We all enjoyed watching them scampering after their gnatty prey.

The sea turtles at Ke'e Beach will forever be one of my herp memory highlights. I hope you have many of your own.

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