



**SAMOA CONSERVATION  
SOCIETY**  
**SOSAIETE FAASAO  
O SAMOA**

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# SEABIRD KNOWLEDGE SURVEY

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**JUNE 10, 2025**



**FAGALOA BAY**  
**Samoa 2024**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This report was prepared by Ioane Etuale of the Sosaite Fa’asao o Samoa, to explain the methodology use and report the results of the Seabird Traditional Knowledge Survey conducted in late 2024 to early 2025. First and foremost, I would like to offer my condolences to Lohia Laufa’i Levasa’s family and friends in Uafato Fagaloa Samoa and abroad. We are sorry to hear of Lohia’s passing but we hope the wisdom he shared in this work will reach many future generations. RIP Lohia.

I would also like to thank the participants from each village that we visited for your generosity and willingness to share your knowledge with our team. Luatuanuu, Leusoalii, Manono-Uta, Uafato and Lalomanu of Upolu, and Tafua, Faletagaloa, Safune, Asau, Aopo, Vaisala, Falealupo and Tufutafoe of Savai’i.

## 1. SURVEY SUMMARY

With support from the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Program (SPREP) led by Karen Baird, the Sosaite Fa’asao Samoa/Samoa Conservation Society (SFS) was contracted to interview a range of individuals with information of Samoa seabirds. The project is funded by Birds New Zealand’s Pacific Islands Bird Conservation and Research Fund. Our team followed the trail of eyewitness accounts of grounded birds, as well as traditional knowledge and accounts from personal experiences.

The SFS specific task was twofold:(1) to follow up on reported sightings of grounded birds and, (2) to explore new leads and possible sites for future studies and/or protection. This project follows [Seabird Knowledge Cafe](#) in 2024, where knowledge on seabirds was exchanged between MNRE, SCS and SPREP and Samoan community members.

The main species targeted in the survey were the shearwaters and petrels (tropical & wedge-tailed and Tahiti petrel) but other species were not excluded from the conversations. In fact, it is impossible to exclude any one or two species in a discussion, because despite their biological differences, they are all seen as part of one system. The “*tautai matapalapala*” (title given to a seasoned fisherman) uses this interconnection between land, sea and air systems to guide livelihood decisions and actions. SPREP provided the technical guidance and existing sighting reports which SFS used to select appropriate individuals and study sites.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND

Samoa is an ancestral community that is governed by a chiefdom system of government guided by the “Fa’asamoa”. Fa’asamoa is made up of norms, values and natural behavioral patterns created by ancestors as the nation’s foundation. It is not written, instead, it is passed down

through oral tradition. Stories told by the elders and songs sung in villages contain important history as well as knowledge of land, air and sea. Today, when there's feelings of loss or need for answers, orators and chiefs seek the wisdom of the past.

The incoming western civilization of the nineteenth century pushed Samoa to adopt a more western education system. The new economic development promises motivated the population's move towards apparently smarter, bigger, better and convenient ways to live. The new European governing system, worship system and new livelihood styles began to replace the old. A lot of youth are not always introduced to traditional ecological knowledge and cultural livelihood practices.

In Samoan tradition, the environment is viewed with a cosmic theology lens where the entire natural world is connected physically and spiritually. Human lives are interwoven into nature depending on her for sustenance and long-term survival.

The majority of land in Samoa is owned customarily and the larger portion of the population occupies rural areas. Traditional ways of living are practiced daily in the rural communities where access and dependency on literature for knowledge are limited. During our search, it became apparent that a large portion of the younger population are more educated, more wealthy and more disconnected from the Fa'asamoa.

So, with faith in our elder's wisdom and willingness to share, our team began our seabird journey. I went as a young chief seeking traditional wisdom. The hope for seabird knowledge revival depends on our willingness to learn and the obligation to tell the story. It was through this approach we discovered that knowledge of seabirds in Samoa is alive and well.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Preparatory Research

The information contained in this report is based on conversations with interviewees. Quotes are kept in quotation marks to indicate primary sources. There was no literature research conducted by the interviewer prior to the surveys.

#### 3.2 Preparatory meeting

A few formal and informal meetings with Karen Baird and Chris Gaskin to discuss the survey and provide some key suggestions on methodologies and site selection. One was to follow up on reported sightings and two, to explore new sites for study and potential conservation projects.

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#### 3.3 Site Selection

The survey was carried out in both Upolu and Savaii. Sites were divided into 3 categories. (1) Urban, (2) Urban Traditional and (3) Rural Traditional.

After a few interviews in the urban traditional sites, the survey moved to rural communities to capture ecological wisdom and traditional knowledge of fishermen, farmers and seabird habitat communities.

Funding supported interviews in ten communities. See table below

**Table 1. Community Selection Criteria**

CATEGORY	DEFINITION	SELECTION CRITERIA
Urban	Non customary land	Sighting reports SCS existing project site
Urban Traditional	Traditional Villages located in urban areas	Sighting reports SFS work site Seabird Habitat
Rural Traditional	Rural villages	Sighting report SFS work site Seabird habitat Future site

### 3.4 Interviewee Selection

The survey informally started in July 2024 during an SFS Manumea search camp. While performing Manumea searches and interviews, the author also used this time to gather seabird data. Manumea project worked with experienced individuals from each village. These individuals were also asked to share their knowledge of seabirds.

Seabirds appear in traditional stories, *fa'agogo*, poetry, songs and traditional proverbs. There is a layer of knowledge that gets deeper and detailed with the age of the person. Wisdom holders understand natural and economic values, cosmic connections and historical trajectory of seabirds. Accessing traditional elders asking them question requires cultural sensitivity and respect. Over the years of SFS's community engagement, the organization worked with key individuals who possess important information and play key roles in communities. The individuals such as the *pulenu'u* (village mayors) who are the first point of contact, the *pulega ali'i ma faipule* (chief council) who are responsible for village affairs, church leaders, hunters, fisherman, women, youth and schools to name a few.

As field conservationists for SFS, we established professional relationships with each community and built connections with traditional knowledge holders and elders. Prior to the survey, a request for permission to enter the village was sent to the village mayor through the Ministry of Women Community and Social Development (MWCSD). After the authorization was received from the village council, we set up our meetings with interviewees. During each interview, the interviewees usually lead us to the next person. The reasons for such referrals range from

interrelationships between respondents, personal experience and expertise, historical connections and familiarity with places such as fishing grounds or nesting areas. For example, the fishermen in Vasala and Asau referred us to an elder in Aopo. This is because the Aopo Bay called Fatafaga is the main fishing ground in that part of Savai'i and the alleged breeding ground of seabirds. The elder at Aopo sent us to the elder in Faletagaloa because of the connection to the wars between the two villages that demonstrated their knowledge of the land and use of natural resources including seabirds in subsistence and defense. Obviously, we kept our pre-selected list of interviewees, but we also followed the inside leads that were provided in the field.

Interviewees can be categorized in the following Categories;

1. Tautai Fisherman - Fishing is a primary role which means he/she fishes for a living. His knowledge of seabirds comes from his experience in the ocean and using marine life for income and subsistence
2. Faifa'atoaga/Farmers- Farming is a primary role. Their knowledge of seabirds are based on the sightings of seabirds inland, their habitats, breeding seasons, and their calls.
3. Tausi Aiga /Family person - Both skilled fishermen and farmers and hunters. Knowledge of both land and sea
4. An elder is someone above 70 years of age who holds traditional ecological knowledge and cultural traditional wisdom

Target age groups

- 40s to 50s years of age
- 60s to 70s years of age
- 80s to 90s years of age

#### 4 SURVERY OBJECTIVES

- To follow up on recommended seabird sites
- Find out about local/community knowledge of seabirds
- Identify birds through their calls
- Collect traditional knowledge of seabirds
- Identify new sites for interviews

#### 5 EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Village approval of the survey through a request sent to the pulenu'u via MWCSO
- Agreement by village council for surveyors to operate in the village
- Authorization to interview pre-selected as well as recommended community members
- Map out common areas where seabirds are seen/heard
- Confirm local names matches given names
- Learn about any traditional use of seabirds
- Learn about historical distribution of seabirds
- Learn traditional legends and wisdoms about seabird
- Get directions and recommendations on future seabird work

## 6 SURVEY COMMUNITIES

### UPOLU

VILLAGE	INTERVIEWEE	PROFESSION	AGE
Leusoali'i	Auau Talataina	Tausi aiga	70 years
Luatuanu'u	Auau Talataina	Tausi aiga	70 years
Magiagi	Sanele Faifaiepa	Fresh water and ocean fisherman and Farmer	55
Manono uta	Leiataua Ataiti Lo'i	Elder, TW, fisherman/hunter	78
Uafato Fagaloa	Leiataua Ataiti Lo'i Lohia Fa'asou	Elder, TW, fisherman/hunter	78 69

### SAVAII

VILLAGE	INTERVIEWEE	PROFESSION	AGE
<b>Aopo</b>	<b>Pa'o Lilia</b>	<b>Elder, Tausi aiga, TW</b>	<b>90</b>
	<b>Ma'ilata Onolua</b>		<b>75</b>
<b>Asau/Vaisala</b>	Malay John Malau	Fisherman Captain	57
	Ken Malau	Fisherman Crew	40s
	Sam Malau	Fisherman Crew	50s
	Falealuga Soonalote	Fisherman Crew	50s
<b>Falealupo</b>	Taofinu'u Matalio Taofinu'u	Tausi aiga, Fisherman, Elder	65
<b>Safune</b>	Taulealeausumai Peola	Tausi aiga, Fisherman, Elder	84
<b>Tafua</b>	Leuluniu Kereti	Tausi aiga. Fisherman, Hunter	65
<b>Tufutafoe</b>	Soifua Levi	Resident, Fisherman	67
	Simiti Moemausu	Resident, Fisherman	50s
	Saemo Perenise Tufuga	Resident Farmer	40s

Notes:

Tausi aiga = family care taker. Proficient in all skills land, air and sea

TW = Traditional Wisdom holder

## 7 RESULTS

**RECORDED BIRD CALLS** – We were able to play the recorded calls to all participants except for the Aopo and Faletagaloa respondents due to equipment problems. However, of the people we were able to play the sounds to, those in their 40s and 50s did not identify any of the three calls played. Those in their sixties up to the nineties were familiar with the calls but could not confidently identify them. However, they had no doubt that the calls belonged to seabirds.



One of the two common species identified by calls is the Fua’o (red-footed booby). As the tautai (fisherman) awaits the tuna rising, he watches for the fua’o. This fearless bird is also referred to as the *manusina* by some fisherman because of its dominant white color. A white deep diver that brings the tuna to the surface, hence the proverb “*o le manusina e le soa*” the unmatched white bird. Other seabirds are already at the scene, but the experienced tautai knows the fish is still in the deep. Suddenly the fua’o is heard, it is time. The tautai put all his might into his paddles. He paddles for his family, his pride, his legacy and the legacy of his ancestors. Failure is not an option and that is the true meaning of the saying “*ua fa’atili foe a le tautai*”. The second species identified by its call is the *tai’o* (tropical shearwater) or *tala*. This species is not known for its calls at sea but on land. There is a spirituality connected to this bird. A fast-moving winged animal that calls out only at night time or when something significant is about to take place. It can be a warning either of natural disasters or a death in the village. There are other species associated with this belief, collectively known as *manutulu’ia*. Ta’io or tala is one of them.

**BIRD NAME** – Almost everyone identified Fua’o (booby) by name when asked to name seabirds they know. They knew there is a dark one and a white one with red feet. All of the interviewees said they did not hear of the name Ta’io (petrel) growing up.

**PICTURE** – When the pictures of seabirds were shown, everyone was familiar and said they have seen tropical shearwater, wedge tailed shearwater, Tahiti petrel, black noddy, brown noddy, white tern, bridled tern, great frigatebird, white tailed tropicbird, brown booby and red-footed boobies. However, there is uncertainty in differentiating between the masked booby and the red-footed booby. Some say it is the same bird but changes colors with seasons and some say they are different birds altogether. Everyone was in agreement that seabirds come out at night, during fish or palolo seasons and during stormy weather. The Ta’io is known by the name *tala* in Safune and Faletagaloa Savai’i.

## HARVEST

- Booby /Fua’o are hunted and eaten in Vatia American Samoa according to Auau Talataina of Luatuanu’u who lived in American Samoa for some years.
- Lohia Laufa’i remembered hunting and eating fua’o as far back when he was a child. (1960s-1970s). There was a harvest season but Lohia has forgotten when.
- Historically red footed booby or the white fua’o are harvested along with the white tern, and tropic birds for their feathers. Rural fishermen still harvest white terns particularly for their feathers. This is because they are still practicing older fishing methods and do not possess modern fishing poles or lures.
- Booby were hunted for consumption in 3 areas-Vatia American Samoa, Tafua Savai’i and Fagaloa Upolu.
- By-catch of seabirds includes catching with fish hooks or nets during tuna rising or other feeding seasons. Real stories of boobies in particular getting caught in nets or fishing lines. Sometimes they landed on the boat. There are no accounts of Tava’e, (bridled tern)



landing on boats. However, according to Auau of Luatuanuu, fishermen deliberately catch the Tava'e with hooks during Atule (Yellowtail scad) and lupu (trevally) fishing. This seabird has a curve feather (fulu pi'o) which is the most desired lure for both yellowtail scad and travelly.

- Tafua in Savai'i is one of the traditional harvest grounds of Boobies (Fua'o) *Ta* means hit, *Fua* is short for Fua'o. Hence the name Tafua. Pa'o Lili'a 90 of Aopo

#### RECENT SIGHTINGS AND GROUNDED BIRDS

Falealupo / Tufu / Tafua/ Faletagaloa / Aopo/ Asau / Vaisala

- Wedge tail shearwater
- Red footed booby (People refer to it as the white Fua'o)
- Brown booby
- Tahiti petrel (identified through the photograph)
- Tahti petrel also seen on ridges in upland Fagalii, Magiagi, and Afiamalu during prawn and eel fishing

#### NESTING AND BREEDIND GROUNDS

Two presumed nesting places were identified by two elders and supported by current boat fishermen crews. One is located on the coast of Aopo village in the five bays, and one in Faletagaloa identified by Taule'ale'ausumai Peola. He also recommended Sili and Taga for future surveys

Figure 1. Upolu 2024 Survey Sites

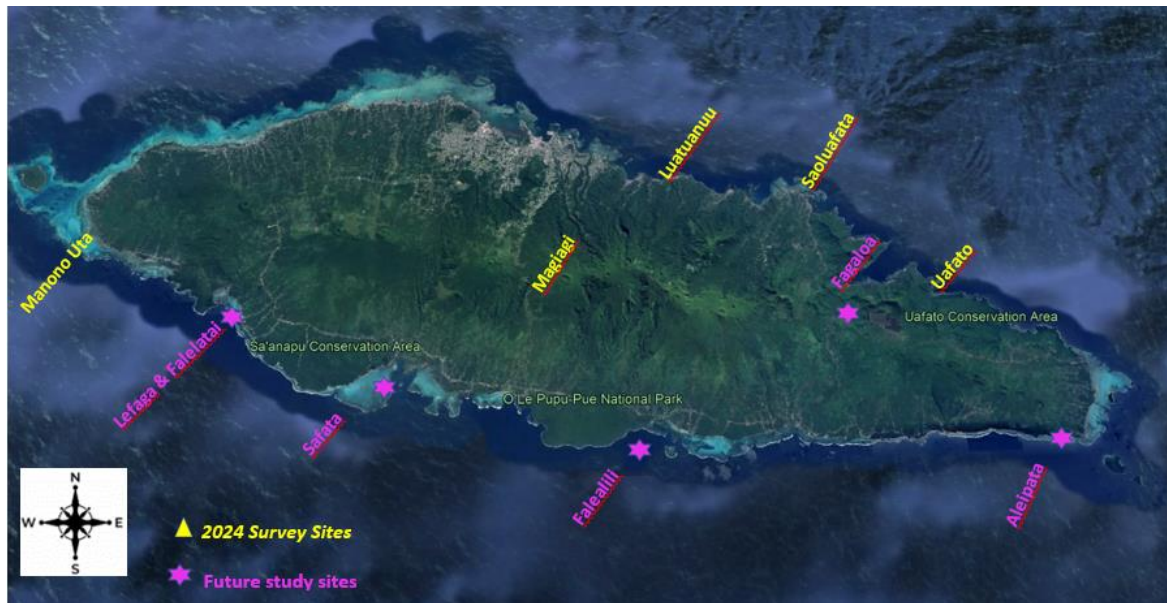
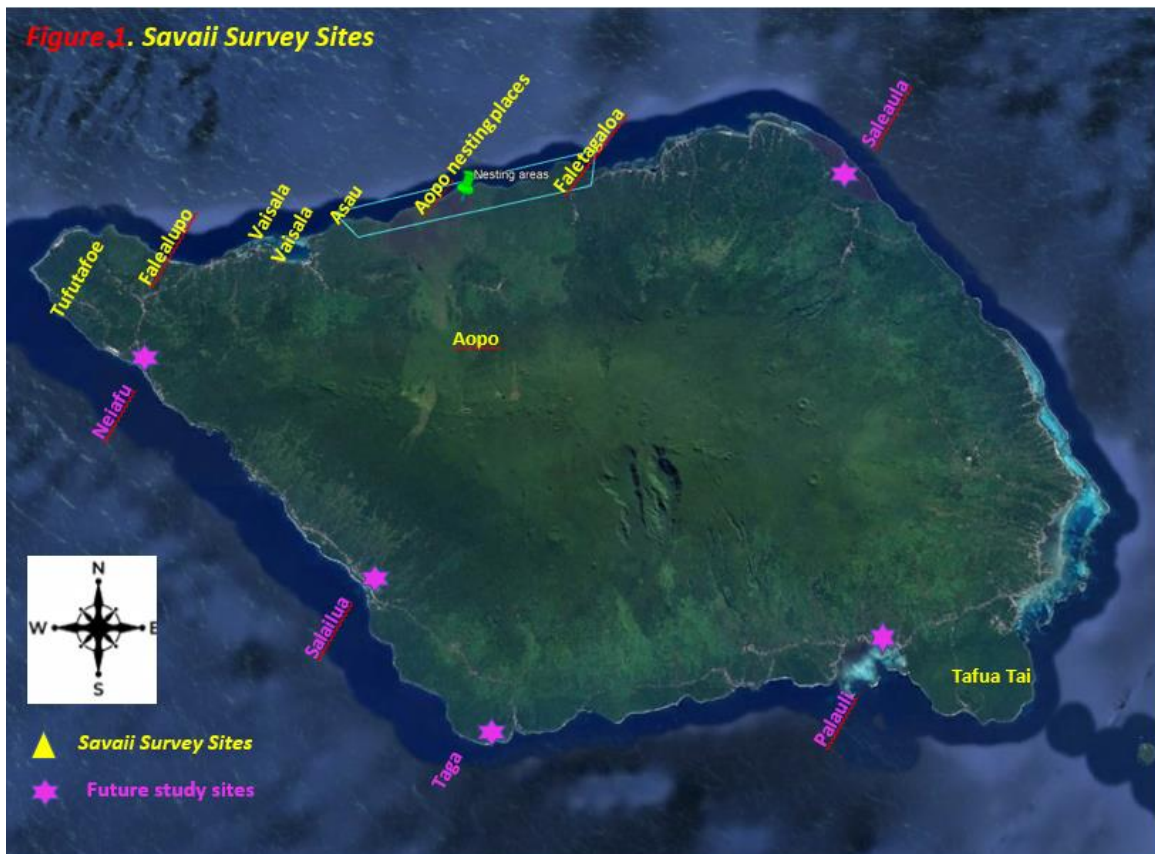


Figure 2. Savaii 2024 Survey sites



## 9 NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The survey only covered NE Upolu and NW of Savaii islands. From those few villages, we learned that the use of seabirds in fishing, sports, weather predictions and for subsistence is preserved in village legends, resource sharing and cultural connections. Included is a map of the regions recommended by interviewees for further surveys.
- Apply for funding to continue the survey in partnership with Samoa Voyaging Society and the National University of Samoa
- Continue to follow up on reported sightings and nesting sites
- Conduct surveys in 10 villages listed below within 3 years
- Include interviews of women and *taulasea* (traditional healers) Samoa
- Each of the villages is selected because it is a reported nesting area, a habitat community, has a traditional fishing ground and is recommended by credible traditional and technical sources.
- Create a system of reporting and documentation for sighting, grounded or caught birds

Figure 3. Upolu proposed research sites – Falelatai, Safata, Falealili, Aleipata and Fagaloa





**Figure 4: Savaii proposed research sites- Falelima, Salailua, Taga, Palauli and Saleaula**





Figure 5. Figure 5. Lohia Laufai, was a longtime friend and supporter of conservation, but most of all a traditional artist, skilled hunter and experienced fisherman. RIP Interviewed by Ioane Etuale

Location – Uafato Upolu, Samoa



Figure 6. Captain Sam Malau described the location of seabird nesting area near the fishing grounds of Aopo. Interviewed by Ioane Etuale  
Location – Vaisala, Savai'i, Samoa





**Figure 7. Chief Taofinu'u Makalio Lamositele a fisherman and farmer explained the ways the white tern is caught and used in fishing lures**  
Location – Falealupo Savai'i, Samoa Interviewed by Ioane Etuale and Faleafaga Toni Tipama'a (SFS)





Figure 7. Taule'ale'ausumai Peola 84 recognized the wedged tail shearwater as Tala. Interviewed by Ioane Etuale and Faleafaga Toni Tipama'a (SFS)

Location- Faletagaloa Savai'i Samoa





Figure 8. Chief Pa'o Lili'a 90 of Aopo is an experienced traditional fisherman and hunter confirmed Fatafaga as one of Aopo's five Bays known for seabird sightings. Interviewed by Ioane Etuale and Faleafaga Toni Timpama'a (SCS)  
Location – Aopo, Savai'i Samoa

## 11 CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude with quotes from two of the interviewees I was fortunate to speak with.

**When asked how they felt about us, researchers always asking questions?** He said, “I welcome a curious mind. Our culture is based on handing down traditions. But always remember that while knowledge may be power, understanding is the *Tofa loloto*. Knowledge can be wrong or forgotten, but oral traditions is the wisdom that connect ancestors and future generations”. Taule’ale’ausumai, Peola 84, Faletagaloa, Savaii Samoa.

It was also Taule’ale’a’s views that oral traditions must be passed on as our ancestors intended. It was not meant to be hidden from those who seek, for the right reason.

**What do you think of climate change?** “I aso anamua” in ancient times, Samoa knew its place in the environment, we are *tausimea* or caretakers of the creation. Unfortunately, humankind has forgotten that role, disrespected that custom and decided to “*solu*” or exploit God’s creation. The result is the great loss we are facing today. Climate change impacts, loss of land, loss of culture and loss of human life. God gives and God takes”. Pa’o Lili’a, 90, Aopo, Savai’iSamoa

In closing I would like to link one particular Samoan saying to the amazing strength of migratory birds. It is known throughout history how far they fly. With modern technologies and capabilities, we find out that they travel thousands of miles each year. And during these trips they are on the air for weeks without rest, eat or sleep. These animals understand planning, energy preservation suffering, sacrifices, endurance and determination. The end result must be so great that a trip of a thousand miles is worth the risk.

“*E tu manu ae le tu logologo*” No matter how long a bird’s journey is, it will eventually come to an end. But our role as wisdom keepers, storytellers and protectors of oral tradition neither rest nor sleep.