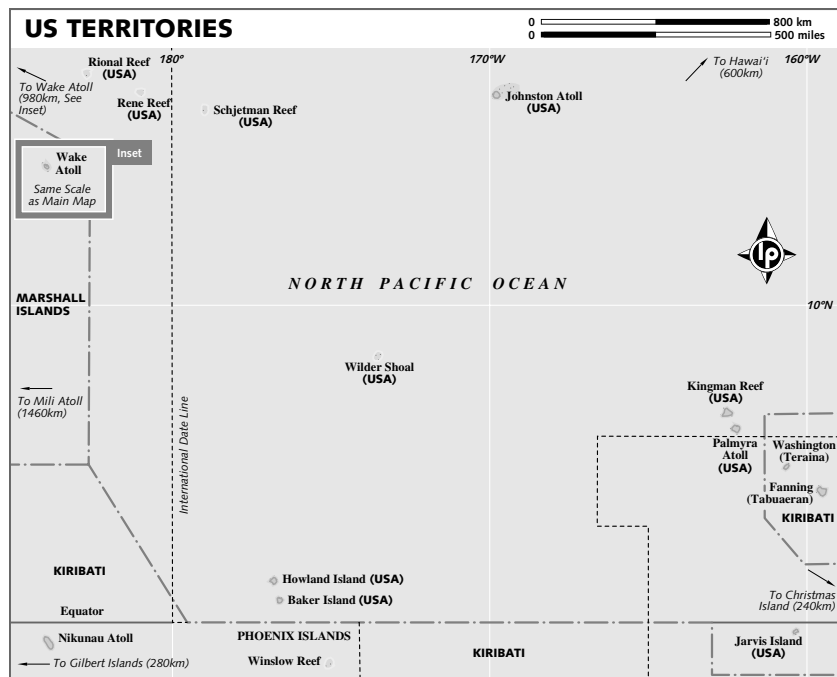


US Territories

Since the 19th century, the US has claimed several small islands, a few atolls and some narrow coral reefs between Kiribati and Hawai'i in the North Pacific. The Americans staked their claims due to bird poo, or more politely guano, during the heyday of the phosphate hunt and legalised their takings with the Guano Islands Act of 1856.

Over the years, sovereignty issues have come and gone in these unincorporated US territories. Wake Island is claimed by the Marshall Islands, and Kiribati has asked the US for Howland, Baker and Jarvis Islands in order to extend its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and expand its fishing licence revenue.

Some of the islands have had chequered pasts but, with the exception of Wake, they are now all national wildlife refuges administered by the US Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS; www.fws.gov). The only people lucky enough to get to visit the islands are scientists and conservationists with special permits.



HOWLAND ISLAND

pop 0 / area 6 sq km

Not every speck in the ocean finds fame, but tiny Howland was catapulted into the lime-light in 1937 when it was the intended refuelling stop for US aviator Amelia Earhart on her round-the-equator trip. An airstrip was built in anticipation of her landing, but Earhart and her navigator, Fred Noonan, never made it. They were three-quarters of

GUANO ISLANDS ACT OF 1856

'... Whenever any citizen of the United States discovers a deposit of guano on any island, rock or key, not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other government and not occupied by the citizens of any other government, and takes peaceable possession thereof, and occupies the same, such island, rock or key may, at the discretion of the President, be considered as appertaining to the United States...'

the way around the globe when they left Lae in New Guinea bound for Howland, 4133km away, and were never seen again. It appears that they failed to locate Howland and came down elsewhere in the Pacific instead. Earhart's fate remains unknown, but theories abound – the most dramatic being that she was captured by the Japanese during WWII and taken to Mili Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The most recent hypothesis is that her bones were found on Nikumaroro, in Kiribati's Gilbert Islands chain – see the boxed text (opposite).

Earhart's airstrip is still on Howland, albeit in bits and pieces, but there is little else on the treeless, barren island except scrub vegetation.

BAKER ISLAND

pop 0 / area 1.4 sq km

Like its near neighbour Howland, uninhabited and barren Baker Island belongs to the Phoenix Island group. It has a fringing coral reef and is a breeding ground for pelagic

birds and marine turtles, as well as a stop for migrating shorebirds. At its highest point, Baker reaches 8m.

In the mid-19th century, whalers frequented Baker and Howland in search of provisions. The US took possession in 1857 and US and British companies mined phosphate until late in the 19th century. In 1935 the US government planted a few colonists on both islands to strengthen its territorial claims, but they were all evacuated in 1942 when the Japanese attacked. The next year, 2000 US troops arrived and built an airstrip – it is still there but is definitely unusable. Baker became a national wildlife refuge in 1974 and the FWS visits annually.

JARVIS ISLAND

pop 0 / area 4.5 sq km

Jarvis' nearest neighbour is Kiribati's Christmas Island (Kiritimati). Like Christmas, Jarvis is part of the Line Islands group and its dry climate stifles all but grasses and small shrubs. Migratory birds, however, abound. Like Palmyra Atoll, the island is also an important green turtle nesting spot.

The British discovered Jarvis in 1821 but the US annexed the uninhabited island in 1858 and immediately started carting off phosphate – over the next 21 years 300,000 tons of guano was mined. The Brits again put their hand up for the island in 1889 but did nothing more, so in 1936 the US government sent colonists to live there and firm up their territorial claim. These folk were evacuated in 1942 and, since then, the islands have remained uninhabited (except for a party of scientists who stayed briefly in 1957 for the International Geophysical Year).

PALMYRA ATOLL

pop 0 / area 12 sq km

Palm-lined Palmyra, 560km north of Jarvis Island, comprises 52 emerald islets set amid pristine coral reefs surrounding three turquoise lagoons. According to the family who owned the atoll for most of the 20th century, Palmyra is 'a place time forgot'.

Americans aboard the ship *Palmyra* first discovered the atoll in 1802, but it was not until 1862 that Hawai'i claimed it. The US

WAS EARHART FOUND?

The mystery of Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan's disappearance en route to Howland Island may have been solved. British soldiers discovered two sets of bones and shoes on remote Nikumaroro (Kiribati) in 1941. The remains were pronounced by a British doctor to be the bones of two European men. In late 1998, however, the doctor's notes were re-examined, leading modern specialists to conclude that the doctor was wrong – that one set of bones belonged to a Caucasian female, 170cm tall – just like Amelia Earhart. But as the bones have long since vanished, the mystery remains.

also (separately) claimed the atoll around that time under the Guano Islands Act. However, when the US annexed Hawai'i in 1898 the annexation act specifically excluded Palmyra from the state of Hawai'i because it turned out to have no guano and had thus been unlawfully claimed.

In 1922 Hawai'i's Fullard-Leo family bought Palmyra for US\$15,000. They sold it in 2000 for a cool US\$37 million to the Nature Conservancy, a major US conservation group, which immediately turned Palmyra over to the FWS as a wildlife refuge. The family turned down the first bidder, a New York corporation, following the outcry from across the Pacific when it was discovered the corporation planned to use Palmyra as a nuclear waste dump.

Palmyra's boat pier and wide harbour make it an attractive stop for visiting yachts. However, it is not open to the public and yachties seeking to stay here must ask permission first from the FWS.

KINGMAN REEF

pop 0 / area 1 sq km

Treeless, triangular Kingman, with a maximum elevation of just a metre, is little more than a coral head surrounded by a massive reef. Kingman was discovered in 1798 by a US whaler, but is named after Captain WE Kingman of the US vessel *Shooting Star*, who came by in 1853. It was claimed by the US under the Guano Islands Act, though subsequently it was found to have no phosphate.

Like nearby Palmyra, Kingman Reef was owned by the Fullard-Leo family but in 1934 it was commandeered by the US Navy. The deep lagoon was used as a halfway station for Pan American Airways' flying boats between Hawai'i and American Samoa in the late 1930s. Kingman remained under navy jurisdiction until 2001, when it became a wildlife refuge.

JOHNSTON ATOLL

pop 200 / area 2.8 sq km

Johnston Atoll, 1100km northwest of Palmyra, consists of two natural coral islets (Sand and Johnston) and two artificial ones, North and East (Akau and Hikina). Viewed from the air, Johnston Island has a most unusual shape, its shoreline extending out in hard straight lines. This is because soil was scooped up from the lagoon during WWII and used to lengthen the runway.

Johnston's other geographic distinction is its isolation. Roughly a third of the way between Hawai'i and the Marshall Islands (or 717 nautical miles southwest of Hawai'i, to be exact), it made a useful refuelling stop for commercial airlines bound for Micronesia and, until very recently, was an absolutely fabulous spot for disposing of all those weapons the world no longer needs.

In 1796 Captain Johnston of HMS *Cornwallis* came ashore. The atoll was claimed by both the US and Hawai'i in 1858 – Hawai'ian

SOME WILDLIFE REFUGE!

Until early this century, Johnston Island was the Jekyll and Hyde of the Pacific. While infamous as a chemical weapons cleanup site, it was simultaneously a national wildlife refuge. Thousands of birds, including boobies, shearwaters and terns, use it as a migratory or nesting stop. All told, Johnston has over 300 species of fish, 20 species of native and migratory birds and 32 species of coral, as well as green sea turtles, dolphins and humpback whales. When the US military finished operations here in 2001, Johnston was turned over to the US Fish & Wildlife Services (FWS) to run as a national wildlife refuge. At long last, it may slowly return to nature.

navigator Samuel Allen of the *Kalama* arrived three months after the US, ripped down the US flag and put up the Hawai'ian instead. When Hawai'i became a US state in 1898, the US separately annexed Johnston Island and the atoll's limited phosphate deposits were mined until the early 20th century. In 1926 Johnston became a national bird refuge; however, its peace was interrupted in 1934 when it came under navy control and was used as a submarine refuelling base and air base. The air force took over the islands in 1948, and the North and East islets were created over the next 15 years. At the same time, high-altitude nuclear tests were carried out.

For 10 years from 1990, Johnston Island served as a storage and disposal site for weapons – one of nine US sites devoted to this purpose. More than 1200 US military and contract workers were stationed on this tiny atoll and kept themselves busy by destroying 6% of the world's weapons arsenal, including mines, missiles, mortars, rockets, bombs and VX nerve gas. Cleanup and closure of the facility was completed in 2004 but some 200 personnel still call it home, as does a great variety of fauna.

WAKE ATOLL

pop 200 / area 6.5 sq km

Wake Atoll, 2000km west of Johnston, consists of three small islands: Peale, Wake and Wilkes. Wake is named after a British captain who landed there in 1796. The US officially claimed it about a century later when a US ship heading to the Philippines during the Spanish-American war planted the US flag in 1898.

Originally intended as a cable station, Wake served as a refuelling base for trans-Pacific flights during the 1930s; a 48-room hotel supported the base. After WWII, the US Navy administered Wake until 1962. Now, the US Army Space and Missile Defense Command (SMDC) controls Wake and keeps 200 contract workers here to maintain the missile system.

The Marshall Islands has laid claim to the atoll on the grounds that it's part of the Ratak chain. On the US side there has been talk for years about making Wake a wildlife refuge, but for now it is still off limits.

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