

# Nikumaroro

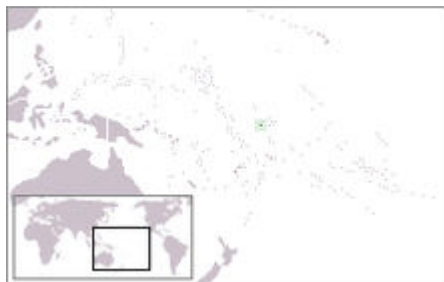
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Jump to: [navigation](#), [search](#)



Nikumaroro



Geographical map of Nikumaroro



## Geography

**Coordinates**  [4.68°S 174.517°W](#)**Coordinates:**  [4.68°S 174.517°W](#)

**Archipelago** [Phoenix Islands](#)

**Length** 6 km (3.7 mi)

**Width** 2 km (1.2 mi)

## Country

[Republic of Kiribati](#)

[Phoenix Islands Protected Area](#)

## Demographics

**Population** 0

Main articles: [Kiribati](#) and [Phoenix Islands](#)

**Nikumaroro**, or **Gardner Island**, is part of the [Phoenix Islands](#), [Kiribati](#), in the western [Pacific Ocean](#). It is a remote, elongated, triangular [coral atoll](#) with profuse vegetation and a large central marine [lagoon](#). Nikumaroro is approximately 6 km long by less than 2 km wide. There are two narrow entrances through the rim, both of which are blocked by a wide [reef](#) which is dry at low tide. The ocean beyond the reef is very deep and the only anchorage is at the island's west end, across the reef from the ruins of a mid-twentieth century British colonial village, but this is safe only with the southeast [trade winds](#). Landing has always been difficult and is most often done south of the anchorage. Although occupied at various times during the past, the island is uninhabited today.

Nikumaroro is known for being one possible location where [Amelia Earhart](#) crashed during her ill-fated final flight to circumnavigate the globe.<sup>[1]</sup>

# Contents

- [1 Flora and fauna](#)
- [2 History](#)
  - [2.1 19th century sightings and claims](#)
  - [2.2 SS \*Norwich City\* wreck](#)
  - [2.3 British settlement scheme](#)
  - [2.4 Kiribati](#)
  - [2.5 Amelia Earhart](#)
- [3 See also](#)
- [4 References](#)
  - [4.1 Notes](#)
  - [4.2 Citations](#)
  - [4.3 Bibliography](#)
- [5 External links](#)

## Flora and fauna



Western entrance to Nikumaroro's lagoon as seen from near the village ruins.

Nikumaroro is sporadically visited by [biologists](#) attracted to its extensive [marine](#) and [avian ecosystems](#). Visitors often mention the island's oppressive equatorial heat, razor-sharp coral, dense [foliage](#) and aggressive [coconut crabs](#).<sup>[*[citation needed](#)*]</sup> Coconut palms, thick scrub and [Pisonia](#) forest cover the land surface. Migratory birds and rats abound. Several species of [shark](#) and [Bottlenose dolphins](#) have been observed in the surrounding waters. Some<sup>[*[specify](#)*]</sup> of the [fish](#) species are [toxic](#) to humans during certain seasons.

The island is part of the [Phoenix Islands Protected Area](#), and as such, has been named an [Important Bird Area](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

The scarcity of fresh water on Nikumaroro has proven problematic for residents in the past, and contributed directly to the failure of a [British project to colonize the island](#) from 1938 to 1963.

## History

### 19th century sightings and claims

Nikumaroro was known by sundry names during the early 19th century: *Kemins' Island*, *Kemis Island*, *Motu Oonga*, *Motu Oona* and *Mary Letitia's Island*. The first record of a European sighting was made by Capt. C. Kemiss (or Kemin, Kemish) from the British whaling ship *Eliza Ann* in 1824. On August 19, 1840, the [USS \*Vincennes\*](#) of the [U.S. Exploring Expedition](#) confirmed its position and recorded the atoll's name as **Gardner Island**, originally given in 1825 by [Joshua Coffin](#) of the [Nantucket](#) whaler [Ganges](#). Some sources say the island was named after U.S. Congressman [Gideon Gardner](#), who owned the *Ganges*.<sup>[3][N 1]</sup>

In 1856, Nikumaroro was claimed as "Kemins Island" by CA Williams & Co. of [New London, Connecticut](#), under the American [Guano Islands Act](#). There is no record of [guano](#) deposits ever being exploited, however.<sup>[3]</sup> On May 28, 1892, the island was claimed by the [United Kingdom](#) during a call by [HMS Curacoa](#). Almost immediately a license was granted to Pacific entrepreneur [John T. Arundel](#) for planting [coconuts](#). Twenty-nine islanders were settled there and some structures with corrugated [iron](#) roofs constructed, but a severe [drought](#) resulted in the prompt failure of this project within a year. In 1916 it was leased to a Captain Allen, but remained uninhabited until 1938.

## SS *Norwich City* wreck

During a storm on November 29, 1929, the [SS \*Norwich City\*](#), a large unladen British freighter with a crew of 35 men, ran aground on the reef at the island's northwest corner. A fire broke out in the engine room and all hands abandoned ship in darkness through storm waves across the dangerous coral reef. There were 11 fatalities. The survivors camped near collapsed structures from the abortive [Arundel project](#) and were rescued after several days on the island. The devastated wreck of the *Norwich City* was a prominent landmark on the reef for 70 years although by 2007 only the ship's keel, engine and two large tanks remained.<sup>[5]</sup>

## British settlement scheme

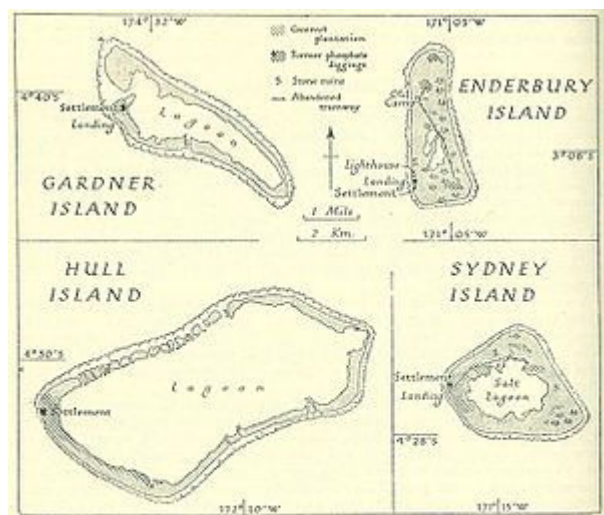


Fig. 155. Four islands of the Phoenix group

The abandoned tramway beds on Sydney have now been converted into roads. The areas shown as marshy on Sydney and Enderbury are not permanent marsh in all cases; they are sandy depressions with a growth of herbs and are occasionally covered with water. Based on: (1) Admiralty chart no. 184; (2) other official sources; (3) E. H. Bryan Jr., *American Polynesia*, pp. 56, 68, 72, 80 (Honolulu, 1941).

On December 1, 1938, members of the British Pacific Islands Survey Expedition arrived to evaluate the island as a possible location for either [seaplane](#) landings or an airfield. On December 20, more British officials arrived with 20 [Gilbertese](#) settlers in the last colonial expansion of the [British Empire](#) (other than formal annexations preparatory to withdrawal, etc.).<sup>[N 2]</sup> Efforts to clear land and plant coconuts were hindered by a profound lack of [drinking water](#). By June 1939, a few wells had been successfully established and there were 58 I-Kiribati on Gardner, including 16 women and 26 children. The island's early supervisor and magistrate was Teng Koata whose wife, according to local legend, had an encounter with the goddess [Manganibuka](#) on a remote part of the island.<sup>[citation needed]</sup>

The British colonial officer, [Gerald Gallagher](#), established a headquarters of the [Phoenix Islands Settlement Scheme](#) in the village located on the island's western end, on the south side of the largest entrance to the lagoon.<sup>[N 3]</sup> Wide coral-gravel streets and a parade ground were laid out and important structures included a thatched administration house, wood-frame cooperative store and a radio shack. Gallagher died and was buried on the island in 1941.<sup>[8]</sup> From 1944 through 1945 the [United States Coast Guard](#) operated a navigational [LORAN](#) station with 25 crewmen on the southeastern tip of Gardner, installing an antenna system, [quonset huts](#) and some smaller structures.<sup>[9]</sup> Only scattered debris remains on the site.

The island's population reached a high of approximately 100 by the mid-1950s. However, by the early 1960s, periodic drought and an unstable [freshwater lens](#) had thwarted the struggling [colony](#). Its residents were evacuated to the [Solomon Islands](#) by the British in 1963 and by 1965 Gardner was officially uninhabited.

## Kiribati

See also: [List of islands of Kiribati](#)

In 1971, the UK granted self-rule to the [Gilbert Islands](#), which achieved complete independence in 1979 as [Kiribati](#). That same year the [United States](#), after having recently surveyed the island for possible weapons testing, relinquished any claims to Gardner through the [Treaty of Tarawa](#). The island was officially renamed Nikumaroro, a name inspired by Gilbertese legends and used by the settlers during the 1940s and 1950s.

Severe storms in 2002 destroyed most of the remaining structures on Nikumaroro, <sup>[\[citation needed\]](#)</sup> although Gallagher's empty grave (his remains were moved to Tarawa for reburial in 1963) can still be seen in the overgrown village site.

## Amelia Earhart



Amelia Earhart and Fred Noonan, Los Angeles, May 1937.

Nikumaroro Island is about 300 miles (480 km) southeast of Earhart's intended destination, [Howland Island](#). [The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery](#) (TIGHAR) made several expeditions to Nikumaroro during the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>[\[10\]](#)[\[11\]](#)[\[12\]](#)</sup> They investigated documentary, archaeological and anecdotal evidence supporting a [hypothesis](#) that in July 1937 aviators [Amelia Earhart](#) and [Fred Noonan](#) landed on Gardner after failing to find [Howland Island](#) during the final stage of their ill-fated world flight. It was surmised that Earhart might have survived on Nikumaroro for several months before the British survey parties began arriving in 1938, by which time she and Noonan may have succumbed to injury, starvation, disease or simple dehydration on the waterless atoll.<sup>[\[12\]](#)[\[13\]](#)</sup> In June 2010, TIGHAR made a 10th expedition to the island.<sup>[\[14\]](#)</sup>

In an area on the atoll's northwest side called the "Seven Site" the team has found and cataloged artifacts such as flakes of rouge and a shattered mirror from a woman's cosmetic compact, parts of a folding pocket knife, traces of campfires bearing bird and fish bones, clams opened in the same way as oysters in New England, "empty shells laid out as if to collect rain water" and American bottles dating from before World War II, their heat warped bottoms showing they "had once stood in a fire as if to boil drinking water."<sup>[\[15\]](#)</sup> A finger [phalanx bone](#) found at the site and examined by forensic anthropologist [Karen Ramey Burns](#) has been examined by Dr. Cecil Lewis at the Molecular Anthropology Laboratories at the [University of Oklahoma](#) in [Norman, Oklahoma](#), USA. DNA tests on the bone fragment proved inconclusive for testing as to whether it is turtle or human.<sup>[\[16\]](#)</sup> [Brian Dunning](#) has dismissed TIGHAR's approach as unscientific in not considering the alternate explanations of the found artifacts.<sup>[\[17\]](#)</sup>

**See also**