



Helping Hawaii's Unique Birds And Domestic Cats



Hawaii is considered the endangered species capital of the world. Because of its isolation, Hawaii's unique birds evolved without predators such as domestic cats, rats, and mongooses. As a result, Hawaii's native birds are extremely vulnerable to predation, especially now that their natural habitat has been greatly reduced by farming and human development.

Although domestic cats are not the only threat to Hawaii's rare birds, they are an important factor, even in higher elevations far from human development. Cats can breed year-round in Hawaii, with 3 litters per year of 4 - 6 kittens per litter. Rabies does not occur in Hawaii, and there are no wild predators to help keep the free-roaming cat population in check.

No one knows how many stray and feral cats roam the islands, but Hawaii's cat overpopulation problem is legendary.

In 1861, Mark Train wrote, "...I saw cats....individual cats, groups of cats, platoons of cats, companies of cats, regiments of cats, armies of cats, multitudes of cats, millions of cats...."



Photo: Clipart.com

Endangered Birds Threatened by Cats

It is not natural for domestic cats to kill Hawaii's native and unique birds. Hawaii's birds did not evolve with cats and have few defenses against them. The following are a few examples of rare birds that are killed by domestic cats.

Palila: The federally endangered Palila, a Hawaiian honeycreeper, is threatened by feral cats in their protected, but limited habitat of mamane and mamane-naio forest on Mauna Kea, Hawaii, from 6,000 to 9,000 feet in elevation. Wildlife biologists have been monitoring the Palila population for years. Since 1998, 8 to 11 percent of monitored Palila nests were depredated annually by cats. This level of cat predation inhibits efforts to restore the Palila population.

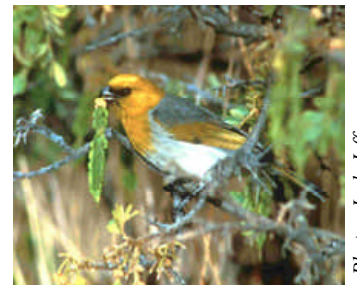


Photo: Jack Jeffrey



Photo: Jack Jeffrey

'Alala: The 'Alala, or Hawaiian Crow, is the world's most endangered crow. Endemic to the Big Island, this crow was once abundant in lower and middle elevation dry forests on the western and southern sides of the island. The 'Alala has suffered from loss and degradation of habitat, predation by cats, rats and mongooses, and avian malaria and pox carried by introduced mosquitoes. In addition, captive released birds have contracted toxoplasmosis, a disease common to domestic cats and rats. In order to save the species, 'Alala are being bred in captivity.

Hawaiian Petrel: The endangered Hawaiian Petrel was once abundant on all main Hawaiian Islands except Ni‘ihau. Today, the world’s largest known breeding colony is found at Haleakala’ Crater on Maui. The primary threat to this breeding colony is predation by introduced rats, mongooses and feral cats. Since 1981, an ongoing and aggressive predator control program has halted most losses, and this important colony appears stable.



Photo: Jack Jeffrey

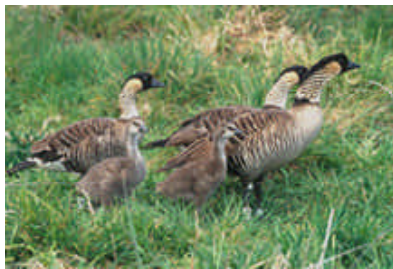


Photo: Jack Jeffrey

Nene: Nene or Hawaiian Goose used to live on all the main Hawaiian Islands, but nearly became extinct in the 1950s due to over-hunting. Today, the Big Island is the only place where they are found naturally in the wild, and thanks to propagation efforts, they have been re-introduced on Maui, Moloka‘i, and Kaua‘i. Nene are extremely vulnerable to introduced predators such as rats, dogs, cats, mongooses and pigs.

Wedge-tailed Shearwater: Cats even impact populations of common seabirds, such as Wedge-tailed Shearwater. Wildlife biologists compared the nesting success of shearwater colonies, where stray cats were fed daily by the public, with a shearwater nesting colony where cats were absent. Many more burrows produced chicks at the colony where cats were absent, and all of the adult shearwaters at the colony closest to the cats were killed. Populations of long-lived seabirds such as shearwaters, which produce only one egg per year and often do not breed until they are over five years old, are sensitive to the loss of breeding adults.



Photo: David G. Smith

Dangers to Outdoor Cats:

Many people don't realize the daily hazards that outdoor cats face. The life expectancy of a free-roaming cat is less than 5 years, while indoor-only cats can live 12 - 20 years. Outdoor cats are in constant danger from:

Cars: Cats can be hit by cars causing serious injury and death.

Disease: Outdoor cats risk exposure to fatal diseases, such as feline leukemia virus (FeLV) and feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV). Although vaccines are available, they are not 100% effective, and cats must be re-vaccinated on a yearly basis.

Injuries: Abscesses, broken legs, torn ears, scratched eyes, internal injuries and death can result from encounters with dogs or other cats.

Overpopulation: Cats that have not been spayed or neutered are the greatest cause of cat overpopulation. Thousands of cats must be euthanized each year because there are not enough homes for them.

Parasites: Outdoor cats suffer from debilitating parasites such as ear mites, fleas, ticks, and worms.

Poisons and Traps: Pesticides and rodenticides can poison and kill outdoor cats. Cats may be caught in traps set for other animals.

Human Cruelty: Cats are shot, stabbed, or even set on fire by cruel people.

Natural Disasters: Outside cats suffer from extreme weather conditions and natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, and fires.

The Truth About Cats and Birds

Even well-fed cats kill birds. Cats are predators, and the urge to hunt and eat are controlled by different parts of a cat's brain.

Belled cats still kill birds. Cats can learn to silently stalk their prey, and flightless chicks nesting in burrows cannot escape.

Cat-caught birds rarely survive. Even if the bird survives an initial encounter with a cat, infection from a cat's teeth or claws, or internal injury usually result in death.

Tips to Keep Your Cat Happy Indoors



Photo: Jeff Price

Cat owners can help Hawaii's birds and cats by keeping their cats indoors. It is easy to keep kittens indoors from the start. With patience and time, most outdoor cats can become content indoor pets. The following tips will help:

- * Play with your cat every day.
- * Paper bags and cardboard boxes provide places to play when you are away.
- * Provide window shelves to keep your indoor cat entertained.
- * Give your cat a nutritious diet and do not overfeed. Provide access to clean water at all times.
- * Keep the litter box clean.
- * Plant pesticide-free grass in indoor pots so your cat can graze safely indoors.
- * If your cat must go outside, train your cat to wear a harness and leash or provide a safe outdoor enclosure such as a screened porch or cat run. For a manual on building enclosures, see www.just4cats.com.

Tips for Responsible Cat Ownership

- * Spay or neuter your kitten as early as eight weeks of age, before a litter can be produced. Your cat will be healthier and won't contribute to the overpopulation problem.
- * Attach an ID tag to your cat's collar or get a microchip implanted with your contact information.
- * Provide routine veterinary care, including annual checkup and vaccinations.
- * Never abandon cats. If you cannot take care of your cat, find a good home or contact a veterinarian, animal shelter, or humane society.
- * Do not feed stray cats. This only contributes to the cat overpopulation problem. Take stray cats to a local shelter or call an animal control officer for help. For information on a shelter nearest you, contact the Hawaiian Humane Society at 888-946-2187.



Photo: Linda Winter

Remember, indoor cats are safe cats.

Help Hawaii's unique birds. Please keep your cat indoors.



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