

Seabirds
Koa'e kea or
White-tailed Tropicbird
Phaethon lepturus

SPECIES STATUS:

State recognized as indigenous
High Concern – NAWCP
Hawai'i Natural Heritage Ranking G5-Secure

SPECIES INFORMATION:

The White-tailed Tropicbird is the smallest and most common of the three species of tropicbird. An adept aerial flier, the White-tailed Tropicbird captures fish and squid by making a deep vertical plunge, at times remaining underwater for a few seconds. Six subspecies are recognized, with *P. l. dorothea* the only one found in the Hawaiian archipelago. The lifespan for the White-tailed Tropicbird is unknown, but thought to be long-lived. Like other seabirds, this species lays only 1 egg.

DISTRIBUTION:

Worldwide, the White-tailed Tropicbird nests on oceanic islands in the west North Atlantic Ocean, the Caribbean Sea, the South Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, and in the tropical Pacific Ocean. In Hawaii, the White-tailed Tropicbird nests in the NWHI on Midway Atoll, and in the Main Hawaiian Islands, including on Kaua'i (Waimea Canyon, Kilauea Point, Na Pali Coast), Moloka'i (Pelekunu Valley, Waikolu, windward sea cliffs), Hawai'i (Kilauea Crater, windward coast), Lana'i (Kaholo Pali, Maunalei Gulch, Hauola Gulch), and the offshore islet Mokolii. Historically, the species nested on all cliffs on O'ahu, but is currently rarely seen there. In general, the White-tailed Tropicbird's marine range is poorly known and the birds are seldom seen in sight of land. However, Hawai'i is the exception, where the species is present throughout the year.

ABUNDANCE:

An accurate estimate of the worldwide population is difficult due to the remoteness of many nesting islands and infrequent visits to these areas, but is estimated at approximately 200,000 pairs. In the Hawaiian Islands, the population is estimated at 1,800 pairs, with most found in the Main Hawaiian Islands.

LOCATION and CONDITION OF KEY HABITAT:

Terrestrial: Prefers to nest in inaccessible locations on cliffs, but known to nest in a wide variety of sites, ranging from closed canopy rain forest to barren ground. Often nests in cliffs, caves, craters, or tree hollows. **Marine:** pelagic and nearshore

THREATS:

- Introduced predators;
- Disease

CONSERVATION ACTIONS:

- Eradication and control of introduced predators at current and potential nesting sites;
- Continued protection and management of existing wildlife sanctuaries and refuges

MONITORING:

RESEARCH PRIORITIES: In general, the species is poorly studied. Examples of future research:

- Develop survey protocol to assess population status and monitor trends;
- Long-term banding studies to provide information on the age structure of populations, species' loyalty to colonies and specific nest sites, age at first breeding, and other life history information;
- Marine range and seasonal movements;
- Densities of birds at sea

References:

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