

Rabbits excel at breeding and that's bad for islands

Kia'i Moku

By Lissa Fox



The last of the Easter

ham has been polished off, the jelly beans and chocolate bunnies have been nibbled away, and thoughts have turned from spring to summer, from

Easter baskets to barbecues. But what about the surprise brought home for Easter morning, the adorable bunny that you thought would be such a hit? The kids have lost interest and care and maintenance is now up to you. You're thinking of simplifying life a bit—it's time for the bunny to go, and what better way than just leaving the cage door ajar. When you wake up tomorrow morning, oops! No more bunny.

But wait! Rabbits do not belong in paradise. There are no foxes, coyotes, and wolves to keep the population in check. Rabbits make wonderful pets, when kept properly, but should not be allowed to in the wild. Where Hawaii's environment is concerned, bunnies are bearers of bad news—not brightly dyed eggs. Take, for example, the story of what happened in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands on Laysan.

When westerners first visited Laysan in the mid 19th century, the island was densely vegetated with sandalwood groves, flowering plants, and fan palms. It was a biological gem with a high degree of biodiversity. Monk seals and turtles lounged on the beaches and seabirds filled the skies. There were at least five species of birds unique to Laysan. Ground nesting seabirds were so plentiful and tame that explorers were worried about stepping on them. Thousands of years of seabird droppings had produced a thick layer of guano. In 1893 an enterprising sea captain settled on Laysan to begin mining the guano for use as fertilizer. Innocently, he brought with him rabbits to supplement his diet and to develop a rabbit canning business.

Rabbits excel at breeding. Reaching breeding maturity at 5-6 months of age, rabbits can have a litter of 5-12 "kits" and become pregnant again within a few days of giving birth. Here in the tropics they can breed all year round, meaning one doe can have up to 12 litters a year. That's 144 rabbits per year from one pair

alone.

The rabbits on Laysan island certainly multiplied at a rate that could have sustained the captain and his family for a long time. In the absence of any sort of predator the rabbit population had exploded. The rabbits ate every green thing on the island and turned what had once been a lushly vegetated island into a desert wasteland of blowing sand with only the Captain's tobacco plants remaining. In addition to building their own burrows, the rabbits moved into the existing burrows alongside the seabirds. But the rabbits were not good neighbors. The seabird population dropped to one-tenth of what it had been. The Laysan apapane, Laysan millerbird, and flightless Laysan rail went extinct, primarily due to habitat degradation resulting from the rabbit introduction and poaching. By 1923 the rabbits had been removed, but the Laysan duck and Laysan finch populations remain threatened to this day.

Luckily, Laysan is a small island, just over 1000 acres. If a significant rabbit population became established on a larger island like Maui, it would be impossible to eradicate. Take the large "island" of Australia for example: twenty-four rabbits were introduced in 1859. "The introduction of a few rabbits could do little harm and might provide a touch of home, in addition to a spot of hunting" said the English rancher who is thought to be responsible. Within ten years it was said that you could have killed 2 million rabbits without noticeably impacting the population.

Quick response by Haleakala National Park prevented what could have been a devastating population explosion of rabbits near the crater. In October of 1989, a pet-owner released 6 rabbits near Hosmer's Grove. Work to remove the rabbits began immediately upon discovery of the population in July of 1990. Over the next 10 months nearly 100 rabbits were removed, the farthest one spread almost a mile and a half from the original population. In the words of scientist Lloyd Loope who was working at Haleakala National Park when the rabbits were discovered "...rabbit establishment on one or more of the Hawaiian Islands is



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just a time bomb waiting to go off." Makes you wonder what that Easter bunny really has in his basket.

So instead of letting your Easter bunny go, please take it to the Maui Humane Society if you can no longer keep it. If you see a rabbit hopping down the road, call the Maui Invasive Species Committee at 573-MISC.

- *Lissa Fox is the Ho'ike O Haleakala outreach liaison representing the Maui Invasive Species Committee, or MISC. "Kia'i Moku," (Guarding the Island) is prepared by the Maui Invasive Species Committee to provide information on protecting the island from invasive plants and animals that can threaten the island's environment, economy and quality of life.*