Keep an eye out for predatory veiled chameleons

By Lissa Fox

This holiday season, when you finish unwrapping presents under the tree, take a look outside for another, unexpected surprise: a giant lizard. The veiled chameleon is not giant by Godzilla standards, but it can cause big trouble. Rather than terrorize the residents of New York City, this alien predator threatens the safety of upper-elevation rain-forest inhabitants: Maui’s rare birds and insects.

Veiled chameleons are similar to Jackson’s chameleons but worse. Resource managers have eliminated a population in the wild, but they suspect a few lizards still may be out there. You can help by looking.

Veiled chameleons are twice as large as, and much more aggressive than, Jackson’s chameleons. With a diverse diet of plants, animals and insects, they’re better equipped to survive dry periods than the insectivorous Jackson’s, and veiled chameleons tolerate a greater range of climates, from sea level up to 9,000-feet elevation. Though not well established, the hardy veiled chameleon could survive in the upper-elevation remnant rain forests, the last stronghold of native plants and animals on Maui. Veiled chameleons could prey on native insects and devastate native bird populations. State wildlife biologist Fern Duvall believes that this cryptic arboreal lizard poses as grave a threat to Maui’s native birds as snakes. Recent studies have found that Jackson’s chameleons eat rare native tree snails, reinforcing concern about the possible impacts of the veiled chameleon. While Jackson’s are established too widely to eliminate from the wild, their larger relatives can still be stopped.

The veiled chameleon is native to Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Fully grown individuals can measure 2 feet long. Unlike Jackson’s chameleons, they don’t have horns. Instead, both the male and female have a shark-finlike casque on the head and a fleshy fringe running along the underside, from chin to tail.

Common pets on the Mainland, they are illegal to import, breed, keep as pets, sell or release in Hawaii. Lawbreakers could face up to $200,000 in fines and three years in jail.

The first veiled chameleon in the state was found above Kaanapali in March 2002. Not long after, Makawao residents reported more strange lizards. Surveys revealed a breeding population that seemed to be contained in a single gulch. State crews sprang into action, hoping to stop this lizard before it was too late. Area residents have helped by capturing and turning in a significant number of the contraband animals. There hasn’t been a veiled chameleon recovered since early 2008, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that they are gone.

Famous for their camouflage, veiled chameleons are tricky to locate in the wild. An animal intentionally released as a test eluded searchers for several hours, even though it was outfitted with a radio transmitter.

According to Adam Radford, operations manager at the Maui Invasive Species Committee, there’s a strong possibility that veiled chameleons are still out there, and not just in Makawao. Smuggled in through the pet trade, they likely have been moved as pets around the island. The Hawaii Department of Agriculture will accept illegal animals through its amnesty program, if they are turned in before an investigation is initiated. On Maui, call the Plant Quarantine office at 873-3556.

Like the protagonists in the Godzilla movie, Maui residents are racing against time to stop the veiled chameleon before it wreaks havoc. You can help. Look twice next time you see a chameleon climbing in your hedge. If it has a shark fin on its head and fleshy fringe down its belly, capture it safely using a towel or rag and call the Maui Invasive Species Committee at 573-6472.

Lissa Fox is the public relations and education specialist for the Maui Invasive Species Committee. “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.

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