

# Red-vented bulbul can alter ecosystems

## KIA'I MOKU

By Lissa Fox



Frankie's nursery in Waimanalo, Oahu, sells exotic fruit trees from all over the world: Abiu from the Amazon, which tastes like caramel and honeydew; acerola from the Yucatan that is touted as the fruit with the highest amount of vitamin C; even black sapote, a relative of the persimmon from Mexico, which tastes like chocolate. Unfortunately, Frankie's suffers from a frequent and unpaying patron: The red-vented bulbul, or *Pycnonotus cafer*. Lynn Tsuruda knows the exotic bird too well. "It (the red-vented bulbul) shows up in big groups, covers all the fruit, eating it just as it's beginning to mature," explains Tsuruda. "You can't do much to stop them." The red-vented bulbul is one of the world's worst invasive species; it's well-known on Oahu but has not become established on any other Hawaiian island - yet.

Illegally released from captivity in the mid-1950s, the population of red-vented bulbuls has exploded, becoming one of the most common birds on Oahu. They nest throughout the year, producing up to three broods of two to four eggs per year. As aggressive as they are gregarious, they travel in large flocks, bullying other birds that compete for the fruit, insects, and the occasional gecko that make up their diet. The voracious flocks of red-vented bulbuls plague orchid growers as well. In 1989, orchid-munching

bulbuls caused an estimated \$300,000 worth of damage to Oahu's orchid industry.

A red-vented bulbul is just over 8 inches long with a black crest on its head, resembling the common introduced cardinal both in size and shape. Both male and female are similar in plumage, black on their backs down to their white-tipped tail. Their undersides are slightly lighter in color, and they have a tell-tale patch of red feathers just under their tail, hence the name red-vented.

Like humans, red-vented bulbuls have an appetite for tropical fruits—a fact any Oahu resident with papayas, bananas, lychee, or mangos in their yard can attest to. They crave the fruit of invasive plants as well, dispersing seeds as they feed. Throughout the Pacific the spread of the red-vented bulbul parallels exploding populations of invasive plants. On Fiji, bulbuls spread seeds of lantana (*Lantana camera*), prickly solanum (*Solanum torvum*) and cape gooseberry (*Physalis angulata*). Bulbuls also snack on high priority pests targeted by the invasive species committees: in Tahiti, bulbuls spread miconia (*Miconia calvescens*), and on Oahu, ivy gourd (*Coccinia grandis*).

Alien bulbul populations impact insects and native birds. The increase in red-vented bulbuls on Oahu coincides with a color morph in the population of monarch butterflies, from orange to white, as bulbuls feed more prevalently on the orange butterflies. In Tahiti, bulbuls threaten to derail efforts to rebuild the population of the Tahitian flycatcher, an endangered bird, as fewer fledglings survive to adulthood



Above: A red-vented bulbul, shown on Oahu, has been described as "one of the world's worst invasive species." The bird destroys and alters habitats. In the Hawaiian Islands, the bird is currently found only on Oahu. Photo by Kim Bridges

in areas where bulbuls and mynah birds are established.

Native to an area from Pakistan, south to Sri Lanka, and into southwestern China, red-vented bulbuls were commonly kept as pets and as fighting birds during the 19th century. Most naturalized populations result from the movement and subsequent release of caged birds, but red-vented bulbuls have been known to nest in curious places: The motor of a ceiling fan and the end of a curtain rod, for example. So it's not surprising that the red-vented bulbul is suspected to have arrived in the Marshall Islands as a stowaway in a shipping container. Now, red-vented bulbuls are found in Samoa, Tahiti, Fiji, Tonga, New Caledonia, Washington State and Oahu, but nowhere else in Hawaii.

The red-vented bulbul could wreak havoc on Maui, spreading miconia and ivy gourd seeds and plaguing commercial and backyard fruit growers, and there is a chance they are here. A young bulbul smuggled into Maui was captured in Kahului, and there have been reports of red-vented bulbuls

in Makawao, near the Hana airport, on Lanai and Molokai.

Next time you visit Oahu, take a minute to familiarize yourself with what the red-vented bulbul looks and sounds like. You won't have any problem finding them. When you return home, keep your eyes and ears open for this bully of a bird. As Lynn Tsuruda of Frankie's nursery warns, "You don't want to get it!" Early detection is essential as even small populations present challenges; a flock of 50 birds released in New Zealand took five years to remove. Report any sightings of red-vented bulbuls immediately to the Maui Invasive Species Committee at 573-6472 or the Department of Forestry and Wildlife at 873-3502.

■ 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.