

Release of pet birds poses threat to ecology

KIA'I MOKU

By Lissa Fox



“This would be a great place to release Walter,” a Michigan visitor said recently to his wife. Their mischievous dusky conure, a small parrot native to the Amazon, likely would find Maui an ideal home. Maui’s climate is similar enough to the creature’s native habitat that he would be comfortable at night, and with all the plants introduced from South America, he would find plenty of food to eat. Unfortunately, our houseguests were not the first people to consider releasing their pet bird here.

Introduced birds have a tremendous impact on the ecology of Hawaii. They compete with native birds for food and nesting resources. Cavity-nesting seabirds, like the wedge-tailed shearwater, face competition from feral parrots for cliffside nesting sites. Introduced birds bring diseases, to which native birds have no immunity. Avian pox and malaria decimated the population of native birds at lowland elevations.

Nonnative birds also spread the seeds of invasive plants. Many of the birds introduced to Hawaii depend primarily on nonnative plants for food; 37 percent of major weed species are dispersed by introduced birds. Legislation passed during the 1940s has curbed intentional introductions of songbirds and game birds. Today, the bulk of new birds becoming established in Hawaii results from the release or escape of caged birds, such as finches, parrots, conures and parakeets. These birds, typically much larger than native Hawaiian forest birds, fly great distances and could increase

the spread of invasive plants exponentially.

More than 170 bird species have been introduced to the Hawaiian Islands, more than in any other place of comparable size. All of these introductions were deliberate.

Polynesians first introduced the red jungle fowl around A.D. 800. Europeans brought pigeons in the late 1700s. Successive waves of immigrants to the islands brought many birds as food or as pets. Some of the latter, including spotted doves and the melodious laughing thrush, eventually escaped captivity.

Subsequent introductions of game birds brought pheasants, chukars, quail, turkey and more. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, gardening societies introduced nonnative songbirds for garden ornamentation. This practice has left a legacy we hear every day of white-rumped shama, northern cardinal, red-crested cardinal, Japanese white-eye, Java sparrow and red-billed leothrix to name a few species.

Most pet birds are frugivorous, or fruit-eating, and many of Maui’s invasive plants - miconia, clidemia and ficus, or strangler figs - produce fruit eaten by these birds. Parrots and parrotlike birds fly great distances in the course of a day, up to 30 miles. They spread invasive plants high into the rain forest, sowing the seeds for a shift in the plant communities we depend on for our watershed. Not only do these birds have the ability to move seeds farther than native Hawaiian birds, they also can disperse more seeds at a time due to their size.

Some birds, such as lorikeets, feed on flowers and could have a devastating impact on the population of native ohia trees. Ohia flowers are the primary food source for Hawaiian honeycreepers, such as the



Above: Birds such as the mitred conure, or mitred parakeet, should not be released. *MISC file photo.*

Below: A pair of lovebirds can make nice companions, but releasing them into the wild could have destructive impacts on Hawaii’s ecology.



akohekohe, iiwi and apapane.

One lovebird owner said, “I’m very fond of them, but they’re destructive little monsters.”

Releasing a bird like Walter in hopes that he will be happy here could have major impacts on the environment. It is illegal to let many species of pet birds fly free; they must be in an enclosed aviary or cage. People who see a pet bird outside of captivity should report it to the Maui Invasive Species Committee at 573-6472. Biologists need help locating feral birds. Many lost pets have been returned successfully to their owners.

Finally, before buying a pet parrot, consider its life span. Large birds like macaws and Amazons live up to 70 years. Even the smaller lovebird can live 25 years. These birds make wonderful companions

but need care over the course of their entire lives.

If you are no longer able to care for your pet, find a good home for it. Humans bear responsibility for the impacts of nonnative birds in Hawaii, but we also have the capacity to prevent future damage to our environment.

■ *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.*