

Once plentiful uau birds now face habitat loss, predators

KIA 'I MOKU

By Lissa Strohecker



Hawaii is famous for rare birds: scarlet honeycreepers that dart through the rainforest and gold-flecked owls that hunt at twilight. But another Hawaiian bird lives most of its life at sea. The uau, or Hawaiian petrel, returns to land under the cover of darkness - and then only to nest. Now is the time to be on the look out for this cryptic bird; the chicks are fledging.

Named for their eerie nighttime call, “uuuuuuuu,” the uau alight on land for only a few minutes before ducking into their underground burrow. Their nesting locations are remote, difficult to access. Counts at sea estimate the population at around 20,000, low enough to earn a place on the federal endangered species list.

Fossils indicate that uau were once so plentiful in Hawaii they blackened the sky. Prior to humans' arrival in these islands, uau and their feathered friends ruled these islands. Uau built burrows from the coastline to the mountaintop, digging into soil and taking advantage of existing crevices. But populations have dwindled to a fraction of what they were, due to habitat loss and predation. Now invasive species threaten to

overrun the sliver of habitat remaining for native birds, while predators lurk outside their burrows.

Having evolved without mammalian predators, uau are particularly naive, both in their choice of nesting location and how they rear their young. Ground nesting, even in a burrow, leaves petrel chicks and eggs vulnerable to attacks by stealthy rodents or felines. Pigs, goats, cattle, deer and people trample burrows, crushing the egg or the chick inside.

Uau only lay one egg per season, and both parents invest much energy and effort in rearing the chick. A trip to the grocery store for an uau parent is a two-week, 6,000-mile journey along the northwest Hawaiian islands and circling back down to Hawaii, among the longest feeding routes of any known seabird. Unfortunately, there is no babysitter; the chick's safety depends on remaining underground, hidden from predators.

While the species as a whole demonstrates remarkable flexibility in choosing nesting sites - from dense thickets of uluhe fern to frigid cliff faces on the summit of Haleakala - individual birds are guided by habit. They return to the same burrow year after year, despite the likelihood of a cat laying in wait.

Many people are working to protect the uau. Biologists are learning more about



Above: An uau chick sits in its burrow. Ground nesting, even in a burrow, leaves petrel chicks and eggs vulnerable to attacks by stealthy rodents or felines. JAY PENNIMAN photo

these remarkable birds by observing their burrows and tracking their movements. A major colony was rediscovered on Lanai in 2006, but the birds' native habitat was being choked out by invasive trees. To protect this colony, staff from the Lanai Native Species Recovery Program and volunteers are fighting back acres of strawberry guava and replanting the uluhe fern that form a protective blanket over the burrows. Within Haleakala National Park, park staff controls predators that attack uau.

You can help as well. When petrel chicks leave the burrow for their first time they can become disoriented by the bright lights of civilization. Some birds come crashing down onto buildings or roads. A grounded chick is defenseless against

predators and threatened by cars. If you see a petrel on the ground, carefully pick it up with a cloth or towel and place it in a well-ventilated box. Do not try to feed the bird. Call Maui Nui Seabird Recovery Project at (808) 280-4114.

■ *Lissa Fox Strohecker 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. For more information visit www.mauiisc.org*