After Years at Sea, First Hawaiian Petrel Pair Nests at Nihokū

Confirming breeding at Kīlauea Point National Wildlife Refuge marks one of several key milestones in effort to conserve endangered seabirds

(Kīlauea Point National Wildlife Refuge, Kaua‘i, Hawai‘i, July 20, 2021) A historic effort to save the Endangered ‘Ua‘u, or Hawaiian Petrel (Pterodroma sandwichensis), has reached a critical milestone after years of work and anxious waiting by project partners. A pair of these rare birds has returned after several years at sea and is confirmed to be breeding. These birds are the first of 110 translocated ‘Ua’u chicks to return and nest at the fence-protected area of Nihokū at Kīlauea Point National Wildlife Refuge.

The return of these ‘Ua’u to breed is top news, capping years of careful planning and hard work, and other promising milestones are unfolding at Nihokū, as other seabirds appear at the site (see below). But first, some ‘Ua’u backstory:

In 2020, trail camera footage and biologists confirmed that five ‘Ua’uwere returning to the site while prospecting the area for nesting; leg band numbers confirmed that these were indeed birds translocated as chicks from Hono O Nā Pali Natural Area Reserve years earlier. This was taken as an early sign that the young birds that fledged from Nihokū successfully imprinted on the site and would likely soon return to breed, just as the project partners had anticipated. (After ‘Ua’u chicks leave the nest burrow, they spend several years foraging on the high seas as they mature to breeding age, then return to breed at the site where they fledged.)

“Social attraction” — where a species’ calls are played over a sound system — is utilized to help lure new prospecting birds, as well as those previously fledged from the site. Nest boxes installed within the protective fencing provide further incentive for the birds to stay and breed. The ultimate goal is to establish a thriving new colony safe from invasive predators such as feral cats, rats, and pigs.

“We are beyond thrilled to have confirmed breeding of the first Hawaiian Petrel pair in a predator-free location, after six years of translocations. This marks a major milestone towards the recovery of this imperiled species, and we hope that it is the first of many such announcements,” says Dr. Lindsay Young, Executive Director of Pacific Rim Conservation.

In addition to the returning ‘Ua’u pair now breeding at Nihokū, the first prospecting ‘A’o or Newell’s Shearwater (Puffinus newelli) was recently observed on trail cameras at the site, confirming that both species have successfully imprinted on the translocation site. Additional exciting observations within the fence include a ‘Ou or Bulwer’s Petrel on an egg, and several Kermadec Petrels on the ground engaged in what appeared to be courtship behavior. If these birds were to nest, they would provide the first Northern Hemisphere breeding records for the species.

The Nihoku Ecosystem Restoration Project is a multi-partner effort involving Pacific Rim Conservation (PRC); the Kaua‘i Endangered Seabird Recovery Project (KESRP); Hono O Nā Pali Natural Area Reserve (HONP NAR); Hawai‘i Department of Land and Natural Resources Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW); University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa Pacific Cooperative Studies Unit; the Kīlauea Point National Wildlife Refuge (a unit of the Kaua‘i National Wildlife Refuge Complex); U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; and American Bird Conservancy (ABC).
The project is part of a larger, island-wide effort to restore populations of ‘Ua‘u and ‘A‘o, both threatened and culturally important species. As was done in this project, translocating birds to protected habitats, from locations where they are vulnerable to threats such as invasive predators, is one important approach that is being implemented to help recover declining populations of Hawaiian seabirds. Other tactics include reducing powerline collisions, controlling invasive predator populations, habitat management, and fostering awareness within the island community on the issue of light attraction’s fatal effects on seabirds, combined with efforts to reduce and shield lights to protect birds. (Both petrels and shearwaters can become disoriented by light, especially during their fledging flights, and thus are highly vulnerable to collisions.)

Dr. André Raine, former project leader for the KESRP team, says that there have been major population declines in the two species in recent decades on Kaua‘i, with the ‘Ua‘u declining by 78 percent and ‘A‘o by 94 percent between 1993 and 2013.

During the active translocation phase of the project, the KESRP team found and monitored ‘U‘au and ‘A‘o burrows in the mountains, then transported vulnerable chicks via helicopter to Nihokū just before the critical stage when they become imprinted on the new site. The translocated chicks were then cared for by Pacific Rim Conservation’s animal care team, which provides feeding and monitoring of the chicks until they fledge from the site and head out to sea.

Since 2015, the team has successfully fledged 106 ‘Ua‘u and 87 ‘A‘o from Nihokū. The ultimate proof that the project is successful will be a thriving breeding population consisting of natural recruitment of birds fledged from other sites and chicks raised completely at the site — a milestone that the project partners are eagerly awaiting.

“Kaua‘i is a Noah’s Ark for endangered seabirds, with most of the world’s population of Newell’s Shearwater and one of the largest breeding populations of Hawaiian Petrel,” says Dr. Raine. “Project initiatives such as Nihokū are one of many critical conservation actions taken on this island to protect these special native seabirds. Seeing these first birds returning to this site to start breeding is the fulfillment of a huge amount of effort from all the project partners, and has us all looking eagerly to see what exciting developments will happen next!”

“We have been delighted by the opportunity to work with our partners over the last several years to implement this important conservation effort to aid in the recovery of Newell’s Shearwaters and Hawaiian Petrels,” says Heather Abbey Tonnesen, Refuge Manager for the Kaua‘i National Wildlife Refuge Complex. “Reaching this critical milestone of having translocated birds return to the site to breed is one of the measures that proves this project has been a success. We are happy to be a part of helping to care for this special place, which provides the safe habitat these species need to establish a new and successful breeding colony for many years to come.”

“It is incredibly rewarding to see the hard work by all of the partners pay off, and even more exciting that we are making demonstrable progress towards protecting these species,” says Brad Keitt, ABC’s Oceans and Islands Director. “It is also fascinating to see the unexpected happening, with Bulwer’s and Kermadec Petrels showing up within the fenced area. We appear to be on our way to a thriving and diverse seabird colony.”
“The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation is excited to be a part of this success and we look forward to watching the Nihokū restoration site within Kīlauea Point National Wildlife Refuge fulfill its goal of providing a predator-free refuge for additional nesting Hawaiian Petrel, Newell’s Shearwater, and other breeding seabirds on Kaua‘i,” says Jeff Trandahl, Executive Director and CEO of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, whose Seabirds Program was a key funder of the effort. “Confirmation of the first breeding translocated Hawaiian Petrel pair at the reserve is a significant and important milestone for this project. This very first breeding pair is a true testament to the combined efforts across the full partnership.”

Sheri S. Mann, the DOFAW Kaua‘i Branch Manager said, “This fence and the social attraction happening inside of it are working exactly as planned. This is a good indication that future predator proof fences will also work to protect and support generations of endangered seabirds.”

ABC and our partners deeply appreciate the support of this project by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Lynn and Stuart White, Atherton Family Foundation, Cooke Foundation, the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, the Martin Foundation, and Marge Duncan.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kLSVaLSCptQ

This trail camera photo captured the moment when a young ‘Ua‘u, or Hawaiian Petrel, the first of 106 birds to have fledged from the site over the past five years, returned to Nihokū. Conservation partners translocated the young birds to artificial nest boxes (such as the one on the left in this photo) to start a thriving new colony inside the predator-proof fence at this site. Photo by Nihokū Ecosystem Restoration Project.

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See project information: www.Nihoku.org

About the Partners:

American Bird Conservancy is a nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving wild birds and their habitats throughout the Americas. With an emphasis on achieving results and working in partnership, we take on the greatest problems facing birds today, innovating and building on rapid advancements in science to halt extinctions, protect habitats, eliminate threats, and build
capacity for bird conservation. Find us on abcbirds.org, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (@ABCbirds).

Chartered by Congress in 1984, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) protects and restores the nation’s fish, wildlife, plants and habitats. Working with federal, corporate and individual partners, NFWF has funded more than 5,000 organizations and generated a total conservation impact of $6.1 billion. Learn more at www.nfwf.org.

Kīlauea Point National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1985 to preserve and enhance seabird nesting colonies and in 1988 was expanded to include Nihokū (Crater Hill) and Mōkōlea Point. To learn more about the refuge, please visit www.fws.gov/kilaueapoint. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information, visit www.fws.gov.

Pacific Rim Conservation (PRC) is an independent organization dedicated to studying and conserving the biota of the Pacific region. PRC provides biological research and management services to government agencies, non-profit organizations, landowners, and a variety of other groups throughout the Hawaiian Islands and the Pacific region. PRC’s goal is to maintain and restore native species and ecosystems through habitat protection and management, threat control, public education, and scientific research to develop and improve conservation methods.

The Kaua‘i Endangered Seabird Recovery Project (KESRP) is a Department of Land and Natural Resources Division of Forestry and Wildlife project, administered through the Pacific Studies Cooperative Unit of the University of Hawai‘i. Formed in 2006, the project focuses primarily on the three endangered seabirds found on the island of Kaua‘i — Newell’s Shearwater, Hawaiian Petrel, and Band-rumped Storm-petrel. KESRP’s work involves identifying the breeding distribution of these rare and enigmatic seabirds, monitoring their breeding colonies, undertaking research projects to better understand their life histories and the various threats which they face, and working with partner projects and organizations to ensure their long-term conservation. For more information visit http://kauaiseabirdproject.org/ and the KESRP Facebook page.

Hono O Nā Pali Natural Area Reserve encompasses 3,579 acres or 1,448 hectares on the island of Kaua‘i protecting the main nesting areas of the ‘U‘au and ‘A‘o, and many other rare species of plants and animals. The Reserve was designated in 1983 and expanded in 2009 to preserve native natural communities in the Hanalei and Waimea Districts, including the Hanakāpī‘ai, Hanakoa, and Waiahuakua ahupua‘a. The Reserve stretches from sea level along the picturesque Nā Pali coast to the highest point at Pihea of 4,284 feet or 1,306 meters. The Reserve encompasses parts of Hanakāpī‘ai and Hanakoa streams and all of Waiahuakua Stream; the southern boundary of the NAR is the south side of the Alaka‘i Swamp Trail. The Reserve includes perennial streams, riparian and ridgeline habitat, lowland and montane forests, rare plants, endemic stream fauna, and forest bird and seabird habitat. Visit the HONP NAR website.