



News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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New Arrivals to Midway Atoll NWR Provide “Insurance” Against Extinction for Nation’s Rarest Duck

In a joint effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey’s Pacific Island Ecosystem Research Center, 22 endangered Laysan ducks – the rarest waterfowl species in the northern hemisphere – have been released at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. The new arrivals were transported by sea from Laysan Island in the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge in early October, and have been released in small groups during the past three weeks.

The creation of this second or “insurance” population at Midway greatly reduces the species’ risk of extinction from random catastrophes such as hurricanes, tsunamis, disease outbreaks, and accidental introductions of nonnative plants and animals, such as rats.

“This critical second translocation will allow us to double the founding population at Midway, improve the sex ratio, and release birds in newly restored habitat on Eastern Island,” said USGS’s Dr. Michelle Reynolds, project leader for the Laysan duck translocation. “There are now Laysan ducks on three islands – for the first time in hundreds of years.”

“Initiating a second population is a major step forward in the recovery of the Laysan duck,” said Dr. Holly Freifeld, biologist for the Service’s Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife office. “This project has been enormously successful so far. The high rate of survival and early reproduction in the first group of ducks released at Midway suggest that we’re doing this right, in terms of both habitat restoration and translocation methods. We hope this second group will do at least as well in their first year at Midway.”

After six months of field research, candidate birds were selected based on weight, sex, health, age, and family history (a single duckling from each brood). On the night of October 4th, 22 birds were captured for transport using hand nets, headlamps, and radio telemetry. Each bird was supplied with its own transport box and the ducks traveled in an air-conditioned cabin aboard the M/V American Islander, a ship chartered by the Fish and Wildlife Service. In addition, the birds were fed, watered, and treated by Geological Survey veterinarian Dr. Thierry Work during transport and their first week at Midway. All the birds arrived safely at Midway on October 7th.

Upon their arrival, the birds were transported to aviaries on Sand and Eastern Islands. In the aviaries, ducks were fed local insects and seeds from Midway, and monitored closely prior to release. Radio transmitters and leg bands were attached to each bird so that their identity and behavior can be monitored after release back into the wild. Between October 7-19, 16 ducks (9 males and 7 females) were released on Eastern Island, and another 6 (5 females, and one male) were released on Sand Island.

Biologists are using radio tracking to determine survival, movements, and reproduction. They have already begun to see movement between the two islands of Midway Atoll; two adult males and a juvenile hatched on Midway flew over two miles from Sand Island to a freshwater seep on Eastern Island. Inter-island movement ensures some mixing among ducks at the two release sites. According to biologists monitoring the ducks, all newly released birds are active with many seen swimming, bathing, and foraging.

This year's translocation effort expanded to include assistance from the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust from the United Kingdom and the State of Hawaii Division of Forestry and Wildlife, along with numerous volunteers from both the public and private sectors including the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

Two scientists, Nigel Jarrett and Jimmy Breeden, have been camping on Eastern Island since October 5th, caring for the ducks in the aviaries and carefully monitoring them after their release. "I never imagined I'd see free-living Laysan teal. It has been a highlight of my career to help ensure this species will continue to exist," said Nigel, an aviculturist for the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust with more than 20 years of experience with rare and endangered birds.

In preparation for the arrival of the nation's rarest duck, Service personnel and more than 40 volunteers led by refuge biologist John Klavitter have invested more than two years of hard work (10, 000+ volunteer hours) in site preparation on Sand and Eastern Islands. Preparation at Sand Island included the removal of nonnative ironwood trees and golden crown-beard plants; excavation of nine shallow freshwater seeps; construction of two aviaries; and planting of 1,400 bunchgrass, sedge, and other native plants to provide cover and nesting habitat. Eastern Island site preparation included the excavation of three shallow freshwater seeps, construction of an aviary, removal of nonnative plants, and the planting of native bunchgrass and sedges.

To date, 19 of the 20 birds translocated in 2004 are thriving. One fatality occurred in December 2004 when a male duck suffered head trauma caused by interaction with an aggressive Laysan albatross. Five of the six females brought to Midway in 2004 nested prior to their first birthday, surprising everyone involved with the project since on Laysan the ducks typically nest during their second year. The five nesting hens collectively produced more than 62 eggs, resulting in 10 new fledged juveniles. The breeding season on Laysan typically wanes by July, but on Midway new duckling broods were produced in August and October. The latest population count includes 4 new ducklings, hatched on Midway last week. Midway's total population has climbed to 55 Laysan ducks.

The Laysan duck was widely distributed across the Hawaiian Islands before the introduction of nonnative rats. After the arrival of these mammalian predators, the birds disappeared from island after island.

Prior to the establishment of the second wild population, the Laysan duck had the smallest geographic range of any duck species worldwide. Until last year, only one isolated population of approximately 500 birds existed on Laysan Island. In the nineteenth century and early 1900's, bird poachers, guano miners, and introduced rabbits devastated the flora and fauna of Laysan, leading to the extinction of three endemic landbirds (Laysan rail, Laysan honeycreeper and the Laysan millerbird). Prior to the elimination of the rabbits, the Laysan duck reached the brink of extinction with an all-time low population of 11 birds in 1911.

“These island ducks do not migrate or disperse from Laysan Island, so wild translocation is needed to restore the species to a larger range,” explained Mark Vekasy, U.S. Geological Survey field biologist.

Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge was chosen as a translocation site because it lies within the presumed prehistoric range of the species, is free of rats and other predators, and provides logistical feasibility for post-release monitoring of translocated ducks and for habitat restoration. The refuge includes three separate islands – Sand, Eastern, and Spit – two of which were chosen as sites for this year's release.

Laysan ducks, *Anas laysanesis*, are small with multicolored brown feathers and a white eye-ring, and are most active at night. On Laysan, the birds are famous for their interesting foraging behavior, a “fly chasing sprint” across the mudflat in the island's interior. The ducks are primarily insect feeders, but also feed on leaves and seeds. The females hide their nests and care for ducklings that can walk and forage the day of hatching.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

Note to Editors: Still and video images are available by calling Ken Foote at 808 792 9535

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