



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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Laysan Ducklings Bring New Hope for the Species' Survival

Laysan ducks brought to Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge are adapting beyond scientist's expectations. Surprising just about everyone involved with the project, the ducks are not only thriving but also reproducing in the first year at their new home.

"The project was initiated after many years of research to understand the Laysan duck's resource needs and limitations. We continue to answer important research questions with this project to aid in future Laysan duck translocations," said Dr. Michelle Reynolds, wildlife biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey.

The newest additions - four, 16-day old ducklings - are doing quite well, and more ducklings are expected to hatch in the coming days and weeks. As part of a plan to ensure the endangered ducks' survival, 20 ducks were transferred from the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge to Midway in October 2004. Previously, the species consisted of a single population of approximately 500 birds on Laysan Island.

"With the current success of the program we are looking forward to the next translocation of 32 ducks in October. If survivorship and reproduction continue at their current levels, we someday hope to have a population that compares to Laysan Island," said John Klavitter, wildlife biologist for Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge.

Nineteen of the 20 ducks brought to Midway last fall are alive and doing very well in their new surroundings. The one fatality was caused by an interaction with an aggressive albatross. Of the 20 ducks translocated to the atoll, six are females.

Five of the six females are actively nesting which has surprised everyone involved in the project due to the females' young age and lack of experience. "It is exciting to see that the Laysan Ducks are making use of the available habitat at Midway for nesting considering native habitat restoration is in its early stages," said Reynolds. The clutch size - number of eggs per nest - for ducks on Midway is much higher than any previously recorded for Laysan Island. Females on Midway have produced nests with 10, 9, 8, 6, 6, and 5 eggs. Current scientific data indicates the average clutch size for ducks on Laysan Island is 3.8 eggs. Scientists believe that the larger clutch sizes may be due to the abundant food sources available on Midway.

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The first female to nest produced eight eggs, six of which were fertile, but only one duckling successfully hatched and died four days later. However, as of June 6, that same female has re-nested, laying at least five eggs. Re-nesting is rarely observed on Laysan Island. The incubation time for the species is 28-30 days.

“Only time will tell with the remaining four nests whether the eggs are fertile or not, and if the young female ducks have the necessary experience to successfully raise more ducklings,” said Klavitter.

The Laysan Duck Translocation Project is funded and supported by the Service, U.S. Geological Survey - Pacific Island Ecosystem Research Center, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, the Polynesian Voyaging Society, and numerous volunteers.

Laysan ducks are teal sized, between 15 and 17 inches in length, are brown with a bright green-blue to purple speculum (the distinctive feathers on the secondary wing feathers), and have a white area eye ring. Males have a blue-green bill with black spots along the upper mandible (bill). The female usually has more white around the head and neck, and has a dull brownish yellow bill. Both sexes have orange legs and feet. The ducks are primarily invertebrate feeders, but may also feed on vegetation and seeds.

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 resource 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 governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

Still images of the mother and ducklings available upon request. Video footage is not available at this time.