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Manu-o-Ku to be celebrated at Iolani Palace

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COURTESY ERIC VANDERWERF

The manu-o-Ku, aka white tern, will be celebrated at the inaugural Manu O Ku Festival on Saturday at Iolani Palace.

Majestic and white, the manu-o-Ku, or white tern, guides navigators out at open sea toward land.

In 2007 the manu-o-Ku was designated as the city and county of Honolulu's official bird, though few may be aware of its status. Aside from the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, the native seabirds can be found only on Oahu, nesting in urban pockets like

Waikiki and downtown Honolulu.

To commemorate the bird as well as the Migratory Bird Treaty Centennial, the Conservation Council for Hawai'i holds its inaugural Manu O Ku Festival at Iolani Palace on Saturday.

MANU O KU FESTIVAL

Where: Coronation Lawn, Iolani Palace

When: 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday

Cost: free

Info: Conservation Council for Hawai'i, info@conservehi.org or 593-0255

Also: Bring a picnic lunch; refreshments will be served.

At the free celebration, all are invited to enjoy hula, music, a nature costume contest, keiki activities, bird tours and spotting scopes.

The white terns, or *Gygis alba*, have managed to not only survive, but also thrive in certain parts of urban Honolulu.

"It's a beautiful native species," said Keith Swindle, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife agent. "Most native birds, especially at lower elevations, have been wiped out by foreign diseases, feral cats and rats. Yet the white tern has recolonized Oahu in the very city center, in places like Waikiki and downtown."

A small group can be found on a median strip near the end of Kalakaua Avenue, adjacent to Don Quijote, perching in several mahogany trees. They can also be found at Kapiolani Park, Thomas Square, the Federal Building on Punchbowl Avenue and on the grounds of Iolani Palace.

The Manu O Ku Festival celebrates the birds and their role in Hawaiian culture, with the hope of raising more awareness about these beautiful creatures in our midst.

"They're kind of here in spite of us," said Swindle. "I just think of the bird like a metaphor of what we should aspire for in Honolulu. It has that resilience. It relies on the land to nest but it's a seabird, essentially, just like life here for residents. We depend on the ocean and of course take care of the land as well."

Swindle and Hawaiian bird expert Eric VanderWerf drafted a proclamation recognizing the manu-o-Ku back in 2005, scribbling words on a paper napkin over glasses of wine and beer at the Kona Brewing Co. in East Honolulu.

Afterward, Swindle went home and typed it up in his computer, but the idea for the proclamation did not take on momentum until he met Laura Thompson, the mother of Hokule'a navigator Nainoa Thompson. She brought it to the attention of city officials.

In April 2007 then-Mayor Mufi Hannemann designated the manu-o-Ku as the city's official bird.

Swindle once lived in Portland, Ore., where the great blue heron is the official city bird, and said that inspired him to propose that Honolulu also have one.

The slender, white birds with dark eyes and sharply pointed bills are indigenous to Hawaii and protected by both state and federal laws. Threats to the manu-o-Ku have included habitat loss due to development, predators such as feral cats and disturbance by tree trimmers who may not know the birds are nesting in the branches.

The Hawaii Audubon Society has since helped draft guidelines that city crews follow to help safeguard the birds while trimming trees.

Unlike most birds, the manu-o-Ku do not lay their eggs in nests. They place their egg directly on a branch and hold it there until it hatches. They have also been known to lay eggs on rocky slopes and man-made structures, including buildings.

While an estimated 15,000 breeding pairs are found in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, the manu-o-Ku have been present on Oahu since the early 1960s.

Currently more than 250 manu-o-Ku nesting sites exist from the Niu Valley area to Hickam Air Force Base, according to VanderWerf. They seem to prefer large trees, like monkeypod, kukui and mahogany, where they can find generous branches to lay their eggs on. Peak chick hatching season takes place from late February to April.

"To me, that's one of the most amazing things about these birds," said VanderWerf, "that they have fully adapted to life in an urban environment."

VanderWerf will set up a spotting scope at the festival, so that visitors can get a glimpse of adult manu-o-Ku with their chicks.

Manu-o-Ku are valued by traditional Hawaiian navigators as important way finders and guides. They travel hundreds of miles to catch small fish out at open sea, and typically head back to land to feed their chicks before nighttime. So one way to find land is to follow a manu-o-Ku carrying a fish in its beak.

"They beautify our skies and oceans," said Swindle. "They're a great ambassador for the city."