

Helicopter Ride to the Future

A historic project more than 30 years in the making took place on Kauai's north shore in Hawaii in early November when 10 endangered Hawaiian petrel chicks were flown by helicopter from their nesting area to a new colony protected by a predator-proof fence on Kilauea Point National Wildlife Refuge.

Hawaiian petrels – or ua'u – are one of two seabird species endemic to the Hawaiian Islands and are found nowhere else on Earth. The new colony will be the only fully protected colony of federally-listed seabirds anywhere in the Hawaiian Islands.

The bird's numbers have declined dramatically due to a number of threats, including predation by introduced mammals such as cats, rats and pigs.

The translocation, which involved more than a dozen people, took place simultaneously in Kauai's rugged mountain interior and along the coast. In the early morning, two teams were dropped by helicopter onto mountain peaks located in the Hono O Na Pali Natural Area Reserve within the Na Pali-Kona Forest Reserve, state lands managed by the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources Division of Forestry and Wildlife. Teams headed for 10 nests burrows that had been monitored throughout the breeding season.

Each burrow contained a healthy chick. The chicks were carefully removed by hand, placed into pet carriers and hiked up to the tops of peaks, where the helicopters picked them up.

“This translocation will establish a new, predator-free colony to help prevent the extirpation of the species from Kaua'i,” said Michael Mitchell, acting project leader of Kaua'i Refuge Complex. “Petrels, like many other native Hawaiian species, are facing tremendous challenges with shrinking habitat and the onslaught of invasive species. Translocating the birds ensures that this colony will be protected for our children and our children's children.”

The refuge's new nesting area is surrounded by a 6.5-foot, fine mesh, stainless steel fence. The 7.8-acre enclosure protects the birds from predators. The area inside the enclosure has recently been partially restored with native vegetation. Seabird-friendly nest boxes were specifically designed to mimic natural burrows

Caption:

A helicopter ride to the future.