

KEĀLIA POND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

NEWSLETTER, FALL 2025

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A WARM WELCOME BACK TO THE MIGRATORY BIRDS!

We are saying goodbye to the summer season at Keālia Pond and one of the first signs of Fall is the arrival of migratory birds!

Every year, Keālia Pond National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) is home to many migratory shorebird species. Most of these birds spend the summer months (around May-August) in Alaska and Canada where they breed, nest, and raise their chicks. In late August to October, birds such as the Kōlea, or Pacific Golden Plover, take the 3,000 mile continuous journey south to warmer areas across the Pacific. Here they spend the winter foraging for food in wetlands, urban parks, and shorelines.

A high note of the Summer of 2025 has been the early return of the Kōlea! We observed 458 Kōlea during the September bird count. That's more than we will typically have in peak migratory season (December-January).



W. Johnson 2025, Image of a Kōlea at Keālia Pond NWR

Keiki Summer Camp at Keālia Pond NWR

HELPING KEIKI CONNECT WITH THE 'ĀINA, EACH OTHER, AND THEMSELVES.

In June-July 2025, Keālia Pond National Wildlife Refuge and Hawai'i Nature Center partnered together to host five weeks of summer nature adventure camp. Keiki ages 6-12 years old participated in week-long camps with various themes such as Abundant Ahupua'a, Habitats of Hawai'i, and Fantastic Fauna. Participants were able to learn about the role of wetlands, complete their own bird survey, create bird-inspired art, play games, and meet new friends.

The Camp was an excellent opportunity for keiki from all across the island to come together, connect with the 'āina, spend time outdoors, and make lasting memories with each other. Throughout the summer we hosted more than 50 students at this day camp, and plans are underway for summer 2026!



Keiki exploring the functions and importance of wetlands in a hands-on "pala" activity!



Camp participants learned how to use tools that biologists use such as hand lenses to closely view aquatic invertebrates living in the wetland.



Campers birding at the Pond



After bird watching at the Pond, camp participants created their own bird-inspired watercolor art piece.

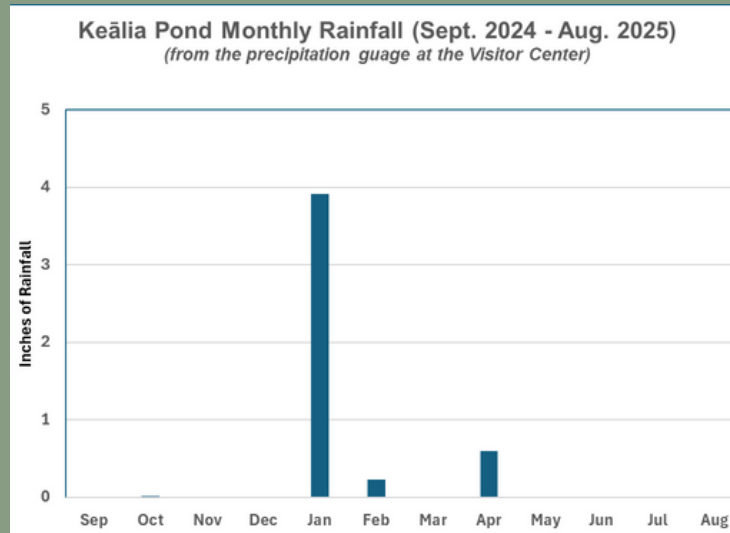
Current management challenges

Updates from the Refuge Manager:

A defining factor at Keālia Pond for 2025 has been drought, with the Refuge receiving less than 1 inch of rain since January. Although this presents management challenges, the refuge is equipped with three high-capacity well pumps that can each pump more than 1000 gallons of fresh water per minute into the Kanuimanu ponds and over the mudflats. This ensures year-long livable habitat for wetland birds. The ae'o and 'alae ke'oke'o forage for invertebrates and insects in the soft mud where water is pumped.

Unfortunately, these dry conditions have had a negative impact nesting success in 2025. Many ae'o nests either did not hatch or the chicks didn't survive. Observations suggest that many nests were built too far from the water on dry mud flats. This means the chicks had to travel long distances to find food and had no nearby cover from intense weather and predators. Furthermore, the 'alae ke'oke'o have not nested at all despite refuge attempts to provide suitable habitat in the Kanuimanu Ponds. Despite these suboptimal conditions, we had at least 36 ae'o chicks fledge in 2025. Although no 'alae ke'oke'o have fledged since February 2024, we are documenting large numbers of healthy adults, which bodes well for future nesting potential. Hopefully higher water over this winter will promote nesting activity. In the right conditions, the 'alae ke'oke'o will nest any time of year.

Luckily, the adaptive management approach practiced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service provides us the flexibility to respond to changing circumstances, experiment with different ideas, and use our scientific expertise and experience to achieve refuge goals. Anticipating continuous long dry seasons, Keālia Pond is expanding our ability to pump well water to areas along the North Mudflats closer to existing vegetation, where ae'o chicks can find cover. The refuge staff is also working to bring the famous Baitfish Pond back into action for the first time in over 10 years, hoping this area will provide more quality nesting habitat for 'alae ke'oke'o as it has in the past.



“ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT PROVIDES US THE FLEXIBILITY TO RESPOND TO CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES, EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENT IDEAS, AND USE OUR SCIENTIFIC EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCE TO ACHIEVE REFUGE GOALS”

- Bret Wolfe, Refuge Manager

Below: Photo of the dry Pond, taken in September 2025



2025 PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST WINNERS



Keālia Pond NWR, in conjunction with Friends of Keālia Pond NWR, are happy to announce the conclusion of the 2025 photography contest!

The Friends of Keālia Pond NWR, a 501c3 nonprofit, is dedicated to supporting the Refuge goals to conserve and protect native wetland habitats by fostering appreciation and educating the public. The Friends group hosted a photography contest to enhance the visitor experience and raise awareness of Keālia Pond's native habitat and wildlife. The contest was open to any experience level with youth and adult entries. Categories included wildlife, scenic views, and people in action. To celebrate their work, the winning photographers and honorable mentions will have their photos displayed in the visitor center. To see all the winners, view the Friend's website:

<https://friendsofkealiapond.org/>.

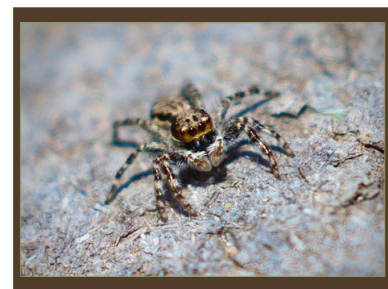
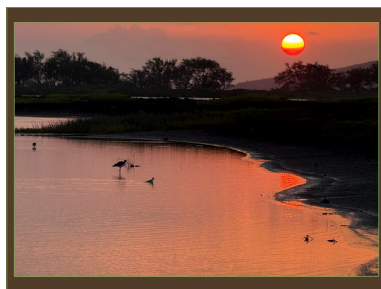
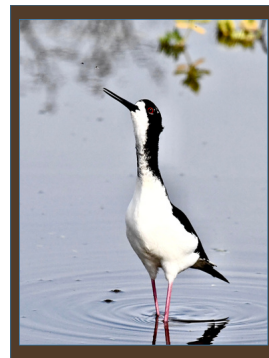
Mahalo to all who took part in the 2025 photo contest!

Check out a few of the winning photos below!

D. Gray, "Stilt Life"



FRIENDS OF
KEĀLIA POND
NWR



Top left to right images: D. Brown, W. Klasen, W. Johnson
Bottom left to right images: B. Morris, N. Wada, J. Fisher

Mahalo Nui to our U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Detailees!



Keālia Pond Refuge hosted a number of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service detailees from different stations from July - September 2025. Staff assisted with various projects such as maintenance of bunkhouse trailers, completion of the Pulelehua Trail, invasive plant clearing, and much more. Mahalo nui to our detailees! Special thanks to; Caitlin Shishido ITM Honolulu, Meagan Selvig, Honolulu, Ginger Bibian, Portland Regional Office, Sarah Dzielski, Idaho Fish and Wildlife Office, Casey Johnson National Conservation Training Center, Bianca Sicich, Attwater Prarie Chicken NWR, Richard Riley, Attwater Prarie Chicken NWR, Ty Spangler, O'ahu NWR Complex, and Kawika Davis, Guam NWR.



VOLUNTEER HIGHLIGHT!

JoAnn Conlon



VOLUNTEER POSITION:

Keālia Pond NWR Visitor
Center Volunteer

FAVORITE PLANT:

Ma'o

FAVORITE BIRD:

l'iwi and Kōlea

JoAnn Conlon is one of our deeply knowledgeable and engaged volunteers. She primarily works in the visitor center greeting visitors, educating the public, and connecting people with the 'āina.

JoAnn is from the New York metropolitan area where she grew up and went to college to study political science and education. Since her early career, JoAnn has always been a passionate educator. She dedicated 32 years to the field as a teacher, a special education specialist, and eventually as a principal. She spent most of her career teaching in rural areas of New York state and New Jersey. During this time, she incorporated engaging outdoor education experiences into the curriculum for her students. This, along with living near outdoor spaces, helped spark a love for conservation and nature-based learning for JoAnn.

JoAnn's daughter moved to Maui early in her career to study wildlife at Keālia Pond NWR. JoAnn visited often and began volunteering and learning about the important work being done at the Refuge. Eventually, in 2022, JoAnn moved to Maui to spend more time with her family and grandson. She has been a consistent volunteer ever since, and graciously shares her knowledge and passion with countless visitors.

JoAnn believes strongly in the mission of Keālia Pond NWR and the importance of native plants and birds to our ecosystems and culture. Her favorite part about volunteering is connecting with people. She also appreciated how much this meaningful work keeps her motivated and fulfilled. The Refuge is so fortunate to have such an experienced educator dedicating her time to enriching this place!

MEET OUR KUPU MEMBERS!

Where are you from and what is your educational background?

I grew up in a small town in the Sierra Nevada mountains of California. In 2023 I graduated from University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) with a degree in Environmental Studies. During college I worked at the UCSC Arboretum, led backcountry outdoor education trips, and took incredible field courses in natural history and ecology.

Why do you do Mālama 'Āina work?

I have always felt drawn to learning more about the natural world and connecting with people in outdoor spaces. I care deeply about restoring and conserving ecosystems that have been damaged and misused and helping communities connect with these places. I want to continue mālama 'āina work that helps everyone access, enjoy, and steward the lands that they call home.

What is your favorite part about your position here at Keālia Pond?

I love working with people of all ages and backgrounds. It has been such a gift to connect the community and share this incredible space. My favorite moments are seeing keiki engaging with their environment and each other.

What are your goals after your term?

I plan to travel and continue immersing myself in different communities and environments. My goal is to keep finding positions at the intersection of people and conservation and to work on more ways to increase access and collaboration in the environmental field.

SYLVIE AMSTUTZ



KUPU POSITION:
Visitor Services assistant

FAVORITE PLANT:
Pohinahina

FAVORITE BIRD AT KEĀLIA POND :
'Alae ke'oke'o

WHAT IS KUPU?

Kupu's Mission is to empower young adults to serve communities through character building, service-learning, and environmental stewardship opportunities.



SUMMER & FALL HIGHLIGHTS

THE U.S. PACIFIC FLEET BAND

The U.S. Pacific Fleet Band Woodwind Quintet performed at the Refuge on Saturday, September 6. The quintet combines the unique sounds of five different woodwind instruments and has an extensive repertoire that encompasses a wide range of musical genres from patriotic selections to classical favorites. Established in 1943, the U.S. Pacific Fleet Band operates from Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Honolulu. The band is comprised of 43 enlisted Navy musicians and two Limited Duty Officers.



CELEBRATING KEĀLIA POND NWR STAFF & KUPUS!



Refuge Staff and KUPU members, from left to right.
Top: Katherine Roman, Allyssa Morris, Joshua Lewis, Simeon Menchego, Alana Terry, Bret Wolfe.
Bottom: Tatum Talbot, Sylvie Amstutz, and Sebastian Unger.

This Fall, Refuge staff had the rare opportunity to welcome new Kupu members while the 2024-2025 members were on-site, finishing their terms. In September, we celebrated a great Kupu year and said “a hui hou” to the three 2024-2025 members. We are so excited to continue hosting Kupu members at the Refuge this year.

What is Kupu?

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KUPU'S CONSERVATION LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM (CLDP)

A paid, entry-level conservation career program. The CLDP matches members with a Host Site (partner organization) that best aligns with their conservation interests.

To learn more about the Kupu program, go to <https://www.kupuhawaii.org/>

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ONGOING EVENTS & INFORMATION AT KEĀLIA POND NWR

ONGOING EVENTS!

FIRST SATURDAY AT KEĀLIA POND

The first Saturday of every month, 9:00am - 3:00pm. Free guided tours with staff through the Native Pollinator Garden and Kanuimanu Wildlife Viewing Ponds. The first tour is 9:30am, the second tour is at 1:30pm. All day Keiki (kids) educational crafts and activities!

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES:

Out-planting Native Hawaiian Dry Land Forest Ecosystem Plants

Help restore native habitat on the refuge. Typical duties consist of outplanting, invasive species removal, and propagating in the greenhouse. Tools are provided. Snacks provided by Friends of Keālia Pond. Every Thursday, 9:00am - 12:00pm. Sign up: <https://handsonmaui.galaxydigital.com/>

Volunteer: Native Pollinator Garden

Help enhance the visitor experience in the Native Pollinator Garden. Responsibilities include trimming plants, basic trail maintenance, and weeding. Tools are provided. Snacks provided by Friends of Keālia Pond. Every Friday, 9:00am - 11:00am. Sign up: <https://handsonmaui.galaxydigital.com/>

SUPPORT KEĀLIA POND NWR!

If you are interested in supporting Keālia Pond NWR with a donation, or by getting involved, please visit our friends group website at: <https://friendsofkealiapond.org/>



Refuge Hours

-The **Refuge** is open M-F from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. It is closed on weekends and federal holidays.

-The **Visitor Center** is open M-F from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00p.m. It is closed on weekends and federal holidays.

-The **Keālia Coastal Boardwalk** is open seven days a week and on federal holidays from 6:30 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.

Entrance is free at all locations.

For more information, contact:

Keālia Pond National Wildlife Refuge, Milepost 6 Maui Veterans Highway (Highway 311)

P.O. Box 1042

Kīhei, Hawai'i 96753

KeāliaPondNWR@fws.gov

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