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Conservation Dogs of Hawai'i – A Bird's Best Friend, too? A collaborative story by Laura Doucette



Kyoko Johnson and detection dog Solo survey a taro field at Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge. ©Tor Johnson

In 2017, Kyoko Johnson, founder of Conservation Dogs of Hawai'i (CDH), alongside her scent-detection dogs, performed a pilot study to locate freshwater native birds that are sick or dead from avian botulism at the Hanalei National Wildlife Refuge (HNWR) taro fields on Kauai. The study was successful. Canine-aided searches found 97% more carcasses than by human sight alone, proving scent detection is a valuable conservation tool. The study's efficacy sparked Johnson to wonder if training dogs to find live downed seabirds during fallout season could work, too.

September through December is fallout season

for Hawai'i's seabirds. Fallout is a phenomenon affecting young birds leaving their nest for the first time. Seabirds use light from the night sky to navigate to the ocean for food. Some fledglings that leave their nest for first flight end up attracted to, and confused by, the bright lights of shopping centers, schools, homes, parking lots, resorts and other buildings.

Confused birds circle continuously, disoriented by artificial light sources and often collide with buildings. Eventually tiring, the birds collapse to the ground, exhausted and unable to take off. Youngsters sit where they land or



A rescued Newell's Shearwater rests in a box on the way to a rehabilitation center on Kaua'i. ©Conservation Dogs of Hawai'i

search for cover nearby, unable to navigate until they regain their strength. While waiting they risk becoming victim to predators in the area or may succumb to injuries from the fall.

Residents of Kaua'i are used to preparing for fallout season by keeping a box and towel in their car to facilitate rescues should they find a downed seabird. When resident rescuers find one they place a towel gently over its head and wings, scooping the bird up to put into the box. At the nearest fire station rescuers locate shearwater boxes, place the bird in the box, and call the rehabilitation center Save Our Shearwaters (SOS).

Twice a day, SOS workers collect, assess, and treat the birds as necessary. When the seabirds are deemed healthy they are released near the ocean at night. One issue, however, remains. Humans can only save the birds they can see and birds can hide well, which is where CDH stepped into the scene.

As Johnson originally trained dogs to find dead freshwater birds, she started training dogs to find live seabirds. CDH's program selects dogs that are calm, and not reactive or aggressive towards birds. Dogs learn target odors, complete scent tests, and learn how to display a passive alert when they locate a seabird. Dog handlers learn to read the subtle behaviors that indicate the dog may be close

to finding a bird. Once dogs are active in the field, trainers use muzzles and leashes as additional precautions to ensure the safety of all birds.

On O'ahu in 2022, the dogs got their chance to test their skills when CDH conducted a downed seabird detection trial with the assistance of U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Service Coastal Program Manager, Sheldon Plentovich. The trial was a success, resulting in a 90% detection rate. It was all the motivation CDH and its conservation partners needed to establish a "Seabird Rescue Patrol" on Kaua'i. In the summer of 2023, CDH trained a team of dogs specifically for seabird scent. By September they were ready to start operational surveys. CDH could, of course, only train the dogs using seabird carcasses. Handlers hoped that the dogs would transfer their detection skills to live birds. And they did.

In the early mornings of October 2023, CDH handler, Debra Gochros, and her dogs began regular surveys for downed seabirds on Kaua'i. The team searched shopping areas and buildings several mornings each week. Gochros' dog, Xena, found two live, critically endangered Newell's Shearwaters. Incredibly, Xena detected each of the birds from 50-80 feet away.



Gochros and her detection dog, Luna. ©Conservation Dogs of Hawai'i

Xena found the first seabird stuck in a chain-link fence. Xena worked the scent puzzle perfectly, her nose held high, as she scanned the air. Suddenly, Xena pulled Gochros into a ditch, up a hill, and through thick ground cover to a fence where they stopped. The dog gave a “sit alert” to communicate her find, indicating the trapped bird. Gochros and Xena waited for a volunteer to retrieve the Newell’s Shearwater and transport the bird to the fire station for SOS to collect.

For further proof that the detection dogs’ efforts were worthwhile, Xena found the second bird inaccessible under a dumpster. Gochros noticed a change in Xena’s behavior pointing to the bird’s hiding area. After moving



Xena hard at work on the scent trail. ©Conservation Dogs of Hawai‘i

the dumpster, the team rescued another bird. Thankfully, Johnson’s idea to teach her dogs to locate live birds is a conservation success story.

Training dogs to find and save birds is only part of CDH’s mission. The dog teams are also skilled in various invasive species detections such as: the little fire ant, coconut rhinoceros beetle, rosy-wolf snail, melon fly, and devil weed, to name a few. Johnson says, “It’s sight versus scent out here. When you have a needle in a haystack the canine nose is a highly accurate pinpoint.”

As Hawai‘i approaches another seabird fallout season, the CDH dog teams are gearing up for weekly downed seabird surveys on Kaua‘i. In addition, two more dog teams are in training. CDH also has plans to expand the organization’s reach across the Hawaiian Island chain. Gochros

says, “We’re excited. We hope to be able to save more birds this fallout season.” With man’s best friend hot on the trail, it’s clear the seabirds of Hawai‘i have another dedicated partner looking out for their survival and protection.

END

Sixteenth Annual Active Nest Count at Freeman Seabird Preserve at Black Point, O‘ahu

By Wendy Johnson, Board of Directors Secretary, Hawai‘i Audubon Society

On Monday, July 15, 2024, approximately 15 volunteers met at the Hawai‘i Audubon Society’s Freeman Seabird Preserve (FSP) to participate in counting Wedge-tailed Shearwaters (WTSH) for an annual census of active nests. These are defined as one or two adult WTSH sitting on, or near, an egg.

Led every year since 2009 by Dr. David Hyrenbach, Professor of Oceanography at Hawai‘i Pacific University, the volunteers peered under bushes, between rock crevices, into depressions dug by birds, and inside human-made ground burrows to find birds and eggs on the one-acre nesting site at Black Point, O‘ahu. Protocols for counting and recording data have remained consistent and effective over time with results showing a steady increase in active nest numbers every year.



Wedge-tailed Shearwater on an egg. ©Laura Doucette

The atmosphere is always joyful and suspenseful as calls of “bird-on-egg” are shouted out to participants responsible for recording data in five designated sections of FSP. After about an hour of field work, Dr. Hyrenbach gathers the data sheets and calculates the total number of incubating birds.

This year the total number of active nests recorded was 482, a 13% increase from last year’s count. This continues the trend that has shown a steady increase in the Wedge-tailed Shearwater population at FSP since the first count in 2009. We will publish a complete scientific report, including data on 2024 chick hatching, growth and survival, in the March/April 2025 ‘Elepaio. Stay tuned.

END

Kōlea-R-Us: Nome, 2024

By Susan Scott

Hawai’i walks are always good, but not quite as good from May through July, when our kōlea are in Alaska. We plover lovers feel the birds’ absence, and often wonder how they’re doing with their summer job of chick-rearing.

Some of us went to see for ourselves. From June 24-28, the Hawai’i Audubon Society sponsored its second Kōlea Quest trip to Nome. And once again, we had the privilege of accompanying



A kōlea on the Nome tundra. ©Susan Scott

world plover authority, Dr. O. Wally Johnson, and his two research associates from Anchorage. (Photo below. Wally, brown coat, in center.)

For Hawai’i residents accustomed to friendly kōlea that prance around our backyards and eat scrambled eggs on our lanai’s, Alaska kōlea hold a surprise. While breeding, the birds view humans as predators, up there with foxes, ravens, jaegers, and all the other Arctic animals hunting for food. With predators on the prowl for nutritious eggs



The Kōlea Quest 2024 crew. ©Laura Doucette



Kōlea nest on the Nome tundra. ©Donald Laurine

and chicks, the lives of plovers, and all ground-nesting birds on the tundra, are filled with life-and-death drama. Camouflage, hunkering down, and holding motionlessness are keys to survival, making finding even one kōlea nest a challenge. But we were there with the experts. Over several days, the experienced researchers found three plover nests with eggs. (O.W. Johnson USGS research permit #20957.)

And on our last day, one of those nests produced the thrill of a lifetime for kōlea fans: two new hatchings and one pipping (and peeping) egg. The first tiny hatchling was already running around the nest. Like chickens, kōlea parents don't feed their offspring. As soon as hatchlings' downy feathers are dry, the kids are out and about, foraging for

insects and berries. Parents follow the best they can, warming and protecting the chicks as needed. In this bug-filled, light-all-night environment, chicks grow up fast. In one month, baby plovers can fly. Parents fly south in August, leaving their offspring on the tundra to fatten up as long as food is available. That can last into October, or



Members of our group looking for birds. ©Susan Scott

even November, depending on weather. When snow falls, the summer's chicks migrate to warm wintering grounds, instinct being their only guide.

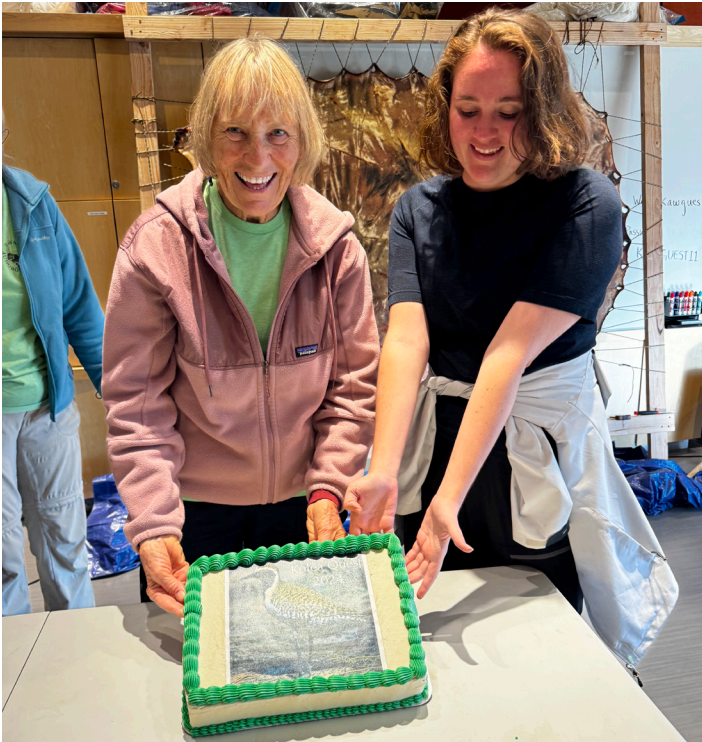
This was the Hawai'i Audubon Society's second trip to Nome with Wally, his study partners, and our outstanding guide, Carol Gales of Roam Nome. As



Wally's long-time field workers, Paul and Nancy Brusseau, scouting for kōlea. ©Donald Laurine



Newly hatched kōlea chicks and a pipping egg. ©Laura Doucette



Susan Scott (left) and Charlotte Bender show the kōlea cake made in honor of their June birthdays. ©Laura Doucette

a bonus this year, we crossed paths on the tundra with three Boston-based shorebird researchers, who, of course, knew Wally. The scientists came in from their field camp that evening to hear Wally's kōlea talk, and share a special kōlea cake.

Getting to see plover research in action with Wally Johnson and his colleagues was a true gift



Wally posed this question: If we tall humans have a hard time finding a nest, how do little birds do it? This photo, taken by me on my belly, as Wally suggested, is a kōlea-eye view of the tundra. ©Susan Scott

to all, as well as a rare education opportunity for our four Kapi'olani Community College students.

I still miss my kōlea on morning walks, but that empty feeling eases when I picture my birds sitting on speckled eggs, or chasing rambunctious chicks. I'm confident that I speak for all participants in offering our heartfelt thanks, and a fond chu-WEET, to Wally Johnson and all the others who made this remarkable trip possible.

P.S. As you might imagine, Hawai'i Audubon-sponsored visits in Nome are expensive, involve a head-swimming amount of organization, and are risky weather-wise. (Cold wind and sideways rain could make kōlea viewing impossible.) When it works, though, it's the experience of a lifetime.



Warm aloha to Dr. Wally Johnson (above at the Welcome-to-Nome statue) for generously sharing his knowledge and study methods. ©Susanne Hammer

To help us plan for a possible future Nome trip next June, please let us know if you're interested by emailing office@hiaudubon.org.

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Welcome home, kōlea. ©Susan Scott

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Announcements

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Volunteers at the annual census of active nests. ©Christiaan Phleger

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Events

September 6: Hawai'i's Kōlea: The Amazing Transpacific Life of the Pacific Golden-Plover. A presentation by Susan Scott at Ho'omaluhia Botanical Garden, O'ahu

September 10: Manu o Kū: White Fairy Terns. Luncheon presentation by Susan Scott at Hula Grill, Outrigger Waikiki Beach Resort, O'ahu

September 27: S.T.E.A.M. Fest at Kanoelani Elementary School, O'ahu

September 29: Hawai'i Island Bird Walk, Kaloko Honokōhau National Park, Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i

October 8: 'Ua'u Kani: Wedge-tailed Shearwaters. Luncheon presentation by Susan Scott, Hula Grill, Outrigger Waikiki Beach Resort

October 26: Hawai'i Island Festival of Birds at the Grand Naniloa Hotel, Hilo, Hawai'i

For more details visit hiaudubon.org/events, or email events@hiaudubon.org

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Male kōlea at its breeding grounds Nome, Alaska © Donald Laurine