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Native Wildlife Preservation: A North Kohala Legacy

By Sophia V. Schweitzer

Although Hawai'i was once home to a diversity of endemic Hawaiian waterfowl (birds not found anywhere else on earth), only one species remains in North Kohala, koloa maoli or the Hawaiian duck. Nēnē (Hawaiian goose), still found elsewhere on the Island, have not been seen here in years. But throughout the decades North Kohala has nurtured another bird-associated species, some of the most remarkable conservation heroes in the nation. Their legacy remains vibrantly alive and may well be priming North Kohala to become a Hawaiian waterfowl sanctuary once more.

One day after we decided to research this story—a story about the legacy—we heard that the main inspiration behind our initiative, David “Kawika” Woodside, had passed away near his home in Waimānalo, O'ahu. We dedicate this story to his remembrance and hope to honor a small portion of his life's work.

Born in Kapa'au in 1924, David Woodside was only 15, a kid yet, when he began his life-long conservation career helping pioneer ornithologist and botanist George C. Munro with the banding of seabirds on offshore isles. Then he pushed onward to obtain a Bachelor's of Science in Wildlife Management, eager to serve Hawai'i's natural environment. Over the years he became

involved with the establishment and management of every state and federal wildlife sanctuary in the islands, gathering encyclopedic knowledge along the way; his passion fueled Hawai'i's threatened and endangered species program. “He was the last of the last old-time naturalists,” one of his mentorees and friends said after learning about his death. “Dave was the last living person to have seen an `akialoa—to my knowledge—which now is truly extinct. Indeed, losing Dave is like losing a Hawaiian species.”

Woodside was also committed to assisting and inspiring others in their conservation work, and in 1954, he was joined by another Kohala boy ten years his senior, Ah Fat Lee. After many years at Parker Ranch as the poultry superintendent, Lee landed a job at the endangered bird breeding facility at Pōhakuloa funded by



David Woodside and daughter Ulalia Woodside weighing terns on Manana Island, O'ahu.

the Territorial Division of Fish and Game where Woodside had been assigned as manager a year before. Both men worked tirelessly to save nēnē from the brink of extinction. They would earn national recognition for their efforts.

Few are aware, however, that they played an equally important role in saving koloa. Scientists believe that in 1949 just 530 koloa remained in the islands, most of them on Kaua'i. Birds from Kaua'i and mainland zoos were

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brought to Pōhakuloa for captive rearing and reintroduction to three islands. The koloa never became tame but proved easy for Lee to breed. Kahuā Ranch then agreed to host a release site, and, between 1958 and 1979, Lee, Woodside, and others, liberated 361 Koloa in the Kohala mountains alone. The cowboys reported duck sightings faithfully, and by the mid-1970s, the koloa had re-established itself.

The effort of bringing koloa back to Kohala stands out as a success story in endangered species management. But the work with native waterfowl would continue in the district. In 1978, suspecting that introduced mallards posed a genetic threat to koloa, Lee conducted cross-breeding experiments and proved that the offspring were fertile hybrids—thus demonstrating the unforeseen problems of exotic bird introductions. The data he meticulously gathered are currently used to address what has turned out to be the worst problem facing koloa yet: hybridization.

Meanwhile, DLNR and the non-profit Ducks Unlimited (DU) started to partner with landowners in Kohala in 1992, shortly after Lee's retirement, to provide more and better koloa habitats. The Hawaiian duck lives in a variety of fresh water habitats and always nests in uplands on the ground. Koloa eggs and ducklings are easy prey for introduced predators such as cats, dogs, pigs, rats, mongooses, and even cattle egrets. Cattle may inadvertently trample nests. Parker Ranch was the first to fence its stock ponds to improve koloa breeding grounds.

A partnership between USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), DU, and Surety Kohala—then Chalon International—blossomed in 1998, when, with funds from the NRCS Wetlands Reserve Program and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, four koloa wetland complexes totaling 46 acres were created in Halelua and Hälawa mauka. Koloa pairs, quite possibly the offspring of



A 10-day-old Koloa duckling

birds released by Lee and Woodside, showed their gratitude by settling into the improved wetlands immediately. Currently, the duck ponds are owned and managed by Kohala Preserve Conservation Trust, and now have been joined by a 17-acre duck pond reserve at the New Moon Foundation in ʻIole just a few miles west.

"It's not just about the ponds," says Kimberly Uyehara, a contract biologist with NRCS. "For instance, koloa use grasslands for nesting, ponds for foraging and rearing young, and streams for molting and refuge from drought. After big rains, birds spread out to feed in newly-flooded bogs and pasture depressions. Collectively, all these habitat types are needed for koloa to survive and successfully raise their ducklings. Conserving the whole area is truly beneficial." Kohala Preserve

Conservation Trust is currently working on a new program with NRCS to restore a riparian forest near the ponds.

It's not just about koloa either. On June 22, our community celebrated the groundbreaking of the Hawai'i Wildlife Center in Hala`ula. Spearheaded by Kohala resident and wildlife biologist Linda Elliott, the center is destined to be a fully equipped native wildlife recovery, response, conservation and education facility—the only one of its kind in the state and something long sought by wildlife biologists and conservationists.

As for the next generation of wildlife conservationists, maybe it's no coincidence that the center, located on 1.6 acres by a charitable license from Surety Kohala, is just behind Kohala Middle School and will have a full-on educational pavilion.

Linda Elliott has already been working with Kohala's schools. "The Hawai'i Wildlife Center and North Kohala make a perfect match," Elliott says. "Kohala has a rich history of people who deeply care about the land. I am excited about working with our community's students and volunteers."

Wildlife habitat in Kohala is clearly expanding. Kids are enthused. True, nēnē and koloa maoli remain federally endangered, but with a continued combined effort by all of us, through community and landowner participation, education, and support, we can save the koloa. And who knows? We may even see nēnē here again one day. Who can predict what may take flight at the Wildlife Center?

David Woodside would be proud of his hometown folks.