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Duck habitat

Refuge for Hawaiian duck in Kohala mountains

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The mountains would seem like an odd place to go looking for ducks, but that's just where local biologists hope to soon find flocks of them.

The New Moon Foundation, along with the Hawaii Wildlife Center, gave two tours on Saturday of a new 17-acre habitat in the North Kohala mountains designed for the Hawaiian duck, also known by its Hawaiian name koloa maoli. The Hawaiian duck is endemic to Hawaii and is the only duck native to the main islands. There are only around 2,000 statewide, and most of the wild ducks are on the islands of Kauai and Niihau.

In hopes of trying to restore the koloa to the Big Island, the New Moon Foundation -- which owns approximately 2,000 acres in Kohala -- enrolled in the Wetlands Reserve Program, part of the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Under the program, landowners can apply for funds to help convert some of their land into habitat for native wildlife; New Moon had 75 percent of the costs covered by the program.

"The more wetlands on the mountain, the better," said Bennett Dorrance, co-executive director of New Moon Foundation, an organization inspired by Buddhist teachings that tries to maintain a "right relationship," with the land. "The plan is for the other landholders to open their land to this."

Those who took the tour were driven up into the mountains, where the fenced-in habitat sits nestled between cattle ranch lands. Once there, they were given a presentation on the habitat and shown the three pond areas for the ducks. The habitat currently has three pond areas, though the lack of rain in the area has made finding water to fill the ponds difficult. One thing those on the tour did not see were the secretive ducks, though some have been spotted in the area.

The most pressing threat to the koloa today is cross-breeding with the more common

and aggressive feral mallards, creating hybrids and threatening to breed out the species. In addition, many introduced animals, such as mongoose, dogs, cats and even bullfrogs, prey on the eggs and ducklings. Hunting was also a problem until the duck became a protected species as a member of the endangered species list in 1967.

"In the sixties, the koloa numbers were way down," said Linda Elliot, the president and director of the Hawaii Wildlife Center, which will be breaking ground on a new facility on June 27. "Habitat loss, predators and hunting caused their numbers to drop dramatically."



Today, pure Hawaiian ducks, which used to be found on every island but Lanai, have only been confirmed in the wild on Kauai and Niihau. Biologists believe the Big Island may have some as well, and workers recently took blood tests of some ducks in Waimea and are waiting on the results to confirm or dispel their suspicions. To avoid any problems in the habitat with hybridization, the Hawaii Wildlife Center is trying to keep mallards away from the sanctuary.

"We don't have any mallards that we know of," Elliot said. "There's a real good opportunity to keep the population here from becoming cross-bred."

The Hawaii Wildlife Center also hopes the habitat, which should be fully operational in about a year, will be a great opportunity to study the koloa. Planners are hoping to create a trail and a blind near the three



Linda Elliott, director of Hawaii Wildlife Center, displays a scale model of the proposed Hawaii Wildlife Center in Kapaa. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

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Native duck ponds are dry as a result of drought conditions at the New Moon Foundation in Kapaau. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

ponds in order to observe the koloa, which is one of the least seen and studied of Hawaii's native birds because of their shy nature.

"They like privacy, not a lot of commotion," Elliot said.

Even if that meant the tour groups did not see any ducks, those who went said they had a fun time and learned more about the plight of the koloa and the efforts being made to save them.

"It was wonderful," said Dixie Adams, of Kohala, who took the tour with her 9-year-old granddaughter, Zoe Rudd. "I love being out in the Kohala woods. It was a fun experience.

"The whole town is supporting Linda and the wildlife. It's going to be a wonderful thing for Kohala and the whole state."

Kohala has a long tradition of helping these native birds. Kohala resident Ah Fat Lee, now 90, raised and bred native birds, including the koloa, when he did conservation work from the 1950s until his retirement in the 1980s. Elliot says that the koloa that currently live in the Kohala mountains are most likely the descendants of the 350 ducks released by Lee. Elliot said that they hope to continue to help the koloa in the same town in which Lee reintroduced them to the Big Island. "We get to tie the past to the present here in Kohala."



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Jim Trump, second from left, land manager of the New Moon Foundation, explains how the native duck habitat was formed. - Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today