



Students take to air waves

Warn golfers not to feed the nene

By Special To West Hawaii Today

Wednesday, April 18, 2007 8:17 AM HST

"Don't feed the nene!" Doing so is not just illegal, but it can be "a death sentence" for the endangered state bird.

That's the message four Big Island seventh-graders and their teachers and classmates want to convey to Hawaii residents and especially golfers.

The four students -- Jonathan Schuler and Trev King from Waimea Middle School and Nicole Nakakura and Zachary McClure of West Hawaii Explorations Academy -- were guests on ESPN Radio's "Emily Gail Talks Golf" Saturday. Joining the students were their science teachers -- Lily Edmon with Waimea Middle and Jessica Schwartz with Explorations Academy.

Also participating in the radio talk-show discussion about protecting the nene was Linda Elliott, founder and president of the Hawaii Wildlife Center. Elliott is one of several mentors working with the two middle school teachers and about 40 students as part of a Research Experience for Teachers grant with the University of Hawaii at Hilo. The grant was conceived to bring technology and engineering training and -- in this case -- native bird expertise -- into the classroom, all to captivate and motivate student interest in science.

Saving and protecting the endangered nene is everyone's responsibility, say the students, who have studied the bird's habits and habitat as part of their science classes at the two schools.

What students learned early on is that the nene -- once 45,000 strong on all the major islands -- have dwindled down to fewer than 1,200 statewide and about 75 in West Hawaii due to hunting (now illegal), habitat degradation and introduction of the mongoose. However, now that the birds are protected and concentrated efforts to protect and encourage breeding are in place, some nene have taken up residence at Big Island Country Club in Puuanahulu, Waikoloa Village and at several of the Kohala Coast resorts.

Students have learned that the nene like golf courses because of the abundance of food but golfers often don't know much about the birds so they don't understand their habits or what the law says about protecting them -- and leaving them alone.

"The students are very well informed and they really care about the nene. They have created posters and brochures, a PowerPoint presentation and an iMovie and they have taken these educational tools with them to talk to residents in Waikoloa Village and members of Big Island Country Club," said Emily Gail.

"When we go to speak to golfers and community groups, we explain why nene might chase after you. They are really just protecting their nests or goslings," said King. "It's important to keep your distance."

"We also explain why feeding the nene is so dangerous for them. The birds normally eat high-protein plants and berries; people food such as potato chips is not nutritious enough and it teaches the birds to beg -- often around cars -- and they end up getting hit," said Schuler.

"The students have been very well-received wherever they speak. Golfers especially at Big Island Country Club and Waikoloa Village are excited to learn about the birds," said Gail.

Talking-story about nene protection with Gail on her ESPN radio show is one of a number of public appearances the students have made in recent weeks.

Gail told the students during the show that respecting and appreciating the nene is not something new for the staff and members of Big Island Country Club. The Big Island Country Club works in partnership with the Hawaii Wildlife Center, donating a portion of green fees to the center and tries to regularly educate golfers about the importance of the nene that have made the golf course their home.

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