



Pa'auilo Mauka Kalopa Community Association

Photo courtesy of Karl Backus

Monthly News & Updates

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September 2020 Newsletter



Old Birds, New Birds

By Joe Clarkson, PMKCA President

My wife Karen and I have lived in the same house here in Hamakua for the last 34 years. When we first moved in, we, of course, took note of the plants and animals on our new property, especially the species that were new to us, including a number of birds we had not seen before. Some birds were familiar because they were also common on the mainland. The Spotted Dove, Mourning Dove, the Cardinal and the House Sparrow were easy to recognize. All of these birds were introduced many decades ago, the Spotted Dove was released in the 1860's on O'ahu, the Northern Cardinal in the 1930's, the House Sparrow sometime in the 19th century and the Mourning Dove, though seen far less frequently than the Spotted Dove, was released near Waimea in the 1960's as a game bird.

Other medium sized birds were completely new to us. While we had seen Mynas while traveling in Asia, we had never experienced their chatter all day long as we do now. This "songbird" was the first one introduced to Hawai'i way back in the 1860's. The far more melodious Hwa-mei, or Melodious Laughing Thrush, was a prized songbird in China and was reportedly released to the wild during the 1900 China Town fire in Honolulu. The Hwa-mei is not a colorful bird, but its various calls are quite pretty.

Some of the bigger birds on our property were entirely new to us. I had never seen a Kalij Pheasant or a Wild Turkey before. The Kalij was introduced in 1962 near Pu'u Wa'a Wa'a, but the turkeys have been here since the 19th century. My attitude towards the Kalij pheasant is mixed. They are an attractive

bird but they also like to eat my bananas and taro plants. I've had to put nets over my taro plots to protect them.

The 'lo is one of the rare indigenous birds at our elevation, but it is very similar in appearance and behavior to many of the hawks found in North America (likewise the Pueo). I have rarely seen a Barn Owl, but often hear them screeching at night. We also had Ring Necked Pheasants on our property when we first moved in, but I haven't seen one around in several years. Karen says she heard one from a distance recently. They were very familiar to me from my childhood in Oregon where they were found all around southeast Portland in scattered fields and lots that later became subdivisions.

Some other unfamiliar birds were small and took a while to notice. The Japanese White Eye has always been around and so has the Japanese Bush Warbler, although I am still not sure if I have actually seen a Bush Warbler. The Warbler's call, mostly heard during the cooler months of the year, is very pretty and easily recognized.

What is surprising is the number of new birds that have appeared in the neighborhood and around our home in just the last year or so. We are now seeing large numbers of Cattle Egrets in our pastures, where before they were only seen near Waimea or near the coast along lower Hamakua. Cattle Egrets are originally from Africa, and spread widely in North and South America long ago, but were introduced to Hawai'i only in the 1950's. There is a very good discussion of the Cattle Egret in Quentin Tomich's "*Hawai'i: Perspectives On Hamakua History*", pgs. 234-238. (This book is a wonderful and detailed survey of many aspects of Hamakua. I highly recommend it.)

We are also seeing Java Sparrows, which I had previously only seen near Waimea, and also Yellow-billed Cardinals, which are very brave and fly down onto our lanai seeking spiders or crumbs left after an *al fresco* lunch sandwich. Other new birds are Saffron Finches, large numbers of Common Waxbills, Yellow-breasted Canaries, and House Finches. I am not complaining, it's nice to see all the new birds, but I wonder what the reason for the invasion might be and whether there will be too much competition for food between the newcomers and the old-timers. Will the new birds push the long-term residents out? I asked Dr Patrick Hart, who is a biology professor at UHH (specializing in ornithology), just this question and he kindly replied:

"I have noticed similar trends at my property in Paukaa, about 2 miles north of Hilo at about 800 feet elevation. Most of the species you listed as recent arrivals were introduced to Kona decades ago, and it took them varying amounts of time to slowly make their way around to the other side of the island.

When I moved to my property 15 years ago, there were no canaries, waxbills, Yellow-billed Cardinals, or Saffron Finch (though there were egrets, house finch, and Java Sparrow already). The waxbills mostly eat grass seed and compete mostly with the mannikins (munia). My guess is that grass seed is not limiting in most areas so not a lot of direct competition. The Yellow Billed Cardinals seem to eat both insects and fruit (so would compete with the Northern Cardinal and Hwamei), while the canaries and Saffron Finch both eat seeds and insects, so would compete mostly with White-eyes.

I am sure that some of these newer species reduce the numbers of the other

species that were already there (particularly for fruit and insect eaters) but I haven't seen that they actually drive their numbers noticeably lower (yet!). My sense is that with the large variety of new habitat types (because of humans) and new plant species, we do have a lot of open niches still available to be filled by these newcomers, and that when they interact with other species, their foraging habits change somewhat to reduce niche overlap."

So, we may have some eventual conflicts and changes in bird species population distribution, but it may take many years. In the meantime, it's nice to have the increased variety.



A Yellow-billed Cardinal perched on our lanai railing. These are the least shy of all the birds around.



Board and Officer Positions Available

PMKCA is looking for more board members! Jami Sales, our Water, Health and Utilities committee chair, has resigned from the board after many years of service. Jami has been very active in support of our community in many ways and we will miss her contributions to PMKCA board activities. Thank you, Jami, for all your hard work.

We will also soon be needing a new PMKCA officer. Diana Nui is our Secretary and has informed us that she will be resigning at the end of the year. Diana will continue working on PMKCA projects at Kalopa Park, but we will miss her participation and record keeping with the board.

If anyone is interested in volunteering for either position, please

contact any of our Board members by phone or email. Contact information can be found at PMKCA.org.

Next Meetings

Here's a lineup of the next PMKCA meeting:

Thu, Oct 8, 2020 7PM PMKCA Board of Directors Meeting
(Possibly by Zoom Videoconference)

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