

Owls at Ka'ena Point

Hawai'i has two species of owls, the introduced barn owl and the endangered Hawaiian owl or pueo. The barn owl is seen regularly on all islands. It is active at dusk and at night and is the main owl seen at Ka'ena Point. Over the last ten years, only two pueo sightings have been reported in the Ka'ena Point Natural Area Reserve. As pueos are territorial and active during the day, they would have been detected, particularly since staff knowledgeable about birds are present on most days.

Unfortunately, the pueo is considered to be very rare on O'ahu. Like seabirds, pueos nest on the ground and are vulnerable to cats, dogs and mongooses. A predator-proof fence would provide one of the only safe nesting areas for pueos in all the Hawaiian Islands. Pueos naturally used to eat mostly birds and insects prior to the arrival of humans, so by improving seabird habitat, pueos will have more of its natural food source.

Comparing Pueo and Barn Owls

Many people confuse pueos with barn owls but there are distinct differences. The barn owl is slightly larger with lighter colored feathers whereas the pueo is smaller and darker. Barn owls were brought to Hawai'i in the 1950s as a way to control rodents. They are very common, and if you see an owl in Hawai'i, it is most likely a barn owl.

Both species are found on all the main islands. Both owls have a "radar shaped" face and excellent vision allowing them to use both sound and sight to locate prey. Barn owls can be heard screeching as they hunt at night. Both owls are carnivorous and eat small rodents and insects. Like most owls, barn owls hunt during the night and are particularly fond of hunting in grasslands or edges along dirt roads where rodents and insects are easily found. As a result, owls will often hunt in those areas and get hit by cars.

The table below shows some of the key differences between barn owls and pueos:

	Pueo	Barn Owl
Time of day they are active	Daytime- early morning to dusk	Dusk and night
Appearance	Darker in color	Light in color
Preferred habitat	Grasslands	Forest and grasslands
Predators	Mongoose, cats, dogs	None (nests in trees)
Natural food	Birds, insects (rodents were not here prior to people)	Rodents, insects, birds,
Nest sites	On the ground in tall grass	Tree cavities
# sightings in NAR	2 in 10 years	Weekly sightings year round

Sick Owl Syndrome

From 1992 to 1994, a monitoring program was started to identify the cause of 'Sick Owl Syndrome' which was a name given to an outbreak of apparently sick owls found on Kaua'i and Hawai'i islands. Veterinarians examined the owls and found that vehicular collision accounted for the cause of death for more than half of the owls (50%), followed by infectious disease (28%) and starvation (22%). No evidence was found of pesticides contributing as causes of death in barn owls or pueos. Diphacinone is a pesticide bait used in Hawai'i to control rodents in endangered species bird habitat

specifically because it is not very toxic to birds. An owl would have to eat over 81 pounds of dead rodents to obtain a lethal dose of diphacinone. If pueo are detected during times of rat control, they will be actively discouraged from scavenging dead rats by staff.

More information on owls in Hawai‘i:

Causes of Owl Mortality in Hawai‘i, 1992 to 1994. Thierry Work and Jon Hale. Journal of Wildlife Diseases 1996, 32(2):266 273

<http://www.nwhc.usgs.gov/hfs/Owls.htm>

<http://hbs.bishopmuseum.org/good-bad/pueo.html>

<http://www.instanthawaii.com/cgi-bin/hawaii?Animals.pueo>

