

Waterbirds

Nēnē or Hawaiian goose

Branta sandvicensis



Photo: Jack Jeffery

SPECIES STATUS:

Federally Listed as Endangered

State Listed as Endangered

State Recognized as Endemic

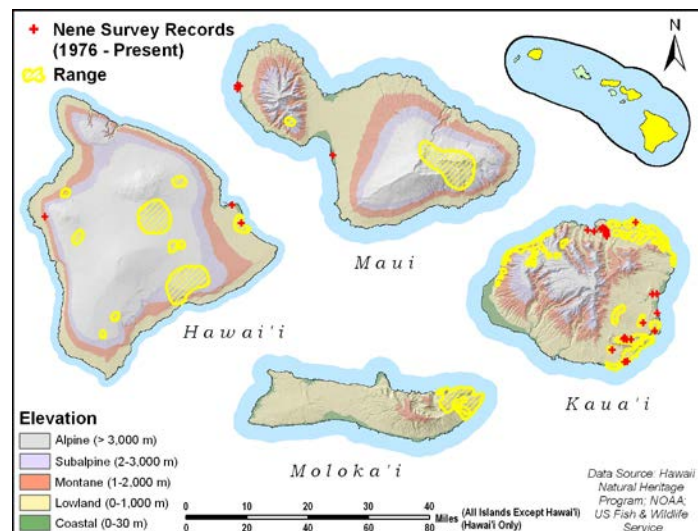
NatureServe Heritage Rank G1 - Critically Imperiled

IUCN Red List Ranking - Vulnerable

Revised Recovery Plan for the Nēnē or Hawaiian Goose (*Branta sandvicensis*) – USFWS 2004

SPECIES INFORMATION: Historically, at least five species of geese (family: Anatidae) occurred in Hawai‘i; today, only the nēnē, or Hawaiian goose, survives. Adults are mostly dark brown or sepia with a black face and crown, cream-colored cheeks, and a buff neck with black streaks. Females are smaller than males. Compared to other geese, nēnē are more terrestrial and have longer legs and less webbing between their toes, which likely facilitates walking on lava flows. Nēnē graze and browse on the leaves, seeds, flowers, and fruits of at least 50 native and nonnative grasses, sedges, composites, and shrubs. Diet varies by location and habitat, and they may require a diverse suite of food plants. Currently, several species of nonnative grass are important in mid- and high-elevation habitats. Nēnē facilitate seed dispersal and play an important role in influencing the species composition of early successional plant communities. Historically, flocks moved between high-elevation feeding habitats and lowland nesting areas. Pairs mate for life and engage in relatively simple courtship displays in which the male attacks or threatens potential competitors, runs back to his mate, and calls loudly. Nēnē have an extended breeding season, and nesting may occur in all months except May, June, and July, although the majority of birds nest between October and March, and most clutches are laid between October and December. Nests consist of a shallow scrape lined with plant material and down. Breeding pairs usually return to the previous year’s nest site, typically in dense vegetation; when available, kīpuka may be preferred. Females lay two to five eggs, which hatch after 30 days. Young are precocial and not fed by their parents; however, they remain with their parents for up to a year.

DISTRIBUTION: Between sea level and 2,400 meters (7,800 feet) elevation on the island of Hawai‘i, Maui, Kaua‘i, and Moloka‘i, and a single pair was reported on O‘ahu in 2014. Historically, the



species was found on all Main Hawaiian Islands and was likely widespread.

ABUNDANCE: In 1951, the wild nēnē population was estimated at 30 individuals and information on historical abundance is limited. The current population is estimated at 2,450–2,550 birds, with 550 on the island of Hawai‘i, 400 on Maui, 1,500 on Kaua‘i, 80 on Moloka‘i, and a single nesting pair reported on O‘ahu in 2014. During 2005–2010, about 224 nēnē were removed from near the Kaua‘i Airport and released at remote relocation sites on that island to reduce the risk of bird-aircraft strikes. Since 2011, the continued growth of the Kaua‘i nēnē population prompted the removal of an additional 600 nēnē from the vicinity of the Kaua‘i Airport and which were released into the wild on Hawai‘i and Maui.

LOCATION AND CONDITION OF KEY HABITAT: Nēnē historically occurred in lowland dry forest, shrubland, grassland, and montane dry forest, and shrubland. Current habitat preferences are likely biased by the location of release sites of captive-bred birds. They currently use a wide variety of habitats including coastal dune vegetation and nonnative grasslands (e.g., golf courses, pastures, rural areas), sparsely vegetated low- and high-elevation lava flows, mid-elevation native and nonnative shrubland, early successional cinderfall, cinder deserts, native alpine grasslands and shrublands, and open native and nonnative alpine shrubland-woodland community interfaces. Nesting occurs in a variety of habitats, including beach strand, shrubland, grassland, and lava rock, and at a range of elevations. On the islands of Hawai‘i and Maui, most nests are built under native vegetation, such as pūkiawe (*Styphelia tameiameia*), ‘a‘ali‘i (*Dodonaea viscosa*), and ‘ōhi‘a (*Metrosideros polymorpha*). On Kaua‘i, however, most nesting areas are dominated by nonnative species, and nēnē often nest under Christmas berry (*Schinus terebinthifolius*), shrub verbena (*Lantana camara*), and ironwood (*Casuarina* spp.). The condition of habitats occupied by nēnē varies considerably. Many of the areas used by the species are managed for conservation by the State of Hawai‘i and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

THREATS: Historical threats included habitat loss and degradation, hunting, and predation by rats (*Rattus* spp.), cats (*Felis silvestris*), dogs (*Canis familiaris*), and the small Indian mongoose (*Herpestes auro-punctatus*). Current threats include predation by nonnative mammals; exposure to diseases that can be transmitted by introduced nonnative animals such as feral and domestic cats (e.g. toxoplasmosis); nutritional deficiencies due to paucity of quality habitat, exposure stress at high-elevation habitats; a lack of contiguous lowland habitat; human-caused disturbance and mortality (e.g., road mortality, disturbance by hikers, aircraft strikes, collisions with wind turbines); behavioral problems related to captive propagation; and inbreeding depression.

CONSERVATION ACTIONS: Past and current actions include captive propagation and release of captive-bred individuals into the wild, predator control, habitat enhancement, research and monitoring, private conservation efforts, formation of the Nēnē Recovery Action Group, and public education. Other actions specific to conservation of nēnē should include the following:

- Enhance and protect habitats used by nēnē, including foraging habitat, breeding grounds, and summer flocking areas.
- Increase predator control effort and effectiveness, including use of predator-proof fences. Increase efforts to detect and remove mongooses from Kaua‘i.

- Significantly increase efforts to minimize negative human-nēnē interactions through public education and outreach focused on communities or areas where the number of nēnē are known to be increasing; continue to promote avoidance and minimization measures that will reduce the risk of collisions with vehicles , aircraft, and wind turbines.
- Develop a statewide long-range management plan for nēnē that includes all of the distinct populations and anticipates changes resulting from management actions and human interaction.
- Continue the nēnē population reintroduction efforts and establish additional populations only where risks can be minimized and habitat quality can support recovery.

MONITORING: Continue surveys to monitor abundance and distribution and annual productivity.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES:

- Standardize survey and monitoring protocols and develop a platform for data sharing.
- Conduct studies on diet and nutrition, particularly as it relates to forage quality of nonnative versus native vegetation, focusing on the needs of goslings and breeding females.
- Refine predator control and exclusion methods.
- Evaluate movement patterns and habitat use by nēnē.
- Evaluate and refine translocation and release methods that incorporates monitoring subsequent dispersal and movement patterns, survival, and reproduction.
- Investigate population genetics as a management tool to monitor the potential for inbreeding.

References

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