Department of Land and Natural Resources

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Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary

Waterbird Report, 2020

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I. Overview

Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary (heareafter 'Pouhala Marsh') is an 84-acre wildlife sanctuary designated for the recovery of federally and state listed endangered waterbirds in Waipahu, Hawai'i. Pouhala Marsh is a brackish, estuarine wetland in the Pearl Harbor Basin on the island of O'ahu (Figure 1).

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS; hereafter the Service) has identified Pouhala Marsh as a core wetland in its *Recovery Plan for Hawaiian Waterbirds, 2nd Revision*. The Service defines core wetlands as being able to provide habitat essential for the larger populations of Hawaiian waterbirds that comprise the bulk of the numbers prescribed for recovery (USFWS 2011). Pouhala Marsh provides foraging, loafing, nesting, and roosting habitat for three endemic and endangered waterbirds: Hawaiian Coot (*Fulica alai*), Hawaiian Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata sandvicensis*), and Hawaiian Stilt (*Himantopus mexicanus knudseni*). In addition, Pouhala Marsh provides habitat for many migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and wading birds during the Fall and Winter months. In the Winter of 2020 alone, White-faced Ibis (*Plegadis chihi*), Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*), Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*), Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*), Green-winged Teal (*Anas carolinensis*), and Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*), were observed at Pouhala Marsh.

Hawaiian waterbirds are considered 'conservation reliant' meaning that populations will require active management for the foreseeable future (Reed et al. 2012, Underwood et al. 2013). Wetland managers mitigate threats to Hawaiian waterbirds by controlling invasive plants and removing invasive predators. Monitoring the success of these strategies over time allows managers to adapt management actions to most efficiently protect waterbirds.

II. Habitat Management

Approximately 26 acres of the sanctuary is usable waterbird habitat; 35 acres are comprised of mangrove forest, the canal and adjacent bank are 4 acres, 2 acres are ocean, and 17 acres are dry upland areas surrounding the wetland basins (Figure 1). Habitat manipulations in 2020 included disking a large patch of pickleweed (*Batis maritima*) one time using a Marsh Master MM-2XL equipped with the disking attachment (Table 1). This mechanical manipulation technique provides long-term control of pickleweed and can provide suppression for months.

The hydrology seems to have changed; the tide levels have increased and the water has become more saline. The increased saline conditions killed the large patch of bulrush (*Schoenoplectus* sp.) and cattails (*Typha latifolia*), although a remenant remained. When the bulrush was controlled in 2019, I identified it as the nonnative *Schoenoplectus californicus*, but the bulrush that followed was identified as the native *S. tabernaemontani*. Perhaps the control of the nonnative *S. californicus* promoted the natural seed bank and *S. tabernaemontani* resulted.

III. Waterbird Monitoring

a. Waterbird Surveys

1. Methods

Surveys.—A census technique was employed to count all waterbirds present using the direct count method. Waterbird surveys were conducted using consistent observation lines to maintain consistency amongst different observers. When conducting waterbird surveys observers survey the Landfill area by accessing the road between the Landfill and the Main Pond (Figure 1). Waterbirds are counted in the Main Pond by observing the area near the freshwater spring (area of cattails and bulrush) and across the water toward the Waikele Ponds. The waterbirds are counted from left to right and numbers are recorded. Next the observer will move from the west side of the Main Pond to the eastern portion of the Main Pond toward the upper road that runs parallel to Kapakahi Stream. To verify waterbird numbers in the Main Pond, the Main Pond is surveyed again from the upper road and the larger number is recorded into the data sheet. It is necessary to survey from both locations to obtain accurate numbers in the freshwater spring portion of the Main Pond in conjunction with the northern portion of the Main Pond and the imaginary boundary between the Waikele Ponds. The observer continues north on the upper road to gain visual access of the Waikele Ponds and counts the waterbirds utilizing the Waikele Ponds separate from the Main Pond although the water within both ponds may be connected. Lastly, waterbirds are surveyed in Kapakahi Stream from north to south. A spotting scope should be used to obtain a visual on the westernmost portion of the Main Pond via the vantage from the upper road.

Observers also recorded ancillary environmental data: cloud cover, vegetation cover, rainfall, wind and gust speed, water level, and the degree of human influence. Cloud cover was estimated as a continuous percentage between 0 and 100 by tens. Vegetation cover was ranked in discrete categories from 0 to 3: 0 = open water, 1 = 26–50% cover, 2 = 51–75% cover, and 3 = ≥75% cover. Rainfall was recorded in discrete categories of 0 = no rain, 1 = mist or fog, 2 = drizzle, and 3 = light rain. Wind and gust speed were recorded as Beaufort categories: 0 = no wind, 1 = smoke drifts (4–7 mph), 2 = wind felt on face, and 3 = leaves, small twigs in constant motion (8–12 mph). Water level was recorded as a discrete category ranging from 0 to 3, where 0 = dry, 1 = lower than normal, 2 = normal, and 3 = higher than normal. Human impact was recorded as ranging from 0 to 2: 0 = indirect, 1 = moderate, and 2 = heavy.

Chicks and fledglings were recorded separately for each of the endangered wetland birds and all banding information observed was recorded. Specific nesting activities measured include: pairing, territory, and survival rates of chicks to fledging stage.

Habitat Use.—Microhabitat was assessed for all the endangered birds encountered. Microhabitat was identified as: *stream*, *stream bank*, *open mudflat*, *vegetation*, *0–3" water*, *3–6" water* and *>6" water*. *Stream* is defined as stream water that is deeper than the tarsal-tibiotarsal joint (i.e., joint not visible) for stilts and water deep enough for the coot or gallinule to be swimming; *stream bank* is stream water not deeper than the tarsal-tibiotarsal joint (i.e., joint visible) in stilts, or coots and gallinules observed standing on vegetation inside the stream channel or in shallow enough water where swimming is not allowable; *open mudflat* is defined as exposed or bare soil with no emergent vegetation; *vegetation* is emergent vegetation with small pockets of mudflat or water present; *0–3" water* is water no deeper than the tarsal-tibiotarsal joint (i.e., joint visible) for stilts and walking in water for coots and gallinules; *3–6" water* is deeper than the tarsal-tibiotarsal joint (i.e., joint not visible) for stilts and swimming for coots and gallinules; and *>6"*

water is such that no part of the leg is visible in the stilt, for the coot and gallinule depth of water was estimated by reading the nearest water gauge.

Fledging success.—Endangered waterbird fledging success was measured using this formula: (# of observed fledglings/# of observed chicks) x 100 = % fledgling success. Fledglings and chicks were mapped each survey to aid in identifying each brood's chicks to fledging ratio.

2. Results

Surveys.—A total of 43 surveys were conducted at Pouhala Marsh in 2020. Mean abundances (range) for coots were 5.1 individuals (1–10), gallinules were 1.8 individuals (0–6), and stilts were 52.7 (12–191) individuals per survey (Figure 2). The peak occupancy for stilts was September–December (Figure 3).

Habitat Use.—Habitat utilization differed by species. The Hawaiian Coot was found most often in stream with 47.2% of the observations; the Hawaiian Gallinule was found most often in mudflat/vegetation with 39.2% of the observations; and the Hawaiian Stilt was found in most often in 0–3" water with 43.0% of the observations (Figure 4). Coots utilized deeper water habitat, gallinules used vegetation, and stilts used shallow water and mudflat.

Nesting success.—Seven waterbird nests were observed in 2020, two coot and five stilt nests (Figure 5). The two coot nests were successful and one stilt nest was abandoned and the other four nests had unknown fates.

Fledging success.—Of the two successful coot nests one brood had one chick fledge and the other brood had two chicks fledge. Stilt chicks were observed and 8 fledglings were seen on a single survey in late August.

3. Recommendations

Wetland characteristics like water level should be measured to gain a better understanding of why stilts leave Pouhala Marsh to nest. Do stilts leave because the water has dropped and therefore food availability has decreased, or do stilts return to historic breeding locations regardless of food availability.

Using cameras on nests at Pouhala could aid in the understanding nest failure rates and causes. In 2021, more effort will be made to monitor nests with cameras to provide a relative sense of nest loss and the potential for mitigative management actions based on the cause of nest failures.

b. Long-term Waterbird Population Analysis

1. Results

Survey.—A total of 130 waterbird surveys were conducted during 2017–2020 (n=15, n=32, n=40, n=43, respectively). The average coot abundance for those years were 2.9, 1.8, 2.8, and 5.1 individuals; the average gallinule abundance was 1.6, 1.7, 2, and 1.8 individuals; and the average stilt abundance was 45.7, 29, 60.9, and 52.7 individuals, respectively (Figure 6).

2. Discussion

The populations of coots and gallinules have remained stable for the last 4 years, with coots increasing in 2020 due to three successful feldglings from two broods. The stilt population has fluctuated over the same span. Recent years have had hydrology changes that likely influenced the changes in the stilt abundance from 2019 to 2020.

IV. Predator Control

a. Methods

The USDA-WS used 4 live traps to target the capture of mongoose and cats. The live trapping occurred from January to March 2020 and did not resume until June 22, 2020. When predator trapping resumed, DOFAW managed predator control efforts. The live traps were substituted for DOC-200 kill traps (n = 13) and were distributed along the road in the interior that paralleled the marsh (Figure 7). The DOC-200 traps were mounted inside housings to protect the trap mechanism from the elements and to eliminate incidental take of non-target species. The DOC-200 kill traps were baited weekly to monthly with previously frozen fish or dry cat food mixed with either salmon oil, shellfish oil, or crayfish oil. One cat kill-trap or chimney trap was deployed on September 3, 2020; the cat trap was installed with two conibears on each end with an entrance in the top and later modified for entrance on both ends of the trap. The cat trap was baited weekly to monthly with previously frozen fish or dry cat food mixed with either salmon oil or shellfish oil.

b. Results

Capture effort was reduced with no trapping in April, May, and the first half of June. DOC-200 kill traps were deployed on June 22, 2020 and one cat kill-traps was deployed on September 3, 2020. The USDA-WS trapped 17 small Indian mongooses (*Herpestes javanicus*) and DOFAW trapped 27 mongooses, 13 rats (*Rattus* sp.), 2 feral dogs (*Canis familiaris*), and 3 feral cats (*Felis catus*; Table 2).

c. Recommendations

Predator control efforts in 2020 were minimal compared to other years. Mongoose take was well below the take in 2019 (167 mongooses).

Predator control efforts will continue as mongoose and cats are believed to prey mostly upon the chick stage of coots, gallinules, and stilts at this site. During nest surveys at Hamakua Marsh, a mongoose scat was found containing feathers, bones, and a beak of a gallinule or coot chick, probably one to two weeks old.

The efficacy of live traps versus DOC-200 traps seems contrasting and warrants further study. In early 2021, we will conduct a side-by-side predator control study in Kawainui Marsh comparing the efficacy and efficiency of live traps and DOC-200 kill traps for mongoose control.

At Pouhala Marsh mongoose population seems to be very high like Kawainui Marsh and could benefit from more predator control. At Hāmākua Marsh, one of 31 nests (3%) monitored by a camera were depredated by a mongoose. In contrast, Kawainui captured on camera three of seven (43%) nests preyed upon by mongooses.

V. Conclusions and Goals for 2021

Pouhala Marsh provides adequate habitat for stilts. In the winter months stilt abundance approaches 200 individuals, yet provides little in the form of nesting habitat. We observed 5 stilt nests, with minimal effort. Inadequate nesting habitat lends to a low nest rate and suspected high densities of mongoose likely impact nest success. In 2021, effort will be made to understand stilt nesting habitat and the impacts predators have on nest success.

VI. Literature Cited

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van Rees, C. B., P. R. Chang, J. Cosgrove, D. W. DesRochers, H. K. W. Gee, J. L. Gutscher-Chutz, A. Nadig, S. E. Nagata, M. Silbernagle, J. G. Underwood, K. Uyehara, and J. M. Reed. 2018. Estimation of vital rates for the Hawaiian Gallinule, a cryptic, endangered waterbird. Journal of Fish and Wildlife Management 9:117–131.

VII. Appendix

a. List of Figures and Tables

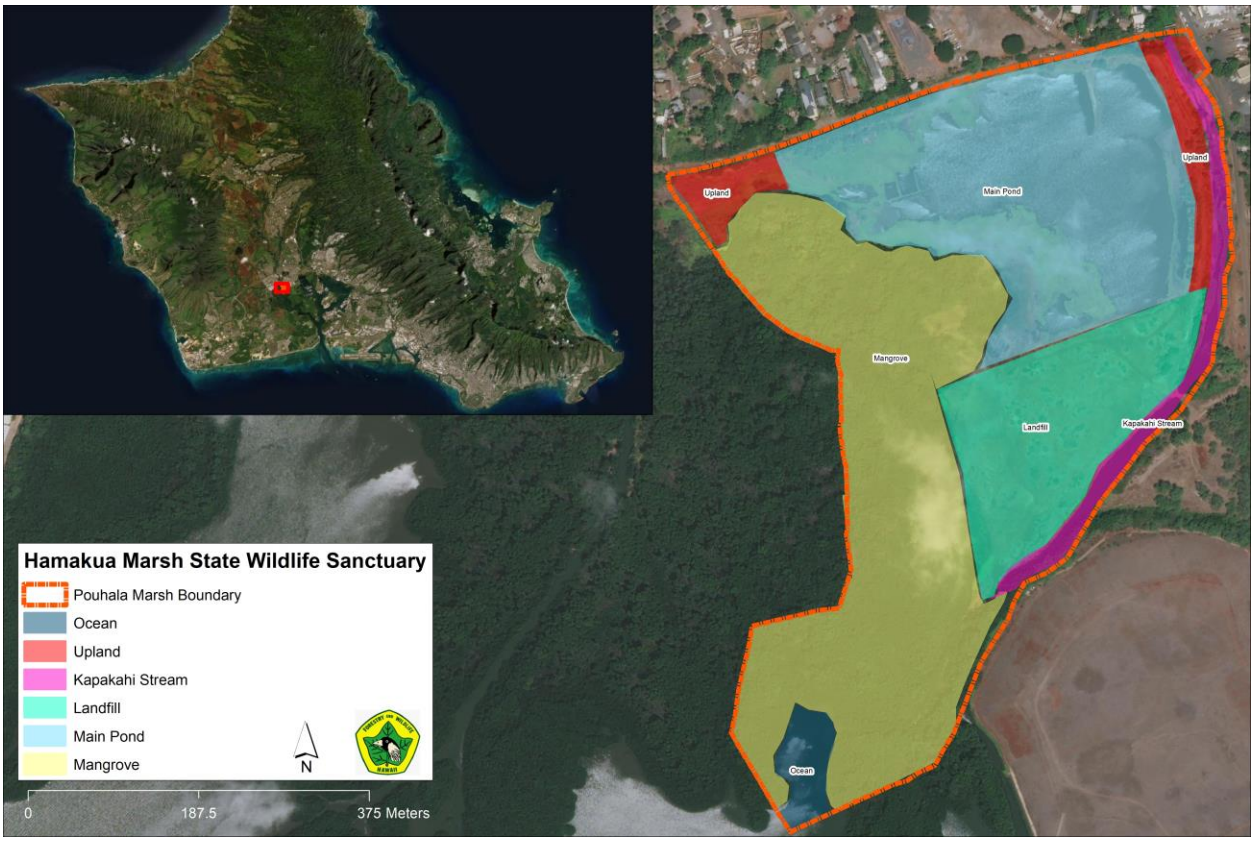

Figure 1. Map of Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary, Waipahu, Oahu, Hawaii, USA.

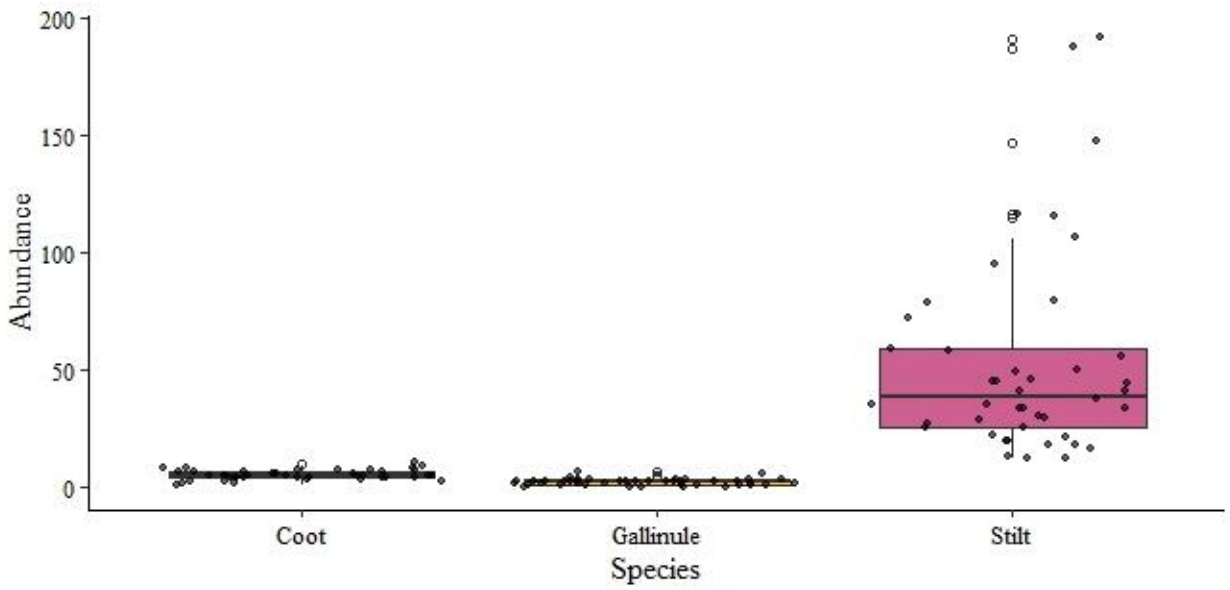

Figure 2. Boxplot displaying median values and interquartile ranges for coots, gallinules, and stilts. Black points represent abundances for each individual survey (n = 43). Open circles are outliers and whiskers represent minimum and maximum.

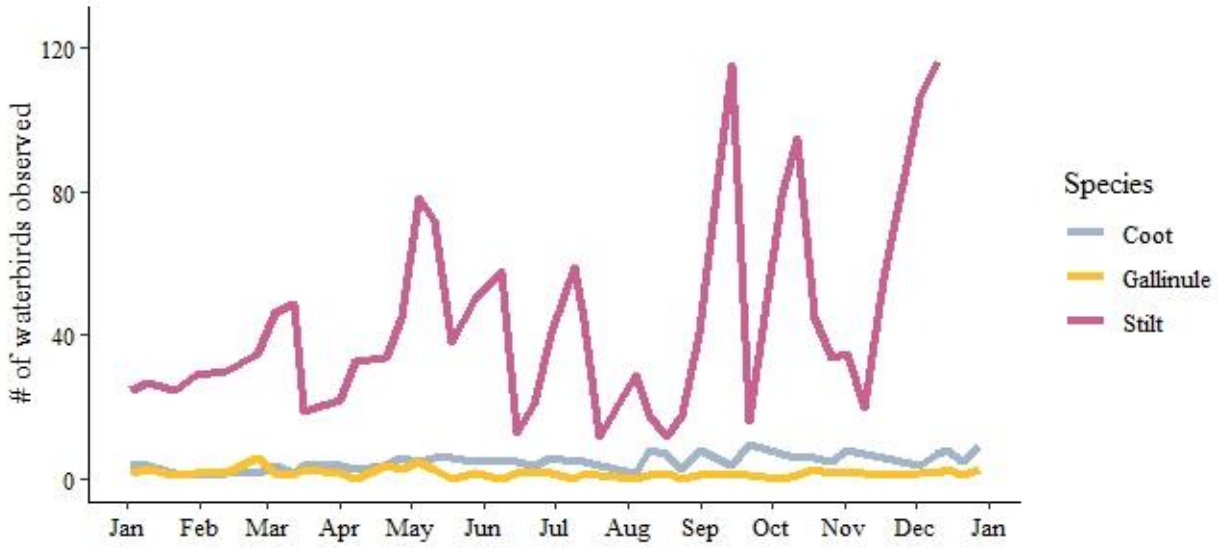

Figure 3. Coot, gallinule, and stilt individuals observed per survey throughout 2020 in Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary, Waipahu, Oʻahu, Hawaiʻi, USA.

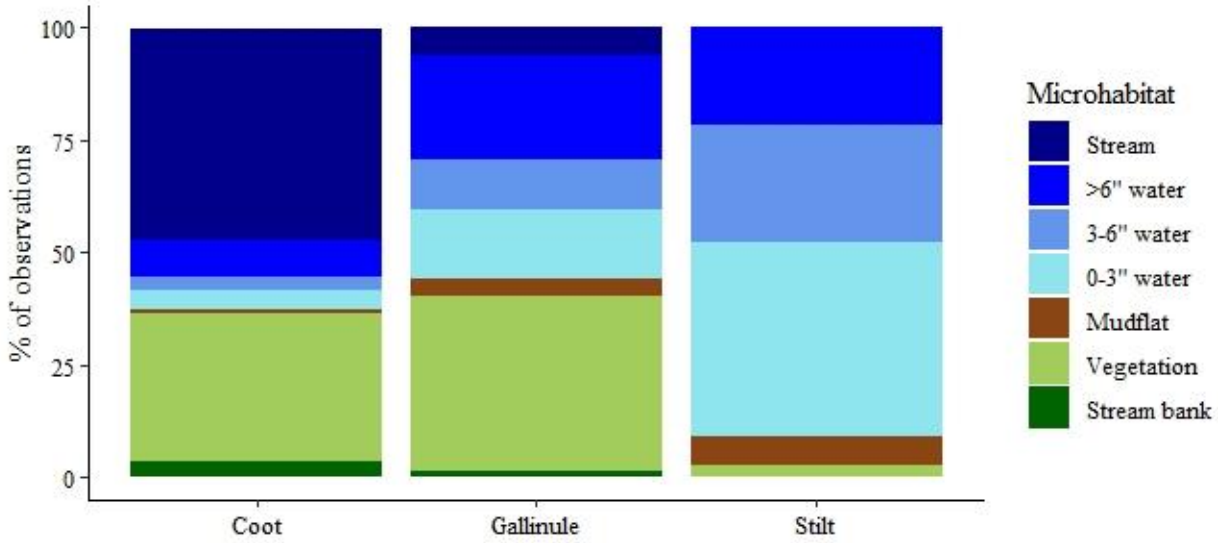

Figure 4. Percent of observations for coots, gallinules, and stilts in seven microhabitats found within Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary, Waipahu, Oʻahu, Hawaiʻi, USA.

Figure 5. Nest distribution at Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary, Waipahu, Oahu, Hawaii, USA. Pictured are five stilt nests observed in 2020.

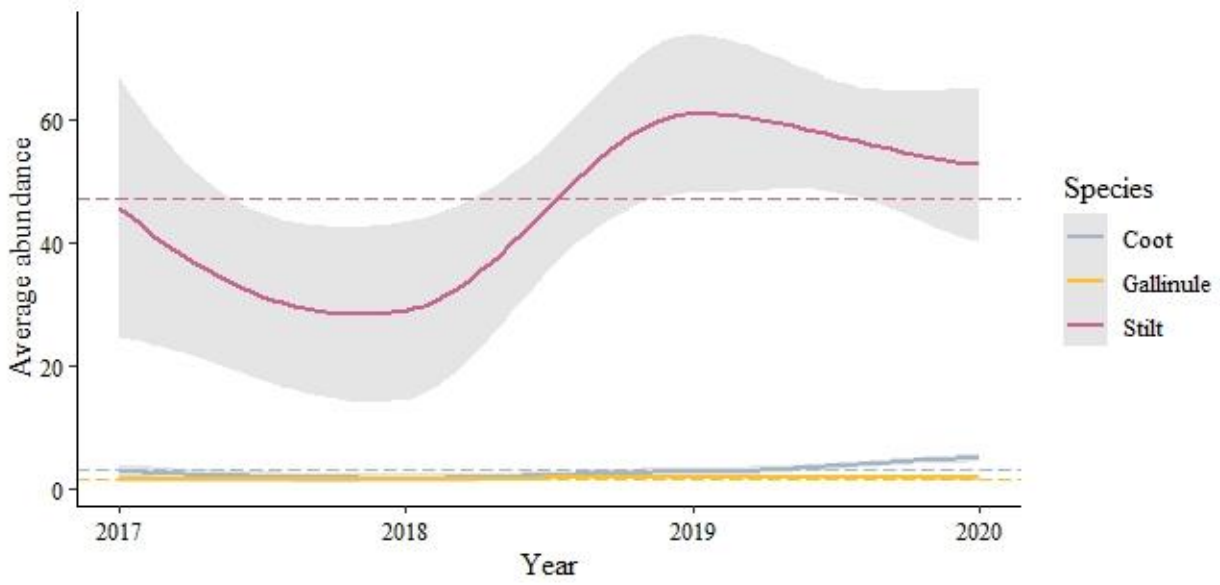

Figure 6. Average abundances for coots, gallinules, and stilts from 2017 through 2020 at Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary, Waipahu, Oʻahu, Hawaiʻi, USA. Gray shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals, horizontal dashes (color coded by species) represent the overall averages for each species over the span 2017–2020.

Figure 7. Predator trap distribution at Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary, Waipahu, Oahu, Hawaii, USA.

Table 1. Habitat manipulation operations and techniques used within the wetlands at Pouhala Marsh State Wildlife Sanctuary, Waipahu, Hawai‘i, USA from 2019–2020.

Year	Habitat manipulation
2019	In early May, the Marsh Master MM-2XL equipped with the roller/chopper was used on the California grass (*Brachiaria mutica*) in Kapakahi Stream. In late September, the Marsh Master MM-2XL equipped with the disking attachment was used to control bulrush (*Schoenoplectus californicus*) and a cattail (*Typha latifolia*) patch in the Main Pond. In late October, the Marsh Master MM-2XL equipped with the cutting attachment was used to trim the bulrush and cattail patch. Subsequently, the disking attachment was used to control the remaining bulrush and cattail rhizomes.
2020	In mid-November, the Marsh Master MM-2XL equipped with the disking attachment was used to control pickleweed (*Batis maritima*) in the Main Pond and Waikele Pond. One pass was made in a north and south direction followed by a perpendicular pass (crosshatch pattern).

Table 2. Predators captured by month at Pouhala Marsh, Waipahu, Hawai‘i, USA, 2020.

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Mongoose	3	12	2	0	0	2	5	4	5	6	2	3	44
Cat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	3
Rat	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	9	13
Dog	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2