

Balancing the Military Mission with the Environment on Ka'ula Island

E Pane Mai Ka Nonoi O Nohili
Answering the Requests of Nohili

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Ka'ula Island is an offshore islet approximately 23 miles south of Ni'ihau. The island provides habitat for many species of seabirds, and Hawaiian monk seals out (i.e., rest) on ledges of the island. Over the years, tens of thousands of seabirds have nested on Ka'ula Island. The island is also culturally and spiritually significant to Native Hawaiians.

Ka'ula Island has been under U.S. federal jurisdiction since 1924. The Navy has managed and utilized Ka'ula Island for training activities since 1952. For the past 44 years, only inert (non-explosive) ordnance has been authorized during aviation training activities. Training activities are limited to the southernmost 1,000 feet of the island, which represents approximately 8% of its total land area.

Ka'ula Island is a critical location for aviation training involving air-to-ground gunnery and the deployment of non-explosive ordnance from the air. The island provides the opportunity for overwater air-to-ground training that is not available at other locations in Hawai'i. Additionally, the island is remote and uninhabited by humans, which means low risk for public safety.

After extensive consultations with the Hawai'i State Historic Preservation Officer, Office of Hawaiian Affairs, and consulting parties, to include Native Hawaiian Organizations, the Navy has identified Ka'ula Island as eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural place under the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The Navy has begun development of a memorandum of agreement and consultations are ongoing with the aim to develop an agreement that includes measures to minimize or mitigate adverse effects on the historic property. During the continued consultation process, no training on Ka'ula Island is expected. If training becomes necessary, it will require approval from Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet. This approval requirement is an additional step should training become critical for national security or national defense purposes while the Navy finalizes the NHPA process.



Monitoring Marine Species While Maintaining Military Readiness

The Navy understands how its activities can impact sensitive environments and wildlife. The Navy conducted vessel and aerial seabird surveys annually at Ka'ula Island from 2009 through 2019, and continues to conduct aerial surveys biannually. In addition to documenting seabirds, the surveys also record the presence and extent of marine mammals around the island. These efforts allow the Navy to determine if military activities are affecting wildlife and, if so, what the effects are. Navy survey reports are provided to Hawai'i Coastal Zone Management Program officials at the Office of Planning and Sustainable Development and are available to the public at www.navymarinespeciesmonitoring.us/reporting/pacific/.

The most recent aerial survey conducted by the Navy in August 2023 recorded 17,638 individual birds of these nine species that were present on Ka'ula Island:

- Brown noddy (noio kōhā)
- Sooty tern ('ēwa'ēwa)
- Grey-backed tern (pākalakala)
- Red-tailed tropicbird (koa'e 'ula)
- Laysan albatross (mōlī)
- Great frigatebird ('iwa)
- Masked booby ('ā)
- Brown booby ('ā)
- Red-footed booby ('ā)

The survey also recorded the presence of 13 Hawaiian monk seals resting on ledges on the west side of the island outside of the training area.



Examples of native bird species associated with Ka'ula Island. From left to right, brown noddy (noio kōhā), brown booby ('ā), red-footed booby ('ā), and Laysan albatross (mōlī). (Photo Credits: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Navy)



Before training begins, pilots observe Ka'ula Island, its ledges, and surrounding waters from the air to ensure marine mammals, such as Hawaiian monk seals or humpback whales, are not present in the immediate training area. Military aviators are trained for accuracy to strike their intended target on land in the impact area. If an aircrew misses the target area and ordnance lands in the waters around Ka'ula Island, the aircrew must report it immediately to the Navy's Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility, Pearl Harbor.

Hawaiian monk seals (īlio holo i ka uaua) rest on the ledges of Ka'ula Island (Photo Credit: U.S. Navy)

The military services are prohibited from delivering any type of ordnance at Ka'ula Island if marine mammals are present in the immediate training area, or if a monk seal is on a ledge of the island.