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TUESDAY • AUGUST 1, 2006 • ONLINE: WWW.KAUAIWORLD.COM

## Vidinha lights wreak havoc on seabirds

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THE GARDEN ISLAND

Newell Shearwaters have a big problem with the Vidinha Stadium lights.

The protected seabirds, which only nest in the mountainous terrain between 500 to 2,300 feet on Kaua'i, often become disoriented by the strong lights, causing them to collide with structures in the Lihu'e area.

To accommodate the shearwaters, the Kaua'i Interscholastic Federation has moved a football game scheduled for Oct. 20 at Vidinha to Hanapepe Stadium.

"They're seabirds who come to land to have babies," KIF executive secretary Diane Nitta said. "Annually, there's a period of time when they have babies, which is June through July, and they are usually born from September through October."

Hanapepe Stadium looks to be out of the clear because of its proximity to the ocean and because its lights are pointed slightly downward, as opposed to Vidinha Stadium, where the lights point upward.

"They crash at Vidinha, far away from the ocean," Nitta said.

Thomas Kaiakapu, wildlife manager



Dennis Fujimoto / The Garden Island

**Hoku Cup Choy of the Vidinha Stadium caretaking crew finishes his inventory of burned-out bulbs Monday during a test of the stadium's lighting system.**

for the county's division of forestry and wildlife said Kauai Island Utility Cooperative has been working with the county to minimize the fallout of shearwaters.

"We might have to adjust the Vidinha Stadium lights," he said. "Lights are a

magnet to the birds, who get close to land at a certain elevation. They end up falling in the Lihu'e Industrial area near Vidinha."

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# Lights

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Kaiakapu said stadium lights might be modified to point downward and avoid attracting the shearwaters — already a troubled species.

“Since Hurricane Iniki, the number of Newell’s Shearwaters have declined,” Kaiakapu said. “During a full moon period, based on our records, they are most likely to make it out to sea.”

The Newell’s Shearwater is a medium-sized, 12- to 14-inch-long seabird with a wing span of 30 to 35 inches.

It has a glossy black top, a white bottom and a black bill that is sharply hooked at the tip. Its claws are well adapted for burrow excavation and climbing.

## Habitat and behavior

The Newell’s Shearwater, or ‘A’o, is a bird of the open tropical seas and offshore waters near breeding grounds. During their nine-month breeding season from April through November, ‘A’o live in burrows under ferns on forested mountain slopes.

These burrows are used year after year and usually by the same pair of birds. Although the ‘A’o is capable of climbing shrubs and trees before taking flight, it needs an open downhill flight path to become airborne.

The ‘A’o primarily feeds on squid and has been described as having loud nasal calls resembling the braying of a donkey and the call of a crow.

## Past and present

The Newell’s Shearwater was reported to be in danger of extinction by the 1930s.



Dennis Fujimoto / The Garden Island

**A poinciana tree at Vidinha Stadium's entrance frames a bank of lights. The skyward-facing lights have disoriented the threatened Newell's Shearwaters and other seabirds, causing them to crash around the stadium at night.**

The introduction of the mongoose, black rat and Norway rat may have played a primary role in the reduction of ground nesting seabirds such as the ‘A’o and the ‘Ua’u, or Hawaiian Dark-rumped Petrel.

Increasing urbanization and the accompanying manmade lighting have resulted in substantial problems for fledgling shearwaters during their first flights from nesting grounds to the open ocean.

When attracted to lights, fledglings become confused and may suffer temporary night blindness.

They often fly into utility wires, poles, trees and buildings and fall to the ground.

Between 1978 and 1981, more than 5,000 Newell’s Shearwaters fell on Kaua’i’s highways, athletic fields and hotel grounds.

Predator control in key habitat areas, the establishment of Bird Salvage-Aid Stations, nest translocation and light-attraction studies have been initiated to help save the Newell’s Shearwater. Outreach to Kaua’i community members has resulted in people picking up downed birds and bringing them to aid stations for care and release, giving the seabirds a chance to live.

The Newell’s Shearwater was listed as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1975. The Hawaiian Dark-rumped Petrel and Newell’s Shearwater Recovery Plan was published in 1983.

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## Conservation efforts