An endangered Oahu ‘elepaio perches in the mountains outside Honolulu; a sterilized feral cat climbs a tree near a beach in the city. The HSUS is trying to protect both.
CAT ADVOCATES AND CONSERVATIONISTS aren’t known for their collaboration. In Hawaii an HSUS-led coalition has set out to change that—by keeping cats safe and away from threatened and endangered wildlife.

by KAREN E. LANGE

MIKE LOHR GIVES A SHRILL WHISTLE and looks up, scanning the treetops for two birds who could help save a species. Once the Oahu ‘elepaio was common on this island. Today fewer than 2,000 exist. Pushed out of 95 percent of their range by sugar and pineapple plantations, military bases, and housing developments, they inhabit a mere 21 square miles in all the Earth. Even in the species’ remaining habitat, the birds are under threat, struggling to adapt to a transformed landscape.

Lohr, an ecologist with The Wildlife Society, steps off a state park trail in the Ko’olau range northeast of Pearl Harbor to search for the pair of ‘elepaios. The trees into which he peers—lemon eucalyptus and strawberry guavas—are exotics. And the gully into which he descends, shuffling down a slope that drops abruptly to a wash of broken tree limbs and mud, has been taken over by another import, feral pigs: Their footprints roil the forest floor.
CARRIED TO HAWAII in canoes and ships, pigs, as well as rats, mongooses, and cats, entered island ecosystems relatively recently, millions of years after winds and ocean currents brought the original flora and fauna, plant by plant, bird by bird. Lacking the instincts to avoid being eaten, many native bird species went extinct. They are still disappearing, with eight lost just since 1983 when Lohr was born. Yet here, a short distance from an easy hike called the ‘Aiea Loop Trail, exists a little enclave of a creature that’s part of Hawaiian folklore, a native bird that’s managed to survive.

A British tourist first spotted the pair in 2011. Since then, Lohr has seen the male and female many times, watching as they claimed this gully for their own. He’s observed with a pang the destruction of a nest by a predator—most likely a rat—and the two birds’ failure to reproduce. Feisty and territorial, ‘elepaio birds usually show themselves quickly when they hear what they believe to be another of their species trespassing. Right now, in late 2012, the pair is fattening up for the breeding season, so it takes Lohr several tries. He uses his digital bird call. Eventually, two reddish brown and black birds appear, flitting from branch to branch 30 feet up, white bellies flashing. Their bills click as they pursue insects. The male snags a moth.

To the west on Oahu, ‘elepaio numbers dropped steeply between the 1990s and early 2000s. Here in the Ko‘olau range, the population has risen, from two to 10 pairs. Maybe it’s that the birds are nesting higher in trees, reducing the likelihood rats will reach their nests. Maybe it’s that the ‘elepaios have developed resistance to two introduced diseases: avian pox and malaria. Whatever the reason, the ‘Aiea Loop ‘elepaios represent hope for the species. “There’s something special about this population. … There’s some evidence that they’re evolving,” says Lohr, president of the Hawaii chapter of The Wildlife Society. “What conservation biologists are trying to do is buy them enough time.” But the birds Lohr has been monitoring have chosen a precarious spot. Just above the gully, a cat colony has grown to over 100, as new cats show up around a parking lot. If the ‘elepaios manage to hatch a baby, Lohr fears the youngster will almost certainly be eaten before he learns to fly.

Ideally, TNR (Trap-Neuter-Return), which is being attempted here, would stabilize and eventually reduce cat numbers. Many groups, including The HSUS, support TNR as a humane alternative to trapping and killing, which outside of small islands has failed to reduce numbers (remaining cats quickly breed back). TNR has worked in places on Oahu and across the U.S. It’s not working along the ‘Aiea Loop Trail because of an influx of free-roaming and abandoned pets.

Felines—orange, calico, grey and white, black and white—congregate near the trailhead. Well-fed and healthy, they return visitors’ gazes with mild curiosity—unaware of the charges leveled against them. There are cats who haven’t been sterilized (their ears aren’t notched), and cats who could potentially be placed for adoption—they’re obviously not feral. An 8-month-old kitten walks onto the road and lets himself be scratched behind the ears by HSUS Hawaii state director Inga Gibson. Another rubs against Gibson’s legs, like he’s waiting for her to fill his food bowl. Gibson shakes her head because she knows the cat might thrive as someone’s pet.

Dwayne De Ocampo, the state park caretaker, emerges from his house and commiserates with Lohr and Gibson over the animals people drop off, despite a big sign telling them not to. “They let go all kinds. Somebody let go a rabbit. I found a goose. … I cannot stop them.” Lohr, who as a graduate student located the remains—heads, tails, a radio transmitter—of bobwhites he was studying in the outdoor crawl space of a home with a free-roaming cat, wants the colony gone, even if that means the cats will be euthanized. The volunteer managing the colony either can’t keep up or doesn’t take friendly cats to shelters for fear they won’t be adopted.

Gibson, charged with protecting both cats and wildlife, and convinced that neither will be safe without the cooperation of all
sides, is looking for a middle way: trying to get friendly cats adopted, to keep feral ones from living near the most vulnerable creatures, to bridge a cultural divide. It’s why she’s accompanied Lohr here, even though she winces at some of his descriptions of the problem. And why she’s been prodding and cajoling experts with opposing views into forming a coalition: “One person is going to say, ‘No cats,’ and another person is going to say, ‘The cats are fine where they are.’ I say, ‘Reduce—prevent more cats. If necessary, move.’”

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

With its mild climate and lack of coyotes and other feline predators, Hawaii has one of the densest populations of free-roaming cats in the U.S. Estimates vary wildly, from at most 100,000 animals to maybe a million—300,000 on urban Oahu and an incredible 500,000 on sparsely populated Maui. That’s double the speculated cat-human ratio nationally. Isolated in the Pacific, Hawaii also has the densest concentration of threatened and endangered bird species in the country, with ground-nesting and ground-feeding water and shorebirds that are especially vulnerable to cats: It’s on islands like Hawaii’s that the few cases of cats contributing to extinctions have been documented. And the state is home to 1,200 critically endangered monk seals. Toxoplasmosis—a disease sometimes spread to wildlife by the feces of infected cats—may have contributed to the deaths of at least five.

On the mainland, wildlife and cat advocates snipe at each other, taking equally unyielding positions—that all free-roaming cats should be trapped and killed; that outdoor cats are a natural part of the landscape; that TNR is “hoarding”; that TNR alone will prevent cats preying on wildlife; that cats are the main threat to birds (versus habitat loss and window strikes and global warming and pesticides); that cat predation has no impact on dwindling songbird populations. In 2011, a Smithsonian scientist was convicted of putting rat poison and antifreeze in food left for cats outside her Washington, D.C., apartment building. In March, an Audubon contributor proposed that an over-the-counter pain reliever be used to rid the outdoors of cats (he later apologized).

Because The HSUS supports TNR, its efforts to bridge the cats-wildlife gulf are sometimes rebuffed. In 2011, when The HSUS advertised for a director of cat protection and policy, a Wildlife Society blog said that person would serve as a “wild bird executioner.” Last December, some bird experts stayed away from an HSUS conference on cats and wildlife.

In Hawaii, The HSUS is working to bring all sides together: Lohr and others from The Wildlife Society; University of Hawaii researchers including Christopher Lepczyk; Fern Duvall and other biologists from the...
state Department of Land and Natural Resources; U.S. Fish and Wildlife and National Park Service staff; representatives of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which monitors monk seals; volunteers with CatFriends and the Hawaii Cat Foundation; and representatives of local humane societies. American Bird Conservancy staff are also participating. What coalition members are coming up with could serve as a model for the rest of the country—if it can work on Hawaii, where the challenges are so great, it might work anywhere.

When the diverse group began meeting in 2010, the tensions were undeniable. Someone would refer to the need for cats to be removed from a certain area. And someone else would note that “removed” usually meant killed. Someone else still would lament that the birds he’d been monitoring had just been eaten by cats. Another would say if there was a plan to trap and kill cats, caretakers would likely sabotage the effort. There were awkward silences and less-than-enthusiastic responses as Gibson moved gamely down the agenda. Think Yankee fans and their Red Sox counterparts.

Or Rush Limbaugh listeners and Obama supporters.

But slowly, the coalition made progress. The group decided on a name: The Hawaii Coalition for the Protection of Cats and Wildlife. And participants agreed on a common goal—reduce the number of free-roaming cats. They defined underlying principles: urge people to keep pet cats indoors, prevent abandonment, promote spaying and neutering, keep cat colonies away from sensitive wildlife areas, and reduce unnecessary suffering of both cats and wildlife.

It’s important to keep perspective, Gibson says: Not all cats are good hunters. Cats don’t selectively go after native species. Most creatures cats kill are insects and lizards and rodents and nonnative birds. Beyond that, when the coalition reaches an impasse, Loyal Mehrhoff, field supervisor for the Pacific Islands office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, often helps members find a way through the conflict. He looks for a language they can share and, in a calm, reasoned way, rebuilds trust.

“We actually have quite a lot of common objectives,” says Mehrhoff, who accepts TNR as a temporary measure in the right locations. “It’s the timing and the techniques. The end game for me is protecting entire species versus individual animals. I’m not willing to let something go extinct.”

THE EMIGRATION CHALLENGE

In 2012, Lohr’s wife, Cheryl, and Lepczyk co-authored a cost-benefit analysis that was not exactly a coalition builder. By assuming that a bird’s life is worth between $1 and $15,000 while a cat’s life is worth zero, it claimed that the quickest and cheapest way to reduce Oahu’s outdoor cat population would be to trap and euthanize 30,000 cats every five years. But the study also reached a less controversial conclusion: that the most effective way to lower the number of cats outdoors is to keep people from abandoning pets. “Unless we deal with the front end—the influx of new cats … all of our management actions are essentially like triage,” says Lepczyk.

A 2011 HSUS-commissioned survey of people across Hawaii discovered the best means to get cat owners to change their behavior is by informing them of the dangers cats encounter outdoors. So the coali-
nies should not be maintained. Most of these are in the mountains, off paved roads. Along Oahu’s southern and western coasts, where the majority of people live, the coalition’s TNR groups struggle to find the money and labor to manage the population of outdoor cats.

Show up during the late afternoon and evening in parking lots around the island, at park and rides, in parks, on college campuses, around industrial zones, near beaches, and Oahu’s free-roaming cats reveal themselves, drawn by the sound of feeders’ cars or the jingle of their keys. TNR volunteers from Hawaii Cat Friends get there just ahead of the caregivers, to catch cats when they’re hungry. They lure the animals into cages with canned tuna and sardines.

One Friday night they’re at Ke‘ehi Small Boat Harbor, a cat hot spot where most of the animals are unsterilized. Kelly Carrington, a vet tech and vice president of CatFriends, waits 30 feet from a trap set next to some concrete pilings. The work requires extreme patience. “You could spend a half hour and catch eight, or a whole night and trap one,” says Carrington, who does this 10 to 20 hours each week. Three cats approach a trap to investigate, sniffing the food inside. Dusk falls. Street lights come on. At last, a young kitten goes in far enough to trip the release. Quickly and quietly, the door shuts.

That night CatFriends catches 13 animals for a spay/neuter clinic the next day. In fiscal year 2011-12, they sterilized a total of 3,200. The Hawaiian Humane Society spayed or neutered another 2,100. That leaves tens of thousands of cats to go. Carrington tries not to get discouraged, though the work never ends and she often faces hostility from people who hold her responsible for the cats. “It’s a problem to be solved,” Carrington says. “Some of it’s really crappy, and you cry like six times in a day.”

A friendly cat, likely a free-roaming or abandoned pet, trots over to HSUS Hawaii state director Inga Gibson near the ‘Aiea Loop Trail, where a colony has grown to 100 animals. Conservationists fear the cats pose a threat to wildlife. Volunteers are trapping and sterilizing to reduce cat numbers. But their efforts are thwarted by a steady influx of new arrivals.
While conservationists document the destruction of birds by cats, TNR volunteers and colony caregivers work tirelessly to help the cats and stop them from reproducing. They frequently encounter great suffering, some of it caused by people. Nine years ago, "Kurt," a retired surgeon, found a cat outside a restaurant who looked as if she had been hit with a 2x4. Her jaw was broken, her cheek drooped, her tongue hung out. She was deaf and blind, covered with burrs, and, he discovered, had a tumor growing in the back of her throat. Kurt took her home and fed her with a pipette for three or four months until she died.

Since then, seven days a week from 4 in the afternoon to 10:30 at night, he makes the rounds with his station wagon, a little dog in the front seat and cat food in the back, part of a network of volunteers who feed and sterilize and microchip cats in Honolulu. Sometimes, surfers stomp on his water containers. Recently, someone has been shooting cats and dropping them in dumpsters—he's worried that's what happened to two of the animals he feeds. At any time, he fears, officials might order him to stop. "I don't particularly care to be doing this," he says. "[But] I feel responsible for them. ... We have to get these cats fed and watered—and we have no help."

A DELICATE BALANCE
Like most caregivers, Kurt won't tell conservationists the location of his colonies. The coalition, though, provides a way for the two sides to communicate. Working with caregivers, the Feline Foundation of Maui has developed a database with the locations of around 4,000 colonies. It shares these with the Maui Humane Society, a coalition member, which in turn can check Mehrhoff's map and notify caregivers if colonies are too close to vulnerable species.

Coalition members like Dana Jones, a cat lover who helps coordinate the Hawaiian Monk Seal Response Team on Oahu, also link the two sides. She and her volunteers are watching cat colonies to make sure they aren't too close to the 35 seals who frequent beaches on the island. Those seals are important, because, like the 'Aiea Loop Trail 'elepaio, they belong to a population that's gaining numbers, while the larger species is not. The idea is to identify colonies that must be moved to decrease the risk of cat feces infecting seals with toxoplasmosis.

"We don't say, 'Cats kill monk seals, toxoplasmosis is prevalent,' because it's not," explains Jones. "It's something we want to prevent."

Already, at Jones' request, one caregiver has shifted cat feeding stations 500 yards farther from the beach, across a road. That leaves a half dozen cats near a haul-out site at White Plains and 15 cats a mile and a half from a site at the Iroquois Point housing development. Jones sees no problem with either colony, especially the one at Iroquois Point, which is well managed and stable—100 percent spayed or neutered and microchipped. The caregiver is responsible, conscientious, and most of all—since she faces eviction if caught—discreet. Even if she had to move out, she would find a way to get back into the gated community and feed the cats. "It's the right thing to do," she says, "I couldn't live with myself [otherwise]."

BORDER PATROL
The ease with which free-roaming cats can drive otherwise rational people to break rules, even the law, is described in the novel Freedom by Jonathan Franzen. To protect birds, Walter, the main character, kidnaps his neighbors' cat. Franzen says the story was inspired by his friends' real-life conundrum of what to do about a bird-eating pet who kept wandering into their yard. "It's a heart-breaking situation ... a gut-wrenching situation," says Franzen, an American Bird Conservancy board member. He hopes a change in public consciousness will finally resolve it. He sees more people keeping cats indoors. "Everyone smoked cigarettes in the 50s, and then the Surgeon General's report came out in 1964. I think something of the sort may be happening."

In the end, Walter returns "Bobby" to his owners and puts up a predator-proof fence to protect the birds. That's what the state DLNR, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and The Wildlife Society actually did in 2011 at Ka'ena Point, where the road that circles most of Oahu ends. A line of boulders forces people to leave their SUVs and hike four miles down a dirt trail, to where the Waianae Range falls into the sea. Here, a predator-proof fence stretches a third of a mile across a 59-acre peninsula, like border control for felines: Six and a half feet tall, with...
mesh fine enough to keep out 4-day-old mice, an underground bib to block burrowers, and a rolled top specifically designed to prevent cats from climbing over. A gate resembling an airlock requires visitors to close one door before opening another.

Once through, people enter the only intact coastal dune ecosystem on the main Hawaiian islands: Wedge-tailed shearwaters that used to nest all along the Oahu shoreline but are now hard to find. Laysan albatrosses that nest in only two other locations on the main islands. Monk seals.

Before the fence, predators took 15 percent of shearwater chicks each year. Some dogs killed more than 100 in a single night, and cats, rats, and mongooses regularly ate shearwater nestlings. The cat presence also sometimes led albatrosses to abandon their nests. After the fence went up, the cats disappeared—they climbed over the barrier and couldn’t get back in. Conservationists trapped mongooses and used poison to rid the peninsula of rodents. The next breeding season, scientists counted the highest number of shearwater chicks since they’ve been surveying the point—more than 3,000, up from 1,700 a year before. They observed 25 percent more albatrosses.

Lohr is heartened by the results. When he visits in November at the end of the dry season, the grass that survives amongst the dunes is yellow, and the hill overlooking Ka‘ena is barren black rock. A sere wind whistles across scrubby native plants. Yet the peninsula teems with life.

Scores of little burrows pock the sand, downy feathers at their entrances. As Lohr watches, a wedge-tailed shearwater fledgling emerges from a partially collapsed burrow, revealing a body covered in glossy black feathers. He walks out and into a shallow depression and sneezes—in his nostrils there’s a gland that concentrates the salt from ocean water so he can expel it. Perhaps today he will take to the air.

At the actual point, where the sea breaks against volcanic rock, rests a monk seal, chilled and exhausted after a night diving 200 to 300 times. He’s dragged himself through the surf at Ka‘ena into a tidal pool, where he basks in the sun, unmolested except for a woman in a bikini who’s edging over to get a closer look.

Satisfied, Lohr steps once more through the gate and slides the second door into place. He knows the fence is an expensive solution that won’t work everywhere, but he’s optimistic as he sets out in a quick, easy gait toward the road. Maybe, just maybe, the two birds at the ‘Aiea Loop Trail will reproduce, and the Oahu ‘elepaio will survive. And maybe the cats near the trailhead can find better homes—in people’s houses or places not so critical to wildlife. Buoyant, he walks. Back to unfenced Oahu, where things are not so simple, not so clear—where vulnerable birds choose hazardous spots, and one species is targeted to protect another, and there is always another cat moving into a colony—or into the wild. Back to the wide world.