

Balancing the Military Mission with Environmental Stewardship on Ka'ula Island

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



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 haul out, or 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.

The Navy has managed and used Ka'ula Island since 1952. For the past 44 years, only inert (non-explosive) ordnance has been employed 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. The remainder of the 108-acre island remains untouched.

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 over-water 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.

The Navy and other services are required by federal law to ensure military aviators can train realistically in an environment that replicates where defense missions may occur to be prepared to defend the United States, its allies, and its interests. Military readiness training and testing activities must be as realistic as possible to provide service members with the experiences necessary for success and survival on land, in the air, and on the open ocean. The training conducted at Ka'ula Island allows units to practice approaching and engaging a land target from the ocean.



Monitoring Marine Species While Maintaining Military Readiness

The Navy understands how its activities can impact sensitive environments and wildlife. The Navy conducted annual seabird surveys at Ka'ula Island from 2009 through 2019, and now conducts biannual surveys. 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 and are posted at www.navy-marine-species-monitoring.us/reporting/pacific/ for public viewing.

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 ('ewa'ewa)
- 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). Photos courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Navy.



Hawaiian monk seals (īlio holo i ka uaua) rest on the ledges of Ka'ula Island (Photo Credit: 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 to the Navy's Fleet Area Control and Surveillance Facility, Pearl Harbor.

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.