

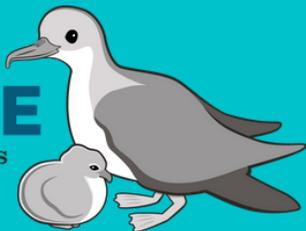


# MEET YOUR SEABIRD NEIGHBORS

By Martha Brown

STORY FOR:

**WAY OF THE  
WEDGIE**  
Survival Lessons  
from a Seabird  
Preserve



Every March, the Black Point neighborhood on Oahu's south shore begins to echo with the eerie, haunting cries that signal the return of the wedge-tailed shearwaters, or 'Ua'u kani (moaning petrel). These pigeon-sized gray and white seabirds arrive each year to dig underground burrows or nest in lava rock niches and ceramic shelters in the Freeman Seabird Preserve. That these wild birds continue to raise their chicks in a colony surrounded by houses and roads speaks to their amazing resilience and determination to survive and thrive.

Painting by Patrick Ching for  
Hawai'i Audubon's Freeman Seabird Preserve



**Above**

'Ua'u kani shearwater chick only a few days old resting in a nest built in a natural rock cave.

Wedge-tailed shearwaters, or “wedgies” for short, were nesting along Hawai'i's coast thousands of years before human settlers arrived. Here are some things to know about these feathered neighbors –

- Polynesian voyagers and fishers depended on wedge-tailed shearwaters and other ocean-going birds to lead them to land and help them find fish
- Wedgies lay only one egg a year and work together for months to feed their growing chick
- Once they leave the nest, fledgling shearwaters won't return to land for 4 or 5 years and when they do come back, they'll head straight for the site where they were born
- Wedgies can dive more than 60 feet deep to catch fish
- These birds are smelly! They have a distinctive, musty odor that may help mates identify each other
- A courting shearwater's moaning cry is so eerie it scared early sailors away from what they thought might be haunted islands. [Link to listen.](#)

Perhaps most impressive is the shearwaters' resilience. Despite the multiple human threats they encounter both at sea and along Hawai'i's shorelines, wedgies are still one of the main islands' most abundant native bird.

**"Seabirds are used as indicators for what's under the water. Wedge-tailed shearwaters are specifically associated with skipjack tuna, so when fishermen see them flying over the water, they know that tuna are near. I think to really appreciate seabirds, it's important to understand how they have helped us to discover land and food."**

By Jenn Urmston a graduate student at Hawai'i Pacific University

If you haven't seen a wedgie yet, it's not too hard to find one. Wedge-tailed shearwaters can be viewed from land as they cruise above the offshore waters, "shearing" the water's surface on long, slim, pointed wings. Onshore, you can observe them (carefully!) in breeding colonies scattered around most of the main islands and on many offshore islets. And if you're out on a fishing boat, spotting a flock of these "tuna birds" is a good sign that skipjack tuna are nearby.

At the Freeman Seabird Preserve colony we've been able to learn a lot about wedgies. We know that –

- Shearwaters are increasing in number where people have protected them from cats, dogs and rats.
- They can raise their chicks in artificial rock and ceramic shelters. That means we can provide them with more places to nest.
- From analyzing their barf we learned they eat squids and flying fish.
- They love the wind – chicks reach a peak weight almost twice as heavy as their parents in windy years with cooler ocean temperature.
- Our night spy cameras revealed that adult pairs are tender with each other, but can have intense fights with their neighbors over nesting spaces.
- Before leaving for sea the young birds walk outside their nests and exercise their new wings.



**"When I surveyed shearwaters for the first time, I remember seeing how protective of their young they were, while curious about the amazing world! My favorite part of surveying was getting so close to nature and learning about another native species and of their adventurous lives."**

By Maia Payne a student at Kalaheo High

Although we've learned a lot about wedgies, there are still many mysteries to solve. We're not sure exactly where the birds go once they're finished breeding for the year. We don't know whether they breed every year, or occasionally take a year off from raising a chick. We haven't figured out why they're so noisy or exactly what their moaning cries mean. And we don't know how long they live.

One thing we do know is that humans have made it tough for these birds to survive. Cats and dogs kill both adults and chicks. Rats and mongoose kill chicks and eat unhatched eggs. Shoreline development has destroyed many of their breeding colonies. Adult wedgies accidentally ingest plastic at sea and feed it to their young. And young birds going to sea for the first time can get disoriented by streetlights and end up falling to the ground, where they can be killed by a predator or hit by a car.

Knowing about these threats, we can all help shearwaters out. To learn more about shearwaters and the threats they face, check out the free lessons and activities available at:

[www.freemanseabirdpreserve.com](http://www.freemanseabirdpreserve.com)