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Federally protected birds are nesting in path of future Skyline rail route

By Diane Ako
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Federally protected birds are nesting in path of future Skyline rail route.

Courtesy Hui Manu o Ku

As the rail project moves into the next section of Oahu, a group of bird advocates say they're concerned about white terns, because thousands of the native Hawaiian birds have nests in urban Honolulu.

HONOLULU (Island News) -- As the rail project moves into the next section of Oahu, a group of bird advocates says it's concerned about white terns, because hundreds of the native Hawaiian birds have nests in urban Honolulu.

Honolulu Authority for Rapid Transportation (HART) will be taking down trees to put the rail up - and if it's done at the wrong time, could disturb or kill nesting terns and their chicks. The group Hui Manu O Ku is watching to ensure the birds are being accommodated.

This manu o ku or white tern is the official mascot of the rail system, Skyline. Ironically, there are many of them nesting in the metro area, directly in the path of the train that pays homage to them.

Biologist Rich Downs is a coordinator at nonprofit Hui Manu o Ku.

"We were concerned when we laid the route of the rail over the white tern breeding map, to see that it's passing through areas and very close to trees the terns use for nesting," Downs said.

Hui Manu o Ku is a nonprofit dedicated to conservation of the federally protected species, which is also the official bird of the City and County of Honolulu. It did not take long for its fears to come true.

"The first encounter with white tern nesting in trees happened on Dillingham Boulevard near the campus of Honolulu Community College," he said.

To Down's delight, HART's vendor, The Tree People, trimmed around the nest and will return later when it's safe for the birds.

Hui Manu o Ku and its partners put out guidance for how to cut trees when there's a nesting tern, which Downs says The Tree People have followed so far.

"Kudos to Skyline and to the contractors for watching out for the white terns as they build this project," he noted.

Downs is happy to credit something done right because, he laughs, one good *turn* deserves another.

Downs says there are nearly 2,500 trees affected and more than 3,300 breeding adults.

"Honolulu is the only urban environment in the entire Pacific region where the terns come on shore to breed; they normally breed in remote locations, far away from people," he said.

One of his messages is: This is an auspicious start to the construction of the rail through this section, but his group is watching.

Another message is: This is more than just an issue for HART. Downs also wants anyone trimming trees to take care around white terns.

HART Deputy Project Director Vance Tsuda says, "HART understands the sensitivities of removing trees and works closely with an arborist as well as DLNR's Forestry and Wildlife division, the Department of Parks of Recreation, The Outdoor Circle, The Tree People, and other stakeholders to mitigate any impacts of tree removal, such as disturbing actively nesting manu-o-Ku. Thanks to close collaboration, trees with nesting birds slated for removal have been postponed until the chicks have fledged. Once the chicks have fledged the work will proceed."



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By Nikki Holbrook

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