



PRESS RELEASE

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Subject: **Rapid Response Team Trained to Search for Snakes**

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Hawaii sends multi-agency team to Guam for snake search and capture training

A multi-agency team from Hawaii has just returned from three weeks of snake search and capture training on Guam. The team was comprised of officials from the Hawaii Department of Agriculture (HDOA), the Department of Land and Natural Resources-Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DLNR-DOFAW), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and the Coordinating Group on Alien Pest Species (CGAPS). The training was conducted by U.S. Geological Service Fort Collins Science Center staff located on Guam, and partner agencies in the Northern Marianas Islands working on BTS control and interdiction.

The training focused on how to conduct searches for brown treesnakes (*Boiga irregularis*) in the wild and along fencelines, which they tend to climb. This training will enable the team to function as Hawaii's rapid response team when snakes are sighted here. Hawaii and other snake-free islands like the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas (CNMI), the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and the Marshall Islands (MI) are at risk from brown treesnake invasions due to the amount of commercial and military cargo and craft movement from Guam, where brown treesnakes are common.

Brown treesnakes were introduced to Guam in the 1950's and within 20 years they decimated Guam's native and alien bird fauna. Population densities have been estimated at 13,000 per square mile in some areas.

The team also looked at trapping operations and cargo inspections for snakes using dogs. Much of that work is conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture-

Wildlife Services. Wildlife Services maintains about 3,200 snake traps around ports of exit, power stations and electrical transfer stations, and conducts searches of outbound cargo using dogs. They caught over 12,300 snakes in 2002.

Despite the numbers of brown treesnakes caught, the snakes are not commonly sighted until you really look. "There is a huge misconception that snakes are just dripping from trees on Guam. Actually, most people don't come into contact with them because the snakes are very cryptic, night-active creatures," said CGAPS public information officer Christy Martin, who participated in the training. "Believe me, snakes are not that easy to find."

What is noticeable is the absence of native birds and most alien birds--the forests are quiet. The few birds that are seen are species like the alien house sparrow which nest in close proximity to humans or in areas that are intensively trapped for snakes, and are therefore somewhat protected. In the absence of birds, the snakes have switched prey to feed on alien lizards and skinks, which reproduce quickly enough to keep the snake populations artificially high.

The training course was conducted by USGS-FORT Brown Treesnake Rapid Response program coordinator, Haldre Rogers. Rogers coordinates rapid response teams to search for snakes when they are reported on the snake-free islands of the CNMI, FSM and MI. "We are trying to raise public awareness of snake issues, particularly on snake-free islands. For example, the CNMI receives a lot of its cargo and other traffic from Guam, which is less than a half hour flight away." Rogers noted that, "There have been 57 snakes sighted and 13 snakes caught in the CNMI, but we are also seeing people wait a day, two days or even weeks before they report a snake sighting. People have to know what to do when they see a snake. They must try to capture it or kill it immediately, or call an agency that is trained to respond. If they wait even a minute, it may be too late," Rogers said. The USGS Brown Treesnake Rapid Response Program is funded by the U.S. Department of the Interior-Office of Insular Affairs.

Although the Hawaii team was trained using brown treesnakes, the lessons are transferable to many species of snakes. In Hawaii there were 236 credible snake sightings between 1990 and 2000. 63 were either captured roaming free or found dead in the wild, 74 were surrendered as pets, and 99 snakes were never recovered. 22 of the 137 were unintentional introductions, and of those, 4 were brown treesnakes.

"We are asking everyone to be aware that all snakes pose a threat to Hawaii, not just the brown treesnake. If you see a snake, contain or kill it, then call for help immediately," said Domingo Cravalho of HDOA. "By all means, be careful." Snake reports can be made to the Pest Hotline, 586-PEST (7378), and captive-held snakes can be surrendered under the State's amnesty program.

CGAPS is a statewide partnership of government agencies and NGOs working together to close the gaps in Hawaii's biosecurity. CGAPS partners meet regularly to discuss the most threatening alien pests, current actions on existing pests, and plan protection systems capable of detecting and keeping out the next silent invader.

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