

## HUMAN HAZARDS TO SEABIRDS BRIEFING

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### *Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument*

Most seabirds exhibit insular tameness, which is behavior characterized by a lack of the wariness you might observe in birds living in areas with terrestrial predators. Because of this, it sometimes appears by their actions as if humans pose no problems for them. In fact there are a number of potentially serious consequences every time a seabird colony is entered, even by experienced researchers.

Mechanical – At most seabird colonies in the central Pacific you will see birds nesting on three different levels, under the ground, on the surface, and in the shrubs and trees. At many times of the year it is difficult to walk in some parts of the colony without stepping on eggs or caving in the burrows of the petrels and shearwaters. Chicks of several of the tern species hide in vegetation so you should be careful about setting your foot where you cannot see the surface of the ground. Ground-nesting Grey-backed Terns and Brown Noddies are often most affected by your activities because they are very timid and nest in open areas that may be travel pathways. If you have occasion to have to walk in burrow areas you must be prepared to rescue a shearwater or petrel by digging if you accidentally cave in its home. Special care should be taken never to leave string or line anywhere in the colony. Seabirds have an uncanny ability to find it and get tangled in any material of this kind.

Thermal – The climate of the tropical and subtropical islands seems mild but the eggs and small chicks of all the species live a precarious life on the edge of thermal disaster. The attendance patterns of adults reflect this, with eggs and tiny chicks virtually never left unattended. Great care and attention must be given to never keeping a bird off its egg or chick for more than a few minutes. Keep this in mind if you must spend more than 3 or 4 minutes in any area. This is an issue when it is hot as well as when it is cool and wet. When first approaching a site look for any nest or adult flushed from an inconspicuous nest and plan your work to minimize keeping birds from attending their eggs or chicks.

Biological – In some colonies, one species may learn to take advantage of human disturbance to prey upon others. Frigate birds will take chicks and steal nest material from booby nests and other Frigate bird nests when the owners of the nest are frightened off by human disturbance. In colonies inhabited by finches of various species the minute an egg is exposed the finch will rush in and peck a hole and consume the contents. Unattended eggs of ground-nesting species are often eaten by shorebirds such as Ruddy Turnstones. All small seabirds are at great risk in colonies where there are introduced rats. It is possible that going up to isolated or cryptic nest and handling the eggs will provide a trail that might lead rats to the nest.

*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
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