

Project Profile: SWCA Temporarily Relocates Laysan Ducks at Midway Atoll

On the northern end of the Hawaiian archipelago, there is a small island with a big problem: mice are eating birds.

At Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, the common house mouse (*Mus musculus*) – introduced during World War II - was found to be eating albatross alive on while they sat on their nests. SWCA, in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), is working to eradicate the common house mouse from the area and mitigate mortality to the critically endangered Laysan duck (*Anas laysanensis*).

“Midway has the largest albatross colony in the world,” says **James Breeden**, Project Lead and Wildlife Biologist in SWCA’s Honolulu office. “It was terrifying when we saw that the mice were eating the albatross alive while they were sitting on their eggs. We immediately knew we needed to eradicate the mice to prevent more damage to the albatross colony. The challenge was removing the mice without impacting the non-migratory Laysan duck.”

The Laysan duck is one of the most endangered species in the Northern Hemisphere. Globally, there are fewer than 1,100 Laysan duck both in the wild and captivity. Wild populations of the species can only be found on Laysan Island, Midway Atoll, and Kure Atoll.

Midway Atoll, home to nearly one half of the known Laysan duck population, is composed of three islands: Sand, Eastern, and Spit. The common house mouse only occurs on Sand Island. To reduce non-target impacts to the Laysan duck during the mouse eradication on Sand Island, the team decided to move the ducks approximately one mile to Eastern Island, where the common house mouse does not occur.

With help from the USFWS, James and his team developed new techniques to capture and move the ducks. Using James’ unique designs, they built special devices to herd the ducks through a tunnel and into a shoot system, allowing them to carefully move the ducks without hurting them. The ducks were then given a primary feather trim so they couldn’t fly after being translocated to Eastern Island.

James’ team hopes that with the move to Eastern Island, the ducks will thrive, and the mouse-caused deaths will stop. To date, they have translocated 409 ducks safely, with plans to move up to 600 ducks total to Eastern Island. The mouse eradication also coincides with the Laysan duck’s molt schedule. Once the mice have been eradicated, the ducks will go through their flight feather molt and be able to travel freely among all islands of the atoll.