

Hawaii News

# Nene's death sparks call for action in Keaukaha

By KELSEY WALLING Hawaii Tribune-Herald | Tuesday, March 7, 2023, 12:05 a.m.

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Photo courtesy of Jordan Lerma/Nene Research and Conservation C10, or Wisdom, walks near Lokowaka Pond in Keaukaha.

Nonprofits and native bird enthusiasts are pleading with government officials for help mitigating traffic in Keaukaha after a nene was killed by a driver last weekend.

Kumiko and Patrick Mattison were notified Friday night that a driver killed one of the five adult nene that have nested in Lokowaka Pond in Keaukaha.

The Mattisons started the nonprofit, 'Aina Ho'ola Initiative, and have been working since January 2021 to restore Lokowaka Pond for native bird populations. The couple was excited to see nesting and molting nene utilize the area this year.

A female nene tagged as C10, or Wisdom, and a male nene tagged as 59K, or Kamal'u, nested and hatched two goslings in Lokowaka and were feeding at the pond as well as crossing Kalaniana'ole Street to feed at James Kealoha Beach Park ("Four Mile").

The Mattisons recently saw that there was only one gosling with the pair and have attributed the other gosling's death to a cat or mongoose.

And then on Friday, C10 was struck and killed by a driver who allegedly overtook a car that had stopped for nene attempting to cross the street.

"Ever since nene came back to the pond, we have been asking and asking the county to put in flashing lights or speed tables to help slow down drivers and notify them that nene are in the area," Kumiko Mattison said. "These requests were unanswered, and what we knew was going to happen, happened. They were unwilling to help the nene, and now a mother is dead."

C10 was relocated from Kauai to the Big Island in 2004 by the state to help repopulation efforts. She was estimated to be about 20 years old.

While it is unknown how long they have been mated, C10 and 59K have been seen together for most of their lives, according to Jordan Lerma, a biologist with the nonprofit, Nene Research and Conservation.

The state Department of Land and Natural Resources Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement, or DOCARE, removed C10 from the road after she was hit Friday night. DOCARE has not yet responded to calls from the Tribune-Herald.

After learning that a nene had been hit Friday night, Lerma went to Lokowaka the morning after and saw that 59K and one gosling kept crossing Kalaniana'ole looking for C10.

"On Friday night, DOCARE took the nene off the road and were unable to identify which nene had been hit, due to the gory death," Lerma said. "Usually after a mate dies, the other tends to stick around the area. 59K and a gosling were 10 feet away from where the nene was hit, so I knew it was C10."

Lerma looked after the nene for about 30 minutes and witnessed two cars nearly hit the pair. He said he then called Raymond McGuire with the DLNR's Division of Forestry and Wildlife, or DOFAW, for help.

"The fact was they were either going to be hit by another car, or cause an accident. DOFAW got involved and made the decision to move them to a protected area off Saddle Road," Lerma said. "I'm so thankful for Raymond and the fact he took part of his off time to relocate 59K and the gosling away from the dangerous area."

The two nene are now living at the Hawaii Island Nene Sanctuary, which is a protected area on the lower slopes of Maunakea.

In light of the nene's death, Cyrus Johnsen, the public information officer for Mayor Mitch Roth, said the county Parks and Recreation Department is working to put more nene crossing signs in the spots where nene are highly prevalent in Keaukaha to help notify drivers.

"We are working with biologist Raymond McGuire on how to best notify the public about nene in the area," Johnsen said. "We're talking through issues, and I know folks want speed bumps, but it's not necessarily that easy. We're also working to find out if Kalaniana'ole is a state or county road."

Although the county is working on putting up more signs, Lerma and the Mattisons said they have yet to hear back from Roth about the nene's death.

"We honestly have more lawyers on our team than biologists (at Nene Research and Conservation), and we're trying to see if the state or county is accountable for this street in Keaukaha," Lerma said. "The truth is the state spent millions bringing these nene, which include C10 and 59K, from Kauai to the Big Island, and one of them got hit. There is no accountability being taken for this and the many other nene that have been killed."

Lerma said he has witnessed numerous cars driving over the shoulder of Kalaniana'ole and is worried that these accidents will continue happening and escalate without proper intervention.

There have been sightings of 17 banded nene who utilize the stretch of land between Lili'uokalani Park and Gardens and Kings Landing, where at least five nene have died this year, according to Nene Research and Conservation.

"It's just sad to see 'Aina Ho'ola and other nonprofits work so hard to restore these wetlands and to watch native species come back to these areas just to see them be killed," Lerma said. "It's a dangerous stretch of road, and it's only a matter of time before a human is hit."

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For those that may not know: Nene (Canadian Geese that once lost their way probably in a storm) were almost extinct here in Hawaii. The Shipman family of Puna, particularly Herbert Cornelius Shipman (1892–1976), took over the W.H. Shipman Company in 1943, is best known for breeding the endangered Hawaii goose (known as nēnē in Hawaii, Branta sandvicensis). He started with four birds in 1918 at his coastal Puna Shipman estate, eventually moving the breeding program to the family's 'Ainahou Ranch after the 1946 tsunami almost decimated his existing flocks. He is credited with saving the breed and keeping the nēnē from extinction. By the 1960's the Nene population was counted at over 500. The National Geographic Society gave the family an award for single handedly saving the State Bird. The story is told in the National Geographic, November 1965, article titled "Saving the Nene, World's Rarest Goose".

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