

Rat removal planned for remote island

By Jan TenBruggencate
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State and federal officials plan to use poison and traps to eradicate rats and rabbits from Lehua Island in hopes of restoring native vegetation and improving habitat for the 16 species of sea birds that nest there.

Lehua — a small, crescent-shaped island north of Ni'ihau — is a state refuge for birds. Polynesian rats and European rabbits are not native to the island, but both species have been there for generations. Researchers say the rats feed on birds and their eggs, as well as on plants and seeds, while rabbits primarily take a toll on the plants they eat.

The island has little vegetation, which is partly blamed on rabbits. But no one knows how dense Lehua's vegetation once was, because the rabbits were there when the first botanical surveys were done.

"The removal of rats and rabbits and subsequent native plant restoration is believed to be the first step to restoring the ecosystem of Lehua Island, increasing seabird, plant, insect and marine habitats," says a draft environmental impact statement on eradication and restoration plans.

Scientists propose using a rat poison to remove the rats during summer, when the rodent population is down and the low chance of rain reduces the possibility that the pesticide will flow into the sea. Hunting and trapping would be used to remove rabbits during winter, when bird nesting is lowest.

After the animals are removed from the island, native vegetation would be planted to supplement natural regeneration.

A draft environmental impact statement on the eradication and ecosystem restoration proposal is available at the Web site for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, pacificislands.fws.gov.

The agency is accepting public comments through July 8 in care of Chris Swenson, project biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pacific Islands Office, 300 Ala Moana Blvd., Room 3-122, Honolulu HI 96850.