



Ronald L. Walker (1932 -2012): Wildlife Biologist and Practitioner of the Art of the Possible

By John T. Harrison

"When it comes to a problem in wildlife management, don't go off the deep end in some esoteric, idealistic approach to solving the problem. Practice the art of the possible. I never forgot that...that's what kind of guided me throughout my career."

Ron Walker was a treasure. The qualities of perspective, wisdom, knowledge, humor, and overarching pragmatism that Ron brought to a conversation enriched the edifying value of his contributions. In choosing paths forward, we frequently seek guidance from experience, and the span of Ron's 53-year career in Hawai'i wildlife management engendered lessons that he shared freely, benefiting all those whose lives he touched.

Born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Ron came to Hawai'i at the age of 17, when his father took a job on the Big Island. As a high school senior in Hilo, he spent time with his father, whose telecommunications job included work at a remote station on Parker Ranch. Having access to a horse, Ron rode widely over the ranch, and he attributed this exposure to the fields, pastures, and forests of the Big Island as the source of his interest in wildlife management as a profession.

During his first summer on Hawai'i, Ron got a job as a laborer for Parker Ranch, doing a variety of manual labor tasks, and it was there that he met State Wildlife Biologist Dick Woodworth, who was conducting pheasant counts on the ranch. Ron became good friends with Dick, who enlisted Ron's help in keeping a notebook to record birds of all types that he encountered in specific areas of the ranch, a task he continued for two summers. As Ron's interest in nature intensified, Woodworth offered to help him find work in Hawaiian wildlife management, once his military service and college work were complete. After a tour of duty in the Navy during which he worked as a cryptographer in Washington DC,



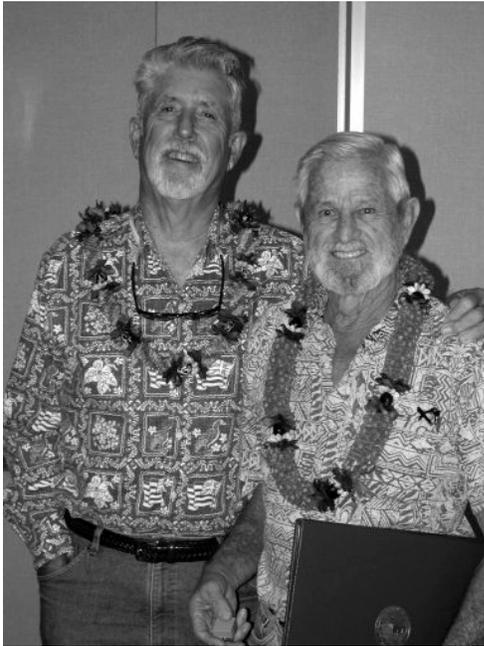
Ron Walker on a catamaran cruise offshore of the Freeman Seabird Preserve with the Hawaii Audubon Society. Photo courtesy of John Harrison

Ron contacted Woodworth, who recommended him to his alma mater, Oregon State University, where Ron completed a curriculum in fish and wildlife management.

Returning to the Big Island in 1957, Ron got his first job in the Territorial Division of Fish and Game with Dave Woodside, who had worked with George C. Munro (both George and Dave were founders of Hawai'i Audubon Society). Dave's focus was on endangered species, and he assigned Ron first to conduct an ecological survey of Nene, and then to assist at the Nene Captive Propagation Facility in Pohakuloa. Speaking of those early efforts in an interview with the Wildlife Society in October 2011, Ron was characteristically self-effacing, noting that his first season produced a grand total of three Nene. During subsequent years, rearing efforts at Pohakuloa steadily expanded, and by the late 60s, the facility was producing over a hundred Nene annually.

Ron next was assigned to lead the Mouflon-feral sheep hybridization program at Pohakuloa. Because of their affinity for large herds, feral sheep were perceived to pose a significant threat to the Big Island ecosystem, and the intent of the hybridization program was to imbue the Big Island sheep with the more solitary habits of the European Mouflon, thereby reducing the pressure of sheep grazing on Mauna Kea. During this time, Dave Woodside served as one of Ron's most influential mentors, teaching him not only Hawaiian names for plants and animals, but fundamental ecological principals and permutations of native habitat in the Mauna Kea area. At this early phase of his career,

continued on page 2



*Ron Walker and Dave Woodside at a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service awards ceremony.
Photo courtesy of Craig Rowland.*

Ron lived for four years at Pohakuloa in a State Park cabin that he himself built.

After five years working for Fish and Game on the Big Island, Ron joined the O‘ahu-Kaua‘i District of the Division, beginning what he referred to as the second phase of his State career. By this time, State government reorganization in 1961 had resulted in creation of the Department of Land and Natural Resources composed of the Division of Forestry and Wildlife (incorporating Forestry and Fish and Game), along with Divisions of Aquatic Resources, Land Management, Conveyances, and Water and Land Development. Consolidation of these divisions placed greater emphasis on the growing resource management responsibilities of the Department. One of Ron’s major projects at this time was a cooperative program with the US Department of Agriculture and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to establish populations of eleven species of game birds from all over the world in Hawai‘i for hunting.

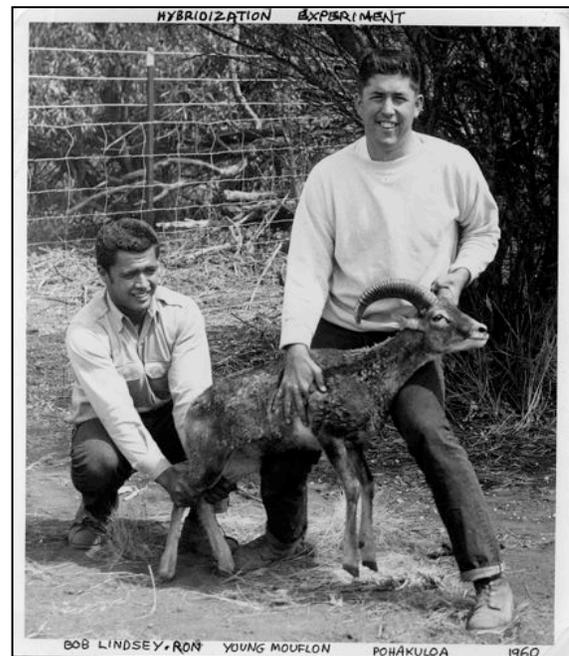
Observing impacts of alien species on native flora and fauna had a deep and lasting effect on Ron. In his 2011 interview, he returns several times to the observation that the biggest change in wildlife management over the course of his career has been the enactment of statutory and regulatory controls relating to environmental impacts, to endangered species, and to the protection of vulnerable organisms across the full range of Hawaiian ecosystems. Ron noted that at the time he started with the Division, controls over species importation were “very lax and very cursory”, and under current policies, it’s likely that none of the game birds as well as other imports such as the cattle egret or the Guamanian Swiftlet would have been permitted entry to Hawai‘i. However, resource management responsibilities of the Department of Land and Natural Resources include maintaining populations of game animals and supporting public hunting programs, and these responsibilities were

specifically identified elements of Ron’s terms of employment. At the same time, his experiences and observations as a field biologist brought him into daily contact with evidence of the harmful effects of game animals on native habitat. As Ron puts it, “I had to, on the one hand, say, ‘I support the Department’s, the State’s position to maintain the sheep for the hunters’, and yet I knew that was a bad idea. I’m still struggling with that.”

Ron was an accomplished wildlife manager, and while his work entailed extensive administrative responsibilities, it’s not surprising to those who knew him that he most enjoyed the hands-on field management and research part of his job. As the arc of his career rose to higher levels of responsibility, periodic field surveys, including repeated excursions to the Northwest Hawaiian Islands in the 60s, leadership of the Hawaiian Waterbirds Recovery Team in the 70s, and production of Hawai‘i’s first waterbird recovery plan, were cherished accomplishments. But despite his preference for fieldwork over administration, when a bureaucratic situation arose, Ron was a master of elegant solutions, as demonstrated by his resolution of the wallaby problem.

As a result of the escape from a private zoo of a breeding pair in 1916, there is a small population of brush-tailed rock wallabies in Kalihi Valley on O‘ahu. Although the animals are non-native, their foraging is mostly on Christmas berry, which is a nuisance invasive, and they do not appear to pose any threat to native species. The location of the colony is remote, and access is difficult. However, the endemic population of wallabies in their native Australia presently is threatened, and concern for the survival of the Hawaiian colony led to the call for some form of protection from hunting. The question that confronted Ron, as the State wildlife manager

continued on page 3



*Ron Walker and Bob Lindsey working on mouflon feral sheep hybridization at Pohakuloa on the Big Island, 1960.
Photo courtesy of Pam Gibson.*

responsible for protecting the wallabies, was how most expediently to ensure their protection.

Ron knew that direct protection for the colony would arise from enacting a law with that specific purpose. However, the legislative process is both complicated and slow, and it favors addressing issues that are more generalized than the specific protection of an unusual animal. Alternatively, working within an existing regulatory framework, Ron proposed instead to declare the wallaby a “game mammal”, and then to permanently close the season on wallabies through the provisions of Title 13 Chapter 123 Section 12 of the DLNR Administrative Rules. While acknowledging this strategy to be an evident “subterfuge”, Ron saw an administrative solution that could be implemented within existing Department procedures, thereby avoiding the delays and pitfalls of the Legislature. Problem solved!

When asked what specific skill set was required to be a great wildlife manager, Ron responded pragmatically, based on his own experience. “Wildlife management, to a large extent, is people management. If you can’t get the ear of the people, and by that I mean those in the field, wildlife biologists, environmentalists, and the general public, then you’re not going to have a successful program. You have to let them know what you’re doing and be very open and honest about it.”

Ron worked for the State DLNR and its predecessor agencies for 37 years. However, in the early 90s, State government underwent another reorganization, this one aimed at cost cutting in the face of budget constraints. Having worked for 2 years as Acting Administrator of the Division of Forestry and Wildlife, Ron was invited by DLNR Director Bill Paty to take the job permanently, an offer that Ron declined, not wishing to assume a purely administrative job. Instead, he retired from DLNR on the last day of December, 1994. However, after what he described as “five days of total boredom”, he joined the US Fish and Wildlife Service on January 6, 1995 and worked for the next 8 years on refuges, land acquisitions for the federal government, ecological services, and the grants-in-aid program. By 2003, in his words, he, “was running out of steam, I guess you could say, in terms of my dedication to bureaucracies, so I semi-retired.” While he maintained a very low level of paid effort with Fish and Wildlife, his volunteer activities for the agency expanded greatly, and he became an active volunteer for many other organizations as well, lending his considerable talents to the Nature Conservancy of Hawai‘i, Kaelepulu Wetland Sanctuary, Na Ala Hele, the Hawai‘i Nature Center, the Hanauma Bay Nature Preserve, and, of course, Hawai‘i Audubon Society (HAS).

For many years, Ron had a desk in a quiet corner of the HAS office on Richards Street, where he spent countless hours volunteering as an archivist, historian, and resident expert on Hawaiian forest and seabirds. He served many terms as a Director of HAS, in addition to similar service on the Boards of Ahahui Malama I ka Lokahi and the Hawai‘i Botanical Society. He also was Vice-President of the Hawai‘i Conservation Alliance. Knowing his preference for field as opposed to office

work, I always admired his dedication to so many tedious yet critical tasks involving paper, and HAS to this day benefits, not only from the organizational and archival support he provided over many years, but from the many personal monetary donations he made that helped the Society through the particularly difficult financial times of the recent past.

Yet one had only to enjoy the privilege of working alongside Ron out in the field to really appreciate what an extraordinary man he was. For every archival legacy he has left, there are countless special places where his sweat equity and his prodigious knowledge are on glorious display in the panoply of natural beauty and restored habitat that supports thriving native communities. Countless students, interns, and starting wildlife professionals have enjoyed Ron’s supporting encouragement at the trailheads of lifetime journeys of natural discovery and conservation efforts, and each of them carries on his legacy.

For me, the quintessential memory of Ron is the recollection of a recent twilight evening, when an HAS group was returning from a catamaran cruise offshore of the Freeman Seabird Preserve at Black Point, O‘ahu. The excursion had been organized to observe the Wedge-tailed Shearwaters wheeling in flight over the ocean as they returned to a nesting area that has been restored and protected, thanks to efforts by Ron and many others. As darkness fell, and the boat turned back to Honolulu, Ron and Charlotte sat together in the stern, with a full moon rising behind them. It had been an extraordinary outing, made more memorable by Ron’s sharing of his knowledge of the birds and their ecology, as they soared gracefully around us. Ron’s arm was around Charlotte’s shoulders, and both of their faces radiated a peace and happiness that reflected the quiet satisfaction of a life’s work dedicated to the love of each other and of the majestic natural world made better by his dedication.

We miss you, Ron. A hui hou.



Ron and Charlotte Walker on a catamaran cruise observing Wedge-tailed Shearwaters flying to shore. Photo courtesy of John Harrison.

Remembering Ron Walker

Stories, memories, and photos from friends and colleagues

Wendy Johnson

HAS Executive Director

I knew Ron Walker in the last fifteen years of his life as a man of remarkable strength, humor and charity. He was a protector of wildlife and wild places who was always ready to lend a hand to a cause he believed in. Ron adopted many local causes and had many ways of helping. These ranged from relentless chain saw attacks on kiawe brush at Black Point to gentle discussions with birdwatchers who contacted the Hawaii Audubon Society with questions about their latest observations. These callers were always referred to Ron, who after his "retirement" spent many hours at the HAS office answering queries, filing, packing merchandise orders, drawing and writing. It was with great pleasure one day that I had the opportunity to overhear Ron on the phone trying to convince a caller from Mililani that she had not just seen a hummingbird in her back yard.



Ron Walker with Laysan Albatross doing field work with Rob Shallenberger at Kaula Rock, a Navy bombing target and seabird colony, in June 1980. Photo courtesy of Rob Shallenberger.

Craig Rowland

*Conservation Partnerships Division,
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*

I worked with Ron in the USFWS Conservation Partnerships Program in Honolulu at the end of his USFWS career. He was a no-nonsense kind of guy. Maybe that comes from working for the government for so many years and from having worked on conservation in Hawaii for so long, but he really wanted to keep things straightforward and effective. I remember once, when he was still with DOFAW and a member of the Nene Recovery Action Group, encouraging the group to make clear, bold recommendations based on the current state of knowledge. He said something to the effect that "you are the experts; make the recommendations you think are right." He was also a very humble guy; always downplaying his contributions to an effort, but always ready and willing to make a significant contribution. I enjoyed working with him and getting to know him and his wife Charlotte over the years. He will be missed by many of us.



Ron Walker, Lance Tanino, Diane Drigot and others during the 1987 Honolulu Christmas Bird Count at Kane'ohe/Mokapu Peninsula sectors. Ron served as a sector 9 leader for 25+ years. Ron, Diane, and Lance have all done the CBCs for 25+ years thanks to Ron. Photo courtesy of Lance Tanino.

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Phyllis Ha

*Sustainable Fisheries Division, PIRO
NOAA Fisheries*

Ron was a consummate professional and gentleman biologist/illustrator. He helped me with biological evaluation fieldwork and the planning for establishing the Oahu Forest National Wildlife Refuge as well as surveys in Haleiwa and at James Campbell. He was always too kind, willing to work hard, support the team, and share his knowledge with others. I will always remember of the twinkle in his eyes, his laughter, beautiful art work, love for Charlotte, and friendship.

Mike Silbernagle

Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
O'ahu NWR Complex

Upon my arrival in Hawai'i 21 years ago, as the new Wildlife Biologist for the O'ahu National Wildlife Refuge Complex, I was advised to meet and get to know Ron, who then worked for the State Division of Forestry and Wildlife. We met, he became a mentor on Hawai'i wetland matters, and at the same time we became friends. A relationship I will cherish forever. Ron's easygoing demeanor and wealth of knowledge about Hawai'i's flora and fauna were invaluable to me. Being the haole from the mainland, I felt I could talk to Ron without being misunderstood, since all I wanted to do was learn about the natural resources he was so familiar with and had spent decades getting to know and love.

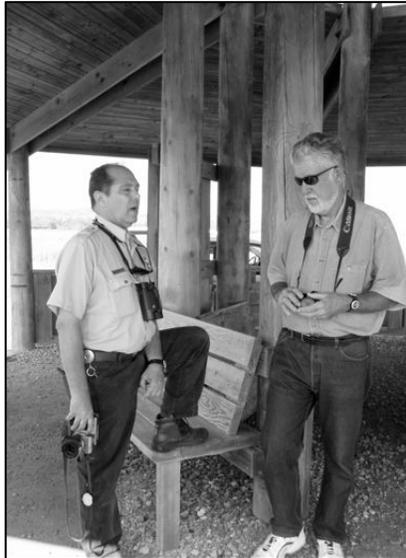
After Ron's retirement from the State, we had many memorable field excursions on the wetland refuges of the Complex, since Ron became a refuge volunteer contributing countless hours helping refuge management projects. We both continued to learn from and enjoy each other's company. Ron was a dedicated outdoorsman and conservationist who would undertake any assignment as long as he felt it benefitted the environment. I can still visualize Ron removing invasive mangrove trees and well established Pluchea bushes from the wetlands. He felt providing opportunities for

young people to experience wildlife management areas and gain an appreciated for nature, wild places, and wild things, was important.

We shared this belief and Ron worked to maintain visitor services facilities on the Complex in support of this. The O'ahu NWR Complex is fortunate to have had such a dedicated volunteer as Ron. He had a special relationship with all our staff.

I truly believe, however, his favorite event was the State Waterbird Survey. He would show up in the morning darkness with a smile on his face, ready to survey birds regardless of the weather. I can't remember a time when he would not be on our North Shore O'ahu team during the twice annual event. I believe that after working his way to an Administrative level, his passion was still field work. In his eyes, this is where the real work was done. His immense resource knowledge paid tribute to this since you don't learn details, behaviors and requirements of plants and animals and their environment without becoming one with them, which Ron did throughout his life.

I can only thank him for taking me under his wing 21 years ago to help me understand Hawai'i wetlands and for his continued friendship over the years. He will be missed by all, myself included, but his wildlife legacy will live forever.



Ron Walker and Mike Silbernagle at James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge.
Photo courtesy of Mike Silbernagle.

Upcoming Field Trips, Volunteer Opportunities & Events

Habitat Restoration at Freeman Seabird Preserve Every Saturday, January through March, 9am to Noon

Help maintain native plants and remove invasive plants trash and debris. We will meet every Saturday at Triangle Park near Diamond Head at 8:45am to carpool to the site. Bring drinking water, and sun and rain protection.

Educational Service Trip to `Ihi` ihilauakea Crater Saturday, January 12th from 8:00am-1:00pm

We will meet at the Hanauma Bay picnic area then hike around the crater that makes up Hanauma Bay to the endangered `ihi`ihi (*Marsilea villosa*) habitat to learn about conservation in Hawaii, endemic plants, maybe see waterfowl, and remove invasive species. Bring plenty of water, sunscreen, and sturdy footwear. Please RSVP to Meagan at hiaudsoc@pixi.com or call 808-528-1432 as space is limited.

World Wetlands Day 2013

Saturday, February 2nd from 9:00am-1:30pm

Hāmākua-Kawainui Marsh Complex, 1110 Kailua Road
Take a tour of the wetlands, listen to live music, and eat delicious local food!

Kayaking and Habitat Restoration at Mokulua Islet Mid-February, Date TBD

Kayak to the Mokulua Islets seabird preserve and remove invasive species and plant natives with Amarisa Marie, the Offshore Island Biologist with DLNR. Kayaks and lunch will be provided by Kailua Kayaks and Sailboards. For details and to RSVP, email Meagan at hiaudsoc@pixi.com or call 808-528-1432.

Lyon Arboretum Habitat Protection Saturday, March 16th from 8:00am – 2:00pm

Lyon Arboretum, 3860 Manoa Road
Learn about high-threat invasive species, remove weeds, and help protect Oahu's unique ecosystems and native wildlife with the O'ahu Invasive Species Committee in partnership with Lyon Arboretum. Bring a daypack, water, lunch, raingear, and hiking shoes and be prepared to work off-trail in uneven terrain. Please RSVP at hiaudsoc@pixi.com or call 808-528-1432, as space is limited.

Office, Outreach, & Education Volunteers Needed

We have long-term and short-term opportunities. Please email Meagan at hiaudsoc@pixi.com for details.

Oscar W. (Wally) Johnson
Affiliate Professor, Department of Ecology
Montana State University

Many Hawaii Audubon members know of the Kōlea research that my colleagues and I have been conducting in Hawaii for over 30 years. We've learned a great deal about these remarkable birds including their routes, flight speeds, and flight times during nonstop migratory journeys to/from Alaska. What you probably don't know is that this project might never have happened without Ron Walker who made the necessary contacts to set things in motion. Back in 1979, when the study was conceived, I met with Ron in his office at DOFAW and he graciously offered to help me. Given Ron's position in the wildlife section of DOFAW and his detailed knowledge of Oahu bird habitats, he was clearly the key person at this critical stage in the planning. The challenge then was to find accessible wintering grounds where there were populations of plovers that could be studied from year-to-year. Ron scheduled me in for a day of exploration and off we went to look over possibilities. By the end of that tour, four sites had emerged as ideal places where various portions of the study could be done – Bellows Air Force Station, the Punchbowl, Hickam, and the Marine Base at Kaneohe. During the next few days with Ron providing liaison, access was arranged at all four locations. Notably, Ron was a "Kōleophile" like me and keenly interested in plover ecology. As a state wildlife biologist he had participated in earlier studies involving estimates of island Kōlea populations and the habitats in which the birds were wintering. These findings were published as in-house DOFAW reports in 1964 and 1972. Aside from plover research, a close personal friendship evolved between the Johnsons and the Walkers. Over the years, whenever Pat and I were in Hawaii working on the birds, we enjoyed wonderful get-togethers with Ron and Charlotte. We will sorely miss him!

Lynn Lonergan
Sister of Ron Walker
Tempe, Arizona

My visits to O'ahu were infrequent, however, they were treasured as my brother and I were very close, but the miles between us deterred a lot of visiting.

I was always particularly interested in his activities with birds, and due to him, became a bird watcher at our Desert Botanical Gardens here in Arizona. Ron sent me two books to help identify the birds in my local area and my section of the country, plus I participated in a bird count here once a year. My interest in birds remains as I watch for sightings frequently. I also refer to my bird books if I travel and have sighted a couple of wonderful specimens over the years.

My visits with my brother included a couple of excursions to the Kawai Nui Marsh where he hiked with me to explore and share his experiences there. I saw the inhabitants he was talking about and I loved every minute of our time there. I was especially pleased to see a seating area where Ron gave lectures to the children and other folks he had on tour.



*Ron Walker conducting mongoose control at Kawai Nui Marsh in 2005.
Photo courtesy of Pam Gibson.*

I am honored to have a hand drawn picture by Ron of the endangered Nene bird on a wall in my home. Ron had so many talents, yet he was a humble man and dedicated to his passion of the preservation of wildlife.

Hawai'i Audubon Society Membership/Donation Form

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Sixty Years Later

Hawaii Wildlifer Still Working to Preserve the ‘Aina

By Pamela Gibson, gibsonp002@hawaii.rr.com
Written January, 2010

In 2003, when wildlife biologist, manager, and administrator Ronald Walker retired after thirty-seven years with the State Department of Land and Natural Resources and eight with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, he was nowhere close to hanging up his hat. This dedicated wildlifer’s aloha ‘aina pulled him immediately into volunteer work, happy to continue the work he does best; protecting Hawaii’s creatures and their habitat.



Ron Walker at Green Sea Turtle hatching at French Frigate Shoals, 1966. Photo courtesy of Pam Gibson.

A robust outdoorsman at 77, Walker still prefers field to desk work. “The real thrill’s always been actual contact with the animals; viewing them, tagging them, even writing reports about them,” Walker says. “I enjoy doing that and passing on what I learned.”

One major thing Walker learned was how best to solve the unique wildlife challenges facing Hawaii, the endangered species capital of the world. Many of the endemic species found here exist nowhere else. Their unique ways of adapting to Hawaii’s subtropical environment (similar only to Florida in the mainland) make them especially vulnerable to

invasive species against which they have few natural defenses. “In most other states, the game animals are native to the state,” Walker says. Not so in Hawaii, where no endemic game animals exist and non-natives brought in invariably cause problems. Witness the non-native pigs, which hollow out tree

fern logs and create puddles where mosquitoes breed and transmit diseases to native birds, and the feral domestic sheep, which used to devastate the forests of the extinct volcano Mauna Kea.

Walker’s wildlife experience is extensive. He worked in wetland planning, research and management covering most of the main Hawaiian Islands. In the 1960s, he joined biological surveys of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. His field survey work includes game birds and

mammals, forest birds, waterbirds, seabirds, and shorebirds. In the 1970s he led the Hawaiian Waterbird Recovery Team, which produced the first waterbird recovery plan. He coordinated programs for public hunting, federal grants-in-aid, capital improvements, land acquisition, information and education, and endangered species restoration. He has served on several Board of Directors for private conservation organizations and actively volunteers for seven such organizations as well as for his former state and federal employers. Outgoing and personable, Walker makes friends wherever he goes.

An illustrator who honed his craft in college where his detailed drawings of fish, plants and mammals helped him learn and earn good grades in botany and biology classes, Walker draws logos, pictures for T-shirts, field signs, refrigerator magnets, tattoos, brochures, maps, and more. But his best illustrative work is the clear picture he draws of a life dedicated to preserving wildlife and its habitat.



Ron Walker with seabirds and Sooty Terns at French Frigate Shoals, 1999. Photo courtesy of Pam Gibson.

Donate to the Ron Walker Memorial Fund

A generous donation has been received by the Society for the purpose of establishing the Ron Walker Memorial Fund in support of HAS activities and educational programs. If you would like to contribute to the Ron Walker Memorial Fund please send a check or cash to:

Hawaii Audubon Society
850 Richards St.
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Donations of \$50 or more receive a 5x7 or 8x10 matted print of your choice of one of Ron’s six drawings below.



Ron Walker at James Campbell National Wildlife Refuge. Photo courtesy of Michael D. Silbernagle.





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Calendar of Events

Every Saturday, January through March, 9am to Noon
Habitat Restoration at Freeman Seabird Preserve

Saturday, January 12th, 8:00am-1:00pm
Educational Service Trip to `Ihi` ihilauakea Crater

Saturday, February 2nd, 9:00am-1:30pm
World Wetlands Day 2013

Mid-February, Date TBD
Kayaking and Habitat Restoration at Mokulua Islet

Saturday, March 16th, 8:00am – 2:00pm
Lyon Arboretum Habitat Protection

Table of Contents

Ronald L. Walker (1932 -2012): Wildlife Biologist
and Practitioner of the Art of the Possible.....1

Remembering Ron Walker: Stories, memories, and
photos from friends and colleagues.....4

Upcoming Field Trips & Volunteer Opportunities....5

Sixty Years Later: Hawaii Wildlifer Still Working to
Preserve the `Aina.....7

Donate to the Ron Walker Memorial Fund.....7