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## Counting Crows

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Destination: [Hawaii Island](#)

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I'm standing on one side of a window in the library of the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center. On the other side of the glass, two crows, a couple, go about their day. The male presents the back of his head to the female. She reaches over, opens her bill and plucks out a feather. He flinches but presents his head to her again, and she reaches, opens and plucks. It's molting season, a prickly, itchy time for a bird.

A little help snagging those feathers in hard to reach places is greatly appreciated.



According to Kara, research associate with KBCC, pairs that like each other, do everything together. They hold each other's feet. They follow each other around. They flip on their sides and play. They feed each other, even share their favorite food if the other asks for it. And, when it comes time to molt, they preen each other.

These birds may be crows, but they are not your ordinary crows. They are more closely related to ravens, than crows, interestingly. Their size. Their heavy bill. Their walk. Their morphology.

'Alala went extinct in the wild in 2002, but as of the summer of 2011, 95 are living in captivity at KBCC. They represent the future, the hope of *corvus hawaiiensis*, known in English as the Hawaiian Crow and in Hawaiian as *'alala*.

Jack Jeffrey, long time resident of Hawaii Island and retired biologist with U.S. Fish & Wildlife, says there were once 4 or 6 different species of crow in Hawaii.



There is no one cause for the loss of 'alala, considered 'aumakua or family gods to some Hawaiians, but, like most situations, a variety and complex set of situations arose that led to the demise of the 'alala population in the wild. Many of those causes still exist today, including habitat degradation, predators and, according to author Mark Jerome Walters in *Seeking the Sacred Raven*, human egos and failed politics.

The plight of the 'alala is not new to Hawaii's endemic bird species. An estimated half of Hawaii's 140 historically-recorded endemic bird species are extinct, gone forever.

In a way, the 'alala themselves are putting pressure on humans to resolve the issues associated with their survival, as, for the past three years, the 'alala breeding success has caused quite a stir and generated a bit of excitement in the 'alala community.

Historically, KBCC birds produce between one and five crow chicks a year. Then, in 2009, eight chicks hatched. In 2010, the number grew to 12. And, in 2011, 19 chicks hatched.

Kara attributes the success to three or four "rock star breeding females pumping out more chicks in a few years than any female 'alalala in the course of lifetime."

As you can imagine, KBCC carefully monitors 'alala production--in person and via 24/7 video recording. 'Alala females lay four bluish-green eggs with black flecks per clutch, but KBCC is careful not to wear out their rock stars, allowing only three clutches per year.

We spent approximately 20 minutes observing this pair of 'alala. After most everyone else had filed out of the room, I stayed, enamored. Still captivated by something about these birds, maybe the glint in their eyes or the way they tilted their heads to gaze at us out of the corners of their eyes, like maybe they had a secret to share or knew something we did not.

KBCC started the 'alala breeding program with 12 birds brought in from the wild. DNA testing showed those 12 to be “closer than cousins,” not optimal for a captive breeding situation. And, yet, there are no deformities in the 95 'alala at KBCC. “The amount of healthy birds hatching is amazing,” Kara said. “I feel like we just passed one of our first genetic bottlenecks.”

Of course, all that success means some day, sooner rather than later, it will be time to release some 'alala into the wild again, and on that day, I am sure many eyes will be watching--wide open, as well as out of the corners of eyes.

KBCC is not open to the public. It is located behind locked gates at the end of a long gravel road somewhere above the village of Volcano on Hawaii Island, one of two centers operated in Hawaii by The Zoological Society of San Diego as part of the Hawaii Endangered Bird Conservation Program. The goal of the program and some dozen research associates and interns at the center is to aid endangered bird species in establishing self-sustaining populations in the wild using captive breeding and reintroduction methods. To that end, the center has worked with many of Hawaii's most endangered birds, in addition to 'alala, including puaiohi, palila, 'akohekohe, Maui parrotbill and Hawaii creeper.

I visited the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center with another group, [The Kohala Center's](#) “Circle of Friends.” KBCC does hold periodic open houses, too, and conducts tours for school groups. To follow their efforts, read the [Keauhou Bird Conservation Blog](#).

To learn more about 'alala and the efforts behind saving it, read *Seeking the Sacred Raven* by Mark Jerome Walters