

Beware the Call of the Coqui



The coqui frog (left), an invasive species that has established populations on Hawai'i Island and should be reported if it is ever heard on O'ahu, and the greenhouse frog (right) that is already widespread on O'ahu and the other main islands. Photo credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture

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Night falls on O'ahu, but the evening silence is broken by a sound that most residents have heard only on public service announcements or trips spent on the east side of the Big Island, "ko-KEE, ko-KEE," as loud as a fire alarm. You may ask yourself, "Is that what I think it is?" Yes, it very well could be the nighttime call of the male coqui frog, a species native to Puerto Rico that was accidentally introduced to the state on imported nursery plants in the late 1980s. O'ahu remains free of established populations of coqui frogs, but individuals continue to make their way here as hitchhikers in shipments from the Big Island, where this invasive species has infested many areas. In partnership with the Hawai'i Department of Agriculture (HDOA), the state's lead agency in combating coqui frogs, the O'ahu Invasive Species Committee (OISC) assisted in the capture of 23 coqui frogs in 2012.

Although coqui frogs are beloved in their native land of Puerto Rico, they are out of place in Hawai'i where, without the many predators and competitors found in their homeland, their populations can explode. What starts out as a single coqui frog calling

outside your home at night could quickly turn into an earsplitting chorus of many if these fast-reproducing frogs are not reported immediately. One night spent in the vicinity of Hilo exemplifies how dense and disruptive their populations can become if they are not caught early and prevented from establishing. Coqui frogs threaten to deprive O'ahu residents of a good night's sleep and change the island's natural ecosystems by gobbling up large numbers of beneficial insects and altering important nutrient-cycling processes in the environment.

Despite interisland inspections by HDOA, coqui frogs continue to stow away on cargo from Hawai'i Island. Therefore, it is important that O'ahu residents remain vigilant and report coqui frogs to keep the island coqui-free for the long term. If a coqui frog is in your neighborhood, you are more likely to hear it rather than see it. Its loud nighttime call can be heard from dusk until dawn. If you have seen small frogs in your yard, you may be seeing the greenhouse frog, another accidentally introduced frog that is already widespread on O'ahu and is commonly mistaken for the coqui frog. Male greenhouse frogs differ from male coqui frogs in that their nighttime calls are softer and cricket-like, they are smaller in size (less than 1 inch long),

and they have claw-like toes (visit this website for a comparison of coqui and greenhouse frogs: ctahr.hawaii.edu/coqui/differences.asp). If you think you hear a coqui frog on O'ahu, please call the toll-free state Pest Hotline, 643-PEST (643-7378). For more information about invasive species issues and how you can get involved in helping to control incipient invasive species on O'ahu, visit OISC's website oahuisc.org.



The coqui frog, cute, but noisy.