

# ‘Io (Hawaiian hawk, *Buteo solitarius*)

Mei (May) 2024

## Description

- Adults are 16-18 inches in length, females being slightly larger than males.<sup>1</sup>
- Can occur in light or dark color phases.
- Begin breeding around 3 or 4 years and mate for life.<sup>1</sup>
- The only native member of the hawk family remaining in the Hawaiian archipelago.<sup>2</sup>



## Distribution

- Live and breed only on Hawai‘i island.
- Fossil records show that ‘io once lived on Moloka‘i and Kaua‘i.<sup>2</sup>
- Prefer to nest in native ‘ōhi‘a (*Metrosideros polymorpha*) trees but will also nest in agricultural areas.
- Threats include deforestation, invasive species, and illegal shooting.<sup>2</sup>



## Cultural Significance

In Hawaiian tradition, the ‘io is symbolic of royalty. In mo‘olelo, ‘io are often portrayed as teachers or judges and compared to the highest chiefs. The ‘io is also an ‘aumakua (personal or family god) to some Hawaiian families – including the Kamehameha dynasty – so harming or killing them was strictly forbidden.<sup>3</sup>



## ‘Ōlelo No‘eau

He ‘io au, ‘a‘ohe lālā kau ‘ole.<sup>4</sup>  
*I am a hawk, there is no branch on which I cannot perch.*

In mo‘olelo (story), the ‘io is a metaphor for an ali‘i (chief). This mo‘olelo is a metaphor for saying I can go anywhere I please because I am a chief.



<sup>1</sup><https://www.fws.gov/story/species-spotlight-hawaiian-hawk-io/>; <sup>2</sup><https://abcbirds.org/bird/hawaiian-hawk/>; <sup>3</sup>Fernandez-Akamine 2022; and <sup>4</sup>Kala 2022.