



## KO'KO' (Guam rail) *Rallus owstoni*

### Endangered Species

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The ko'ko', as the Guam rail is known in Chamorro, is a very special bird. It is endemic to Guam; that means it is found nowhere else in the world but on Guam. This bird is dark brown with white stripes on its stomach. A Chamorro legend tells how the ko'ko' got its stripes. One day, a hilitai (monitor lizard) and a ko'ko' decided they looked too plain, so they agreed to paint one another. The ko'ko' painted the hilitai. When it came time for the hilitai to paint the ko'ko', the hilitai painted a few strokes then decided he was tired and left all but the ko'ko's stomach unpainted. The ko'ko' became so angry that he bit the hilitai's tongue in two. This is why, according to the legend, hilitai have forked tongues and cannot make noise.

The ko'ko' came to our island thousands of years ago. At that time it was able to fly, but as there were no predators on Guam, it slowly lost the ability to fly. People arrived on the island and brought dogs, cats, rats and monitor lizards with them. Sometime after World War II, the predatory brown tree snake also found its way to our island. Since the ko'ko' is flightless and builds shallow nests on the ground, it was easy for snakes to catch the ko'ko' and its babies.

Ko'ko' lay up to four large, freckled eggs. Young ko'ko' leave the nest when they are only one day old. Their parents then eat the egg shell. Adult ko'ko' eat insects, snails, skinks and geckos. They like to live in brushy areas mixed with grassland or forest. They also like to bathe in the rain. When their numbers were high, they often could be found along the roadside in tall grass early in the morning. Due to snake predation, the ko'ko' population has become extinct in the wild. Now, it is against local and federal laws to capture, harass or kill a ko'ko'.

The Department of Agriculture's Division of Aquatic and Wildlife Resources and several zoos in the mainland U. S. came together in 1983 and began a captive breeding program for the ko'ko' in hopes that they could prevent this bird from becoming extinct. Since that time, more than 300 ko'ko' have been born in mainland U. S. zoos and on Guam. Many of these have been released on Rota where there are no snakes. Maybe one day, when the snake population is under control, some ko'ko' can be returned to their original home on Guam.