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'Armor balls' make pilots, planes, birds safer

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JOINT BASE PEARL HARBOR-HICKAM, Hawaii -- Hickam pilots can now fly safer thanks to a project six years in the making.

The Bird Hazard Working Group initiated the bird hazard abatement as part of the Bird/Wildlife Aircraft Strike Hazard, also known as the BASH program, when members of 647th Services Squadron, 647th Contracting Squadron, 15th Wing safety office and Mamala Bay Golf Course workers released "Armor Balls" into a reservoir at the Mamala Bay Golf Course Oct. 26.

"We are trying to prevent some of our endangered species from using this area as a watering hole or nesting habitat area," said Darrin Phelps, U.S. Department of Agriculture assistant district supervisor for wildlife services.

The black softball sized "Armor Ball's" float on the surface of the reservoir causing the birds to over look the water, minimizing the chances of birds landing there. This in turn minimizes birds as a hazard striking aircraft in mid-air. The balls rise and fall with changing water levels and can easily maneuver around objects such as floating pumps. They have a life span of more than 10 years.

"The worst case scenario is (the birds) can take out all the engines which would lead to an aircraft crashing," said Capt. Russell Foxworth, 15th Wing chief of flight safety. "They had an (Airborne Warning and Control System) aircraft that went down in (Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska) in 1995 due to 31 Canadian geese that struck the plane. It was a real wake up call for a lot of people."

The 23,560 square foot reservoir is geographically located on the edge of the Mamala Bay Golf Course which is a few hundred yards away from active runways belonging to Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam and the Honolulu International Airport, putting pilots at risk for accidents involving birds.

"As an operator now and commanding an operational flying squadron, it's great to see our base come together to support the safety of the flying operation because it helps people like me get more peace of mind when we send folks out to conduct flying operations," said Lt. Col. Brian Hill, 96th Air Refueling Squadron commander.

Since fiscal year 2007, 15th Wing aircraft have sustained more than \$261,740 in damages due to bird strikes. In October 2009, one bird strike at Barber's Point caused more than \$194,078 in damage.

"It's great to see a project that is (six) years in the making really come through, representing not just military effort, but great partnership with our folks here on base." Colonel Hill said. "It's easy for folks to talk safety and preach safety, but when you actually see that resources and that commitment behind it, it really goes a long way toward solidifying the commitment."

BASH is an Air Force wide program responsible for developing research programs to reduce bird strike potential around airfields and during low-level flight operations. The "Armor Ball's" project is expected to be completed at the end of November after a total of more than 236,000 balls are released.
