



Fruit Salad, Yummy, Yummy?

By Idangie Sein

Working with animals has been a lifelong passion of mine. I grew up watching Steve Irwin on TV, captivated not only by his tendency to pick up every creature he met, but for his genuine excitement. I could tell by the look in his eyes he understood the feeling I had when I watched the slug on my front doorstep inch by, or the white ibis in my yard wiggle the tips of their beaks into the mud. The innate sense of awe inspired by observing another living being just 'being'— simply existing as they have for thousands of years, as their ancestors did before them.

An ingrained sense of compassion and companionship with the world around us, a sense I feel is often lost as the discoveries of growing become familiar. As life gets more complicated, we forget the simplicity of the world. The things we all have in common: eat, drink, sleep.



Eating is something that everyone needs to do – even the 'Alalā. But what exactly do these birds eat?. We know what to feed them to sustain them nutritionally in captivity. Those privileged few who take care of the captive population of crows know of certain individuals' preferences. But what did they eat when they were wild and flew free? Fruit. Definitely fruit. And bugs. Their beaks are perfect for breaking apart certain native seed pods like ho'awa. The 'Alalā filled a seed dispersing niche that is vacant in our current ecological web. A vacancy that is a direct result of the loss of this species in the wild.

I find the loss of these relationships one of the saddest factors of losing our native species. One of the reasons we need to appreciate the details of the beings around us, before the basic knowledge of their lives is gone.

What I can tell you about the Maui cohort is this—they do not like to eat their peas. Or their carrots. We offer our little cohort a selection of fresh fruit and frozen vegetables, along with some extra meaty bits. A quick chop of some papaya, melon, and apple, a sprinkle of veggie mix, add some pinkies (pre-packaged small mice) – and you have 'Alalā dinner. Or breakfast. Fruit salad really can be eaten at any time of day.



The prepared diet is offered fresh every morning. As an equally delicious base, a mix of dry pellets, mealworms, and black soldier fly larvae is available all day. We have repurposed automated pet feeders to dispense food into pre-set meal locations we refer to as 'Feeder Stations'. Built prior to release, the birds were trained to use these feeders at the Maui Bird Conservation Center. They were then transferred into the field. Because the birds recognize these stations as food sources, we are able to manipulate the feeder locations to encourage exploration and nuanced social behaviors. We have a few of these located in our field aviary, where the birds were originally housed when they moved into the forest. The others are meticulously placed in different directions throughout the forest. The fresh 'fruit salad' is there to enrich the diet and provide variety, despite all of their nutritional needs being met with the dry pellets we offer. As they forage and learn the food availability of the surrounding forest, we hope to wean the birds off of the proffered food and see them become completely independent.



In order to provide this delicious meal plan, the cohort of crows needs a team of private chefs on standby. As a part of the Maui team, I am honored to be known as one of those few chefs. We maintain a constant presence, shuffling in and out of the field in seven-day rotations, ready to provide emergency care, fresh food, and record the behavior of the flock.

As a fellow earthling, it is with my absolute pleasure I share with you our recipe from the field. A dish for both human and avian consumption. It is the bridge between our world and the world of the crows, and has the spirit of the forest in every bite (minus what the 'Alalā would argue is the best part – the mice).

Below is a simple fruit salad recipe so that everyone can eat just like an 'Alalā. And just like they would prefer, we left the veggies out.



'Alalā Fruit Salad (but for people!)

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Papaya (ripe) | 2-3 slices of Prosciutto | |
| 2 Gala apples | 1 tbsp sugar | 1 pinch of salt |
| ½ Honeydew melon (ripe) | 2 tsp lemon juice | |

Peel and chop each fruit into even sized pieces. In the bottom of a bowl add the sugar, lemon, and a pinch of salt. Mix in the fruit and make sure it is evenly coated. Let sit for 30 minutes in the fridge to allow the flavors to meld. Before serving, hand-tear the couple slices of prosciutto and place on top.
Enjoy!