



Winging It

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN BIRDING ASSOCIATION



American Birding[®]
ASSOCIATION

Vol. 24, no. 3
June 2012

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Hanging by a Thread: Birds and Conservation on Kaua'i

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Kaua'i. The "Garden Isle". To most the name of this place conjures images of lush verdant landscapes as seen by helicopter in Jurassic Park, or perhaps long stretches of unpopulated white sandy beaches lining the jungle.

Some think of it as paradise, a place where people go to "get away from it all". A place full of life, enriched with gaudy-colored birds, redolent with exotic flowers, and surrounded with aquamarine waters that teem with fish of every color.

In reality, Kaua'i (*kah-WAH-ee*) is nothing short of an ecological disaster. There is hardly a single native plant or animal below 1,000 feet. To see even a shadow of what this island once was requires an expedition to remote highlands, where the final native denizens of Kaua'i still cling to existence. They find refuge in the Alaka'i (*ah-lah-KAH-ee*) Swamp, almost exclusively above 3,000 feet in elevation. A misnomer really, the "Swamp" is a montane rainforest sitting on a large plateau that has some bogs but not the flooding or standing water characteristic of a swamp. Regardless, the Alaka'i is just over 5,000 feet at its highest. That doesn't leave too much room for the birds.

Native Hawaiian birds are restricted to high elevations because of human influences. Extant honeycreeper species are following the same patterns of range restriction that led to the decline and even-

tual extinction of other honeycreeper species before them. Hawaii has the ignominious title of the extinction capital of the world. This is especially unfortunate considering Hawaii once boasted the greatest adaptive radiation of birds amongst islands. Just to highlight one of Hawaii's avian groups, the Hawaiian "honeycreepers" once numbered greater than 55 species, all descended from finch-like ancestors. Today there are only 17 species remaining, 11 of which are listed as endangered. It is a mistaken belief to think that these extinctions were an artifact of the past, or that a country armed with the Endangered Species Act and as prosperous as the United States could not be culpable for letting these conspicuous species to go extinct. A bizarre snail-eating finch-turned-chickadee, the Po'o-uli, went extinct as recently as 2004. And more species

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A close look at the crossed bill of the 'Akeke'e in action.
Photo by © Lucas Behnke.



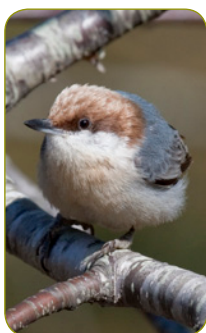
Some of you will have noticed the lead article in this issue and wondered, “Why Hawaii again? Is the editor pushing some kind of agenda?” I can honestly say that this is not the case. It’s a totally appropriate response, though, given my past advocacy for expansion of the ABA Area. Rather, a recent personal experience weighed heavily on ultimate timing of this piece. I realize that not everyone is interested in Hawaii, and since it’s not part of the ABA Area, I understand that oversaturation of the newsletter with this topic may be offputting to some members. With that in mind, this piece was originally slated to appear a year or more from now. But my experience birding on Kaua’i in April of this year set off alarm bells in my head. Birds that were easy to find just a year or two ago are now merely



clinging to existence. Without our help, these birds will rapidly go extinct. The ‘Akikiki may have decreased from 3,000+ to only 300 individuals in just the last 4 years! What could I possibly do to make a difference? As editor of a newsletter, it seemed the best way I could contribute to their conservation was by making others aware of the situation. There are no plans to run additional material on Hawaii in the near future. The first sentence of ABA’s mission statement reads, “The American Birding Association inspires all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.” I hope you’ll agree that Johnson’s and Wang’s article furthers that mission.

Save the Dates! • Get Ready to Rally!

Calling all birders! Join us this fall for the first-ever ABA Birding Rally! Based at Kiptopeke State Park on the Eastern Shore of Virginia, there will be great birding right on site. Gobs of migrating raptors glide by the storied hawkwatch there, and the oldest songbird banding



station in the U.S. continues its valuable work. You’re never far from salt water and the rhythms of the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. Nearby refuges such as Chincoteague brim with birds, blue crabs, and even some wild ponies. Come join your ABA leaders as they team up with local birders to tally some great birds and great times at one of the premier migration hotspots on the East Coast. We can’t wait to see you there!

17-21 OCTOBER 2012 • CAPE CHARLES, VIRGINIA

Log on to aba.org/events/rally12 for additional information. REGISTRATION OPENS WEDNESDAY 20 JUNE 2012 AND IS LIMITED TO 60 PARTICIPANTS.

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You can join the ABA, learn more about us and our programs, and access a wide range of birding links on our website: <www.aba.org>

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Winging It (ISSN #1042-511X) (USPS 003-289) is published bi-monthly by the American Birding Association, Inc., 1618 W. Colorado Ave., Colorado Springs, CO 80904. Periodicals postage paid at Colorado Springs, CO, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Winging It*, 1618 W. Colorado Ave., Colorado Springs, CO 80904. (Individual membership: \$45 per year) Return postage guaranteed: Send undeliverable copies and POD Forms 3579 to 1618 W. Colorado Ave., Colorado Springs, CO 80904. For Canadian returns mail to WDS, Station A, P. O. Box 54, Windsor, ON N9A 6J5. GST Registration No. R135943454. Canadian Publications Agreement No. 40033104.

- The American Birding Association aims to inspire all people to enjoy and protect wild birds.
- The American Birding Association represents the North American birding community and supports birders through publications, conferences, workshops, tours, partnerships, and networks.
- The ABA’s education programs promote birding skills, ornithological knowledge, and the development of a conservation ethic.
- The ABA encourages birders to apply their skills to help conserve birds and their habitats, and we represent the interests of birders in planning and legislative arenas.
- ABA members are encouraged to patronize our partners for their birding needs. Eagle Optics (800.289.1132) offers a wide selection of the world’s best sport optics, while Buteo Books (800.722.2460) offers a wide selection of birding publications, including the popular ABA/Lane Birdfinding Guides. Make sure you tell them both you’re an ABA member!
- We welcome all birders as members.



Birders' Exchange received the following "thank you" letter from students in Grupo Eco Huellas (Ecological Footprints Group) in Patagonia after we awarded their school a grant of a telescope for all of their bird-related activities.

On behalf of Grupo Eco Huellas, we would like to say thank you for the beautiful gift you gave us. It is very important for us to know that people who live at the other end of America know we're here.

We are ecstatic because we know that your present will make it easier for us to watch birds. There are many teenagers in our group, but the most beautiful thing is that we will be able to use the telescope to show children of primary school age the great variety of birds that fly in freedom through our skies. We hope they will learn, as we have, that though the world is huge, we can make it smaller by flying towards our dreams and wishes, just like the birds do.

We don't have enough words to express how grateful we are for this enormous surprise. We happily hope to be in touch, and send our kisses!

Grupo Eco Huellas
General Roca, Río Negro, Argentina
www.grupoecohuellas.blogspot.com



For more information about how you can help our neighbors to the south conserve habitat and save the birds we share, as well as resident birds throughout the Neotropics, please contact Birders' Exchange via Betty Petersen at bpetersen@aba.org

HANNA MOUNCE • mounce@mauiforestbirds.org **Help Save the Maui Parrotbill**

The Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project (MFBRP), formed in 1997, is driven by science and dedicated to the conservation of Hawaii's native forest ecosystems. Our mission is to develop and implement techniques that recover Maui's endangered birds and to restore their habitats through research, development, and application of conservation techniques.

Currently our efforts are focused on the most critically endangered of the surviving Maui honeycreepers, the Maui Parrotbill, or Kiwikiu. This species and other forest birds are declining on Maui for many reasons, including habitat loss and degradation by introduced ungulates, introduced predators, and introduced diseases. Today, only 500 parrotbills are estimated to exist in the wild. Furthermore, their current



range is extremely restricted, comprising less than 5,000 hectares of largely protected wet forest habitat on the windward side of east Maui within the Hanawā Natural Area Reserve, Haleakalā National Park, and the Waikamoi Preserve. Establishing a second Maui Parrotbill population on the leeward side of Haleakalā is considered a critical step for the species' recovery. To reach this goal, collaboration is essential.

Observations of early naturalists suggest Maui Parrotbill preferred mesic and dry forest habitat dominated by Koa (*Acacia koa*), which historically existed on the leeward side of east Maui. Accordingly, a landscape scale fencing project has been initiated to protect the Nakula Natural Area Reserve and the Kahikinui Forest

Reserve. Once these areas are fenced, non-native ungulates will be removed and a combination of natural species regeneration and active restoration of important parrotbill food plants and endangered species will begin to restore the habitat.

The second parrotbill population will be established by translocating wild birds and releasing captivity-reared individuals. The genetic diversity of the translocated birds is currently being assessed to ensure genetic diversity and thus maximize the success of the new population. Reintroduction of the Maui Parrotbill to the leeward side of east Maui will begin within the next five years.

Hawaiian Airlines recently added MFBRP to their "Give Wings to Great Causes" flyer miles donation program for 2012. You can now donate miles to MFBRP, allowing staff to attend important inter-island collaboration events. Donated miles will help get MFBRP biologists to scientific meetings, training events, and conferences, as well as to bring additional scientific expertise to Maui.

Now you can help—and it's free! Your donation of frequent flyer miles will help MRBRP achieve our goals and help save the

Maui Parrotbill from extinction.

To donate miles, visit <www.hawaiianair.com/hawaiianmiles/donate-miles>.



The extensive black face sexes this 'Akeke'e as a male. Photo by © Alex Wang.



are slated for extinction in just the next few years if their rates of decline hold steady.

The physical threats to Hawaii's avifauna are certainly difficult but not impossible to manage. The spread of diseases such as avian malaria (*Plasmodium relictum*) and avian pox are probably the most devastating, but introduced mammalian predators and habitat change due to human use and invasive plants are also major factors in the birds' decline. Hawaii's endemic avifauna evolved in absence of these diseases as well as the vector that spread them, the Southern House Mosquito (*Culex quinquefasciatus*), so the birds are especially sensitive. Species such as the 'Iwi (*ee-EE-vee*) have 90% mortality if bitten by a single infected mosquito. What a staggering statistic! That's why almost all native passerines are restricted to high elevations, where it is too cold for mosquitoes to reproduce. For the majority of their evolution, Hawaii's native birds were also naïve to mammalian predators, but now the onslaught is in full effect. Introduced rats

and feral cats are proficient nest predators, and introduced mongooses (originally and ironically brought in as biological control for the rats) also take their toll.

The forest itself, with a smorgasbord of unique and endemic plant species, is also under siege. Huge tracts were logged or cleared for agriculture after both Polynesian and European arrival. What is left is under attack from aggressive invasive plants such as Strawberry Guava (*Psidium cattleianum*) and Kahili Ginger (*Hedychium gardnerianum*). These species create choking monocultures that prevent native plants from regenerating and drastically change the forest composition. In addition, feral pigs have a taste for Strawberry Guava and help spread it around while simultaneously uprooting native plants, thereby creating wallows that provide ideal breeding sites for mosquito larvae. Add to the mix global warming, which promises to raise the elevation mosquitoes can live at, and it is no surprise that the native birds are in a tight squeeze.

And the forest birds are not the only ones under fire. Hawaiian Petrels once nested from *mauka* to *makai* (from mountaintop to the coast). But humans and their mammalian companions have put an end to that. It is said that the species used to be so numerous that upon its crepuscular arrival to its nesting burrows it would blanket the sky akin to the Passenger Pigeon of lore. Their population has been decimated and is still declining for reasons both known and controllable. In April 2012 Oscar visited a colony of Hawaiian Petrels that had not been surveyed in the past few years and found five carcasses that had been killed by cats. One was only a few days old. Another seabird, Newell's Shearwater, has declined by an estimated 14.7% per year from 1993–2001, and there is no indication that the decline has slowed. There are no current population estimates, but there could be as few as 5,000 breeding pairs. Every year, hundreds of seabirds (mainly Newell's Shearwaters and Hawaiian Petrels) succumb to nocturnal fallout due to light attraction (and disorientation) and powerline



*Left: Thanks to a successful captive breeding and release program, the Puaiohi (a species of *Myadestes solitaire*) is doing relatively well compared to Kaua'i's honeycreepers. Photo by © Michael Retter.*

Right: The highest reaches of Kaua'i's highlands function as a veritable keep for the island's native birds. Photo by © Kenneth Sponsler.

collisions. This used to take down thousands of birds per year, but is now down to just a few hundred. On the surface, this sounds positive, but it's due to population crashes, not anything we humans have done to help the birds. The threat has not been reduced significantly; there are just fewer birds to be harmed. As daunting as the physical threats are, it just may be that the greatest threat to these birds is our collective ignorance.

Perhaps because it no longer appears in field guides to North America, the avifauna of Hawaii is forgotten if not rightly shunned by many American birders. Similarly, while Hawaii has a third (34 of 91) of the U.S.'s listed endangered avian species, it receives only 4.1% of federal and state spending on listed birds. When you combine Hawaiian-language names with a complete lack of coverage in North American field guides, it's no wonder that most birders from the U.S. and Canada have no idea even what a particular species looks like. Can you differentiate an 'Akikiki from an 'Akeke'e? Or an 'Anianiau from an 'Amakihi? Can you pronounce them? The names are as bewildering and exotic as the birds. But for those who take the time to get to know them, the Hawaiian names for these birds are as beautiful and memorable as the birds themselves. After seeing the glowing neon-orange-on-black plumage of the 'Akohekohe, and hearing its low-pitched, guttural "kohe" croak, you won't soon forget that it is pronounced *AH-KOH-hay-KOH-hay*. Keeping traditional Hawaiian names for Hawaiian birds need not be an obstacle to their conservation, but our knowledge and awareness of these species are instrumental to their salvation. Something as simple as reintroducing these species to North American field guides (along with a pronunciation key) could do



Introduced birds like the White-rumped Shama are largely resistant to (and are thus carriers of) avian malaria, so when they spread into areas inhabited by native birds, they unwittingly spread the disease. Photo by © K. W. Bridges.

wonders for the public's awareness for these species and, thus, their conservation.

Back up on the Alaka'i Plateau lives the 'Akikiki (*ab-kee-KEE-kee*), a honeycreeper that has filled the niche of a nuthatch. Just a decade ago this two-toned woodsprite, formerly known as the Kaua'i Creeper, ranged from Kōke'e State Park east to Mt. Wai'ale'ale (a contender for the wettest place on Earth). Finally listed as Endangered in 2010 along with the 'Akeke'e (*ab-keh-KEH-eh*)—Kaua'i's take on a crossbill—the 'Akikiki has almost completely disappeared from the western half of its range. And no one really knows why. It could be due to the litany of threats that wiped out its brethren, but its recent range contraction may suggest something else. No matter, as the populations of these species

continue to decline, they likewise disappear from the public mindset.

To be sure, the plight of the Hawaiian avifauna is a many-headed beast, but there are also many avenues available toward protection of these birds. One of these is the Kaua'i Forest Bird Recovery Project (KFBRP), which is conducting research on three of the listed endangered species. This organization is



responsible for spearheading the research component of these species' conservation efforts in an effort to better direct management. By researching aspects of the native birds' basic ecologies, some of which are still unknown (!), this group hopes to be better prepared to diagnose the threats to these birds. Some of KFBRP's ongoing work includes population surveys, installing rat-proof nest boxes for the endangered Puaiohi, and mitigation in the form of sterilizing mosquito wallows and attempting to reduce rat populations. Likewise, the Kaua'i Endangered Seabird Recovery Project (KESRP) monitors seabird populations, explores the birds' dispersal and diets, and searches for breeding colonies hidden away in remote mountainous parts of highland Kaua'i. More research will prove invaluable for some of these species. For instance, there is still a breeding seabird in the United States about which almost nothing is known! While detected regularly coming inland at night, no active nest of a Band-rumped Storm-Petrel has ever been found in the state of Hawaii, and this endemic population may well be a full species.

KFBRP and KESRP are also partnered with many other conservation-minded organizations, such as The Nature Conservancy, which just last year fenced in 8,000 acres of the Alaka'i to protect the native forest from feral pigs and goats. This tried and tested technique has proven extremely effective in protecting native birds on other islands because it makes such a significant difference in preserving the native understory of the forest. Another organization, the Kōke'e Resource Conservation Project, helps by removing invasive plant species throughout the Alaka'i. And then there is the Hawaii Endangered Bird Conservation Program, which admirably attempts to boost population numbers through captive breeding, but this should not be considered a failsafe! Many of our threatened species have very complicated life history strategies which make it challenging or even impossible to raise them in captivity. For instance, the Kiwikiu, or Maui Parrotbill, lays only one egg a year, and its young are so altricial that a fledgeling may spend up to 18 months dependent on its parents. Thankfully, the parrotbills seem to make up for this by being relatively long lived (if not depredated by an introduced mammal): the oldest known banded bird is at least 16 years old and believed to still be breeding.

Immature 'Akikikis have pale faces. They're also quite cute.
Photo by © Lucas Behnke.



An adult 'Akikiki. Photo by © Alex Wang.

Many people come here on family vacations, but how many people specifically come to go birding, or even get some birding in on the side? Relatively few—which is a shame because birders are excellent advocates of conservation and preservation of native species. Conversely, the islands' strong hunting lobby has joined forces with the State of Hawaii to make the eradication of many invasive species nearly impossible via drawn out judicial avenues. For instance, the continued presence of Mouflon Sheep may deal the final blow to the highly-specialized Palila by overgrazing the birds' only food source, Māmane (*Sophora chrysophylla*), in the next three years. The species' population declined from 4,000 to 1,200 individuals between 2007 and 2012. Tragically, the erection of a sheep-proof fence is likely all it would take to stabilize the population. And most birders are scarcely aware of, never mind involved in, the fight to save this bird. The result may be the extinction of the last finch-billed honeycreeper in the main Hawaiian Islands. We birders, with increased travel to an area, provide large ecotourism incentives and change the opinions of locals who come to depend on our expendable income. Right now, it's the hunters of exotic mammals and gamebirds who have that cachet.

Although thinking of what it once was can be a depressing thought, there are still some awesome birds here in Hawaii that make it a worthy travel destination for both casual and dedicated birders—and an even better destination if you want to combine it with typical rest and relaxation. In between lounging on the beach and overfilling your plate at a luau, it's worth it to make some time to see the glorious beauty and diversity native Hawaii has to offer. And even if you can't pay us a visit, consider contributing to one of the hard-working conservation organizations that fight extinction on a daily basis by studying the birds, restoring the habitat, and eliminating alien invaders. They need all the help they can get, and there may be no easier way of helping Hawaii's birds. Or just maybe you have the time and adventurous spirit necessary to volunteer for one of our conservation organizations; there is no better way of coming face-to-face with, and intimately knowing, some of the planet's rarest birds.

Though neither is a Hawaii native, Oscar Johnson and Alex Wang both currently live on Kaua'i and work with various bird conservation organizations on the island.