



## MFBRP NEWSLETTER – JUNE 2008

### **DR. CONSTANCE “Dusti” BECKER JOINS THE MFBRP TEAM**



In the wake of Kirsty Swinnerton taking a position with Island Conservation, the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project is moving forward this coming year with a new Project Coordinator, Constance “Dusti” Becker, PhD. Dusti joined MFBRP in April to see the end of the 2008 Maui Parrotbill breeding season. Dusti brings experience from a variety of projects and ecosystems, as well as the arena of academia. Much



of Dusti’s work has been focused on the community dynamics of forest birds in the cloud forest habitats of Ecuador.

***A special thanks to DOFAW and PCSU for all of their additional help and support during our staff changes and interim period!!***

### **FLATBREAD FUNDRAISER**



***Come Support the Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project on JULY 1<sup>st</sup> 2008 5-10 pm***  
in Paia, Maui. A portion of all food sales (restaurant and take-out dining) from this evening will support our conservation research next season.

### **EXPANDING TO ‘AKOHEKOHE PRODUCTIVITY AND SURVIVAL**

This 2008 season concludes three years of intensive Maui Parrotbill nest studies. While plans for 2009 will continue to focus on parrotbill, we are also planning to expand to incorporate similar productivity and survival research on ‘akohekohe. This past May we experimented with a variety of netting techniques, decoys and playback methods to lure in ‘akohekohe at our Frisbee Meadows



study site. Here we have a couple of photos of the first individual we caught and banded. We will target 'akohekohe again this winter with capture techniques we tested. We hope to establish a double-digit banded population in Frisbee Meadows for the 2009 breeding season. We will be seeking additional funding to establish a more comprehensive bird monitoring effort for windward East Maui via collaborations with the Nature Conservancy, East Maui Watershed Partnership and Haleakala Ranch.

## THE ARBOREAL HIGHWAY TO EXTINCTION?

As part of our ongoing efforts to plan the conservation and management of our native forest birds in East Maui, MFBRP has monitored rat densities and behaviors within our study areas. This information may aid in conservation efforts because rats have been known to prey on the nests of other species of forest birds across the globe. In the past, observing rat behavior as it pertains to the native birds has been much harder than measuring densities because of the tendency of these animals to be more active at night. However, this field season our crew had multiple sightings of rats in Hanawi during the day, quite unusual in comparison to past years.

One event in particular allowed an observer to watch a rat foraging for approximately twenty minutes. The rat was alone at about nine meters high in an `olapa (*Cheirodendron trigynum*) pulling berries from the branches and eating them while rain draped the forest. After observing the rat for fifteen minutes, another rat began climbing up the base of the `olapa and rested in the rain on a large branch at about four meters up the tree. A few minutes later, the rat began a slow, sneaky ascent toward the other rat foraging on berries. After a quick bound toward the foraging rat, the two rats were fighting. After making quite a ruckus, the fight resulted in one rat falling down to another branch of the tree while the other observed his acrobatics. After the two meter plummet, the rat righted himself and chased the other rat down the trunk and into a hole at the base of the tree. The two continued to whirl up and down trees and hopped from tree to tree as they chased each other on the arboreal highways of the `ohia and `olapa limbs in the forest.



So, what does this observation tell us? First of all, it tells us that rats do climb to precarious heights in trees where our native birds would typically nest. Since rats are known elsewhere to eat passerine eggs and young, this could mean trouble for our forest birds and in particular for the Maui Parrotbill who already has a very small population and an extremely low rate of nest success. Second, `olapa berries do act as a food resource for the Maui Parrotbill. Witnessing rats eating these same berries means that the Maui Parrotbill has to compete with rats for food at some level. This could be bad news for our critically endangered birds because they are tremendously outnumbered by rats across the total landscape.

What effect these rats may have on the total food availability in Hanawi is still unknown. Also unknown are whether rats in Hanawi are affected by large population fluctuations. Are the numerous daytime observations this year a result of a rat population explosion this year? Are rats increasing in density in this area where the observations were made or was it just by chance that we were in the right place to see rats foraging in the daylight?



## **SUPPORT MAUI BIRDS WITH A DONATION TO MFBRP**

***The Maui Forest Bird Recovery Project would like to thank all of the individuals who have aided our research efforts this year through monetary and equipment donations.***

**Please send your tax-deductible donation at any time with a check made out to Tri-Isle RC&D. Mail your check to our office address.**

### ***MFBRP Wish List***

*Some of the supplies that we need for camp improvements:*

*2x4s of any length*

*Corrugated metal roofing*

*Bolts more than 4" in length*

*4x4s of any length*

*Plastic guttering as well as connection pieces*

*Large flats of siding*

### ***The following is an essay by a Hawaii Youth Conservation Corp Volunteer Anna Rauch-Sasseen A DAY IN THE LIFE***

*While strolling along the amiable trails of Hanawi Natural Area Reserve with fellow field workers, Tonya and Rich, my attention gets caught: the berries of the abundant kanawao plant are half eaten. Significant? I should think so. The Maui Parrotbill, an endangered honeycreeper, love to munch the little morsels – more to devour the tasty larvae housed INSIDE the berries than the berries themselves – nonetheless, their destruction could only mean one thing: THEY have been here. My senses are heightened instantly. Had I a tracking dog, a nice hound or something of that nature, I would have signaled to it with the almost imperceptible wave of a hand that only superior trained dogs can detect. Lacking said dog, I instead signal to Tonya and Richard, “Be on the alert for any hint of Parrotbill.” Let the birding begin.*



*Not moments after my dark green binoculars hit my eyes, we hear it. “CHEWY CHEWY CHEWY!!” Parrotbill; 10, maybe 20 meters away, 240 degrees. My pulse quickens. Again.*

*“CHEWY CHEWY CHEWY!!!!.”*

*This time it is closer, a little louder. My eyes wildly scan the canopy. Still, no success. Where are you hiding, clever bird?*

*“CHEWY CHEWY CHEWY!!!!!!!!!!!!.”*

*We see it: a flutter of wings; a flash of green and yellow; a glimpse of smooth, decurved bill. For a second I am overcome by its beauty. The second passes and in another I note its peculiar size. I don't remember learning that Parrotbill can grow bigger than a Clydesdale – perhaps I missed something. A third second and a stream of fire erupts from its oversized bill. Something is not right. Tonya and Rich are too shocked to move. The giant opens its bill to emit the fire of my destruction. I shut my eyes, fall to my knees, utter a quick prayer – necessary at such times - and prepare for annihilation. Nothing happens. I cautiously*



*open one eye; Rich and Tonya do the same. The enormous fire-breathing Parrotbill has perched on an Ohia as best as its huge form will allow. Out of its bill comes, not flames, but this:*

*"if all goes according to plan, a city of 6 square kilometers housing 50,000 people will rise in the United Arab Emirates- and it will be carbon neutral.*

*What? With a scholarly air, he continues.*

*"Abu Dhabi's plans to get into the renewable energy market, a hedge against the day its oil wells run dry."*

*Come again? A lavender smell reaches my senses. There are no lavender fields in Hanawi. Is that eggs I smell? Why do I smell eggs? And the clanking - where is that infernal clanking coming from? "Wake up, Anna." Oh.*

It seems that the fire-breathing Parrotbill was merely a dreamy figment of imagination, its educated and socially conscious monologue a by-product of National Public Radio in the wee hours of the morning. Tonya Rasmussen, who had been cooking eggs while listening to the NPR, had doused me with a fine mist of lavender in an attempt to wake me as pleasantly as possible. I thank her for rescuing me from inevitable obliteration by an evolutionary anomaly and stretch my sleepy limbs: another morning in the cabin, another day in the field. Tonya Rasmussen, Richard Aracil, and I, Anna Rauch-Sasseen, comprise the field unit of Po'ouli camp. Our location: Research Site HR3 in Hanawi. Our mission: Locate nests of the Maui Parrotbill. Our research objective: Obtain data to help ensure species survival.

Characters, each of us, our cabin is a happy place in the mornings. Richard, who prefers to be called "Rich" but is instead called "Richard" by Tonya and I because it is more fun to say, likes sugar. Lots of sugar. He also used to horde loose-leaf paper in grade school. Tonya enjoys a bit of coffee and dancing. She used to take lessons; so if you imagined superior dancing skills, good work. I like humming and singing. Tonya often joins in to Rich's delight - the "Truly Scrumptious" duet from *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, being his particular favorite. A giant box of Bisquick provides enough pancake sustenance for days on end.



After breakfast, the gear goes on. And let me just say, Milan, Paris, the runways of New York City, *need* to get with the times and duplicate our field style. Fashion has never reached heights this glamorous: bold, daring gigantic plastic yellow overalls paired with smart blue or tan rubber boots, innovative camo rain jackets, and romantic, whimsical field hats. Pure inspiration. It is only in these works of art that we three attempt to brave the bird search.

The search is comprised of hiking, walking, trudging, slipping, crawling under, over, and up obstacles – rain or shine – in order to accomplish our research objective. Fulfilling useful work in the lovely green native rainforest of Hanawi – what more could one want? We come back to the cabin after a day in the field and get ready for dinner. If Tonya cooks, we can expect a gourmet masterpiece; if Rich, a delicious Asian peanut butter surprise; if I, a canned food spectacular. Dinner is followed by hot cocoa, field notes, unruly games of Scrabble, break-dancing, teaching Richard how to dance, and reading. I assure you, it is a cozy way to spend an evening.

Eventually, sleep comes. The lanterns are extinguished and we trudge to our bunks and sleeping bags to call it a night. Hopefully nobody will be visited by fire-breathing Parrotbill, but you never know, Richard might enjoy it. Here's to a day in the life of Po'ouli camp.