



News Release

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A Narrowing Window of Opportunity to Protect Hawai‘i’s Forest Birds

HONOLULU — Forest birds in Hawai‘i have long been valued for their beauty, birdsong, and colorful feathers that adorned the ceremonial clothing of the archipelago’s royalty. But a new study concerning the impacts of climate change on these treasured species finds that without immediate and proactive conservation measures, these globally unique birds are at great risk of disappearing from Hawai‘i’s forests.

"Forest birds are integral to the overall health and well-being of the forests in Hawai‘i. They are yet another reason for controlling invasive species and for maintaining and supporting forest habitats," says Suzanne Case, Chairperson of the Hawai‘i Dept. of Land and Natural Resources, highlighting that forest birds represent the unique, interconnected, and threatened nature of Hawai‘i’s lands. But now, in addition to existing threats, global climate change is driving up temperatures in Hawai‘i, allowing mosquitos into prime high elevation habitat where the deadly avian malaria they carry threatens to eliminate this safe haven for birds.

In a study published in PLOS ONE on Wednesday, a team of scientists provides the first detailed set of range projections for each of the 20 remaining native forest bird species in Hawai‘i. The team – led by the Pacific Islands Climate Change Cooperative and featuring researchers from the U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – show that 9 of the most vulnerable species may lose 75% or more of their range. Of these, 6 species may lose 90% or more of their current livable habitat this century.

"As dire as these findings are, they do not mean that these bird species are doomed," said lead author Dr. Lucas Fortini, research ecologist with the USGS, "Instead, our findings indicate what may happen if nothing is done to address the primary drivers of decline: disease spreading uphill into the few remaining refuges."

Ongoing conservation and restoration actions continue to be critical, but this research underscores that these efforts must be paired with new methods to deal with avian malaria and the spread of mosquitos as well as reclaiming large swaths of forest bird habitat that is currently uninhabitable due to disease. Chair Case agrees, adding: "This is terribly important work being done right now with climate change, habitat loss and degradation, and diseases causing tremendous declines in forest bird populations. We can't afford the extinction of more species."

"This study clearly shows the serious, and increasing, threats to the survival of Hawai‘i’s forest birds," says Dr. Chris Farmer, American Bird Conservancy’s Hawai‘i Program Director. "The

conservation community in Hawai‘i and our national partners need to immediately begin implementing innovative actions to avoid another wave of avian extinctions.”

The full study “Large-scale range collapse of Hawaiian forest birds under climate change and the need for 21st century conservation options” is available online in [PLOS ONE](#). This research was supported by the U.S. Geological Survey, the Pacific Islands Climate Change Cooperative, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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The Pacific Islands Climate Change Cooperative (PICCC) is a self-directed, non-regulatory conservation alliance whose purpose is to assist those who manage native species, island ecosystems and key cultural resources in adapting their management to climate change for the continued benefit of the people of the Pacific Islands.

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