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Preface

by Sheldon Dingle

Of all the species of plants and animals that have existed since the beginning of the world at least 90% have become extinct. The vast majority of these have died out due to natural causes. It is only in the recent past that man has been a factor in the extinction of a species. Unfortunately, man's adverse influence is accelerating at an outrageous rate. Between the years 1600 and 1900, man caused the extinction of about seventy-five known species, most of them birds and mammals. Another seventy-five species have been eliminated since 1900. The rate of known species disappearance now stands at about one species per year — again mostly mammals and birds. There is very little hard data regarding how many species of plants, fishes, reptiles or insects have been wiped off the face of the earth.

Based on statistics and ratios, scientists have estimated that there are probably about ten million species on earth. Of these about six out of seven have not yet been classified and documented. These are, of course, ball park figures but scientists are identifying hundreds and hundreds of new species each year. In the last ten years 100,000 new species have been documented. Most of these species are plants and insects but even among vertebrates, the best known category, new species are being discovered.

In 1967 a new Hawaiian honey-creeper was discovered inhabiting a remote canyon accessible only by helicopter. On a Japanese island a new cat was found. In Australia scientists uncovered a mountain opossum. And the search goes on and new vertebrates are found. In the insect category about twenty new species are documented each day. The total number of species is staggering, although the true figure will probably never really be known. It is equally unlikely that the true number of species that become extinct each year will ever be known. Many species probably live and die completely unrecorded by man.

This basic information is intended as a general background from which we will narrow down to our particular interest — birds. The concept of species in general is far beyond the scope of our special interest but for those who want to learn more, a Dr. Norman Myers has written an excellent book entitled *The Sinking Ark*, published by Pergamon Press, Oxford, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Paris, and Frankfurt. I recommend it.

Dr. Myers writes that tropical moist forests are richer in species than any other biome on earth. And it is just this tropical area that is at present suffering an intense exploitation by man. Of the 401 bird species and sub-species that are listed as threatened in the Red Data Books, 291 occur in tropical moist forests. Of course there are bird species threatened or endangered in many other parts of the world too. The A.F.A. and all concerned aviculturists are vitally interested in all such bird species. The problem of saving them from extinction is enormous and vastly complicated. Every facet of our lives has some impact on every species everywhere in the world.

As you may have noticed, this issue of the Watchbird is devoted to a certain few bird species that are presently endangered. All of the species treated herein are being dealt with in one form or another by captive breeding programs — with the exception of the California Condor. The A.F.A. is extremely concerned with these birds and with captive breeding programs. The A.F.A. feels that many endangered birds will certainly become extinct unless more successful captive breeding techniques are developed and it is the aim of this organization to foster such programs and to save every bird possible.

And now, dear reader, please give your support to the A.F.A. and your attention to the birds presented in the following articles so that we can better live up to our moral responsibilities towards the rich and beautiful avifauna of our earth.

This issue of the Watchbird and the April/May, 1980 issue will be devoted primarily to endangered species. This is the first of two parts.

[Editor's note: The law and regulations dealing with endangered species are very complex and difficult and the A.F.A. owes a great debt of gratitude to Jerry Jennings, chairman of our endangered species committee, for the huge amount of work he has done to keep us informed on the subject. He has written volumes of letters, testified before legislative committees, and made numerous talks on endangered species. In fact, this very issue of the Watchbird is Jerry's brain-child and he did much to bring it about. I'm sure that your gratitude to Mr. Jennings can best be shown by your increased commitment and support of the A.F.A. programs that are in the best interests of the endangered birds of the world.]