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CONSERVATION

by
Sheldon Dingle
Norco, California

When Bob Berry sent me some conservation documents regarding six endangered Hawaiian birds my memory was jogged and I pulled an old volume off the shelf and re-read it. In *Aves Hawaiienses* by Wilson and Evans I read, "This bird is preeminently a honey-sucker . . . and though I have on several occasions observed it feeding on the fruit of the banana, I believe this to be only a secondary article of diet: in a state of captivity it has been kept with success on the juice of the sugar cane." Then Wilson states that in the district of Kona this bird, the o-o, is fairly common.

That was written in 1890.

In 1967 James C. Greenway, Jr. wrote in *Extinct and Vanishing Birds of the World*, "Five, or perhaps six, forms of the essentially Australian family of honeyeaters . . . were once to be found on as many of the Hawaiian Islands. Of these, all save perhaps one are quite probably extinct."

Goodbye to Wilson's "fairly common" bird.

Now to "Endangered Species," the U.S. Fish and Wildlife technical bulletin sent me by Bob Berry. The bulletin outlines a recovery plan that has been approved by Hawaiian wildlife. It also gives a brief survey of reasons for some birds' decline on the various Hawaiian Islands. In addition to a number of introduced predators "competition with exotic birds for food and living space has been another problem. There were major introductions of various songbirds from around the world from 1865 through at least the first three decades of this century, and it was during 1900-1930 that the heaviest decline in Kauai's native forest birds was recorded.

"It is likely that imported songbirds, gamebirds, and even poultry introduced new diseases and parasites that infected native Hawaiian birds. Two other diseases, avian pox (Poxvirus avium) and avian malaria (Plasmodium spp.), might have been present already in the islands, but later transmitted more widely by introduced birds and mosquitos . . .

"Due to the flourishing aviary trade in Hawaii, importation of exotic birds continues, and some could prove to be new predators, competitors, or disease vectors. The plan calls for stricter quarantine laws and better enforcement of laws against smuggling exotics. As research identifies specific hosts of avian diseases, control methods should be evaluated and applied where possible . . .

"To ensure their survival, the recovery plan recommends immediate initiation of a captive propagation and sperm bank program. The Honolulu Zoo has expressed interest in a propagation program, and the FWS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center might be able to provide support. If this approach is approved, techniques will first be attempted on related, but less jeopardized, surrogate species. For the rarest birds, artificial manipulation of nesting biology to increase production, using such methods as building artificial nesting structures or double-clutching the eggs, might initially be less hazardous than captive propagation. The ultimate goal is to build up large enough flocks in captivity so that offspring can be released into secure natural habitat to supplement any remaining wild populations."

There you have it, my friend. Wilson's o-o is gone. Of the six subspecies only one, *Moho braccatus*, is left and during a 1981 survey only two individuals were sighted. And now it is time to begin a captive breeding program. How would you like for the entire future of a species to depend upon one pair in *your* aviaries? You get my point.

Of course we all wish Fish and Wildlife Service great success in their Kauai Forest Birds Recovery Plan. It seems a bit late, but better now than never. This points out to me the importance of good aviculture as a conservation tool. How lovely life would be now if the o-o of Wilson's day had actually been established as an aviary bird—and the Carolina parakeet, and the passenger pigeon. . . . ●



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