

# SAVING THE HAWAIIAN BIRDS

*Margrethe Warden  
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The native birds of the Hawaiian Islands are rapidly disappearing due to the introduction of non-native species, loss of habitat and disease. While the islands are themselves small areas of land, they are home to more thirty percent of the endangered species in the United States. The vast majority of birds that have become extinct in this country were native to Hawaii.

The Hawaiian Endangered Bird Conservation Program, established in 1993, represents the collaborative efforts of the U.S. Department of the Interior, the state of Hawaii, the Zoological Society of San Diego's Department of Conservation and Research for Endangered Species (CRES) and a number of private landowners. In 1996, the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center was established on the Big Island of Hawaii. The program also assumed the operation of the Maui Bird Conservation Center in 1996. Since the program's inception, these

groups are working together to develop the means to restore the populations of twenty-two of these critically endangered birds. One such program involves collecting the eggs from the nests of the wild birds, artificially incubating them and hand rearing the chicks. These birds are then either released back into their native habitat or held back for future captive breeding purposes. In 1999, the first successful reintroduction of the endangered Puaiohi that not only survived the reintroduction but also went on to successfully breed and fledge their own offspring within sixty days of release. Captive propagation alone cannot restore these fragile populations; protection and preservation of the habitat is critical to accomplish the recovery of these imperiled species.

Since it began, over 750 native birds have hatched in the program. Eight of these species have been declared federally endangered including the Maui

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Parrotbill (*Pseudonestor xanthophrys*), Hawaii 'Akepa (*Loxops coccineus*), Palila (*Loxoides bailleui*), Hawaiian Creeper (*Oreomystis mana*), Puaiohi (*Myadestes palmeri*), 'Alala (*Corvus hawaiiensis*), Crested Honeycreeper or 'Akohekohe (*Palmeria dolei*) and the Hawaiian Goose or Nene (*Branta sandvisensis*). Five species of non-threatened native birds have also been added to the propagation program to assist the development of captive breeding and release techniques.

The wild 'Alala or Hawaiian Crow population had dwindled to an estimated twelve birds when the organizations joined forces to save it. During a five-year period starting in 1993, twenty-seven were released back into their habitat in the South Kona District of Hawaii.



Six survived. Given the unexpectedly low rate of survival, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been reviewing additional better-managed sites for release. Now, probably extinct in the wild, the captive population of 'Alala is growing.

In 1996, the captive population stood at fourteen birds. Ten years later, there were at least fifty birds and with the successful captive rearing, they are expected to continue to increase in number. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acquired land in 1997 which included a portion of the 'Alala native habitat. The ultimate goal is the release of these birds back into the wild.

A pilot study was conducted to determine the feasibility of recovering members of the Honeycreeper family (*Drepanidinae spp*), many of which are on the brink of extinction. Most of the fifty-seven species of native honeycreepers have already become extinct due to habitat degradation and loss along with predation by non-native animals. In 1996, an effort was made to establish a captive breeding flock of Palila at the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center. The first release of seven captive bred Palila Honeycreepers on Mauna Kea was accomplished in 2003 followed by releases of five birds and six birds in 2005 and 2006, respectively. According to Alan Lieberman, Conservation Program Manager at the Zoological Society of San Diego, the first breeding of captive-raised Palila in the wild was observed in 2004 and



'Akepa male

2005 in the Puu Mali Forest Reserve; a native forest habitat that is now being managed for recovery of the Palila, a conservation milestone

Hunting, as well as the introduction of non-native species such as rats and mongooses, drove down the population of the Nene. This bird was listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act in 1967. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, there are about five hundred of these once abundant birds



Honeycreeper chick

left in the wild. The captive breeding and release efforts on behalf of this goose will hopefully restore its wild numbers.

The Puaiohi (*Myadestes palmeri*) is a critically endangered, small brown thrush. In 1996 and 1997, more than a dozen eggs were collected from the wild, hatched and raised at the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center. They became the breeding stock for the recovery and reintroduction efforts. Since then more than two hundred of these birds have been successfully hatched. While researchers are not sure of the exact number of wild specimens, the captive breeding and release program has added one hundred thirteen birds to the native population.

The entire captive propagation effort has been the result of many years of developing techniques of both private aviculture and zoological facilities. The model program established on behalf of the Puaiohi has included a number of avicultural techniques including the collection of eggs from the wild, artificial incubation and hand rearing as well as the release of the captive-reared birds. It is only through avicultural and habitat conservation efforts that these birds, America's own natural resources, can be saved.

The American Federation of Aviculture, Inc. (AFA), through its Conservation and Research Committee, has made a commitment to support the recovery of the Hawaiian birds. If you would like more information on how you can help support the Endangered Bird Conservation Program, feel free to contact Margrethe Warden at [birdbrain@mindspring.com](mailto:birdbrain@mindspring.com). If you would like to make a tax deductible donation to help save the Hawaiian birds, please send your check to the American Federation of Aviculture, Inc., PO Box 7312, N. Kansas City, MO 64116. Please include a letter with your check indicating you wish your donation to go towards the Hawaiian bird conservation efforts and include the designation on the memo line of your check as well. Working together, we can make a difference.

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'Akepa female

'Alala chick, also known as Hawaiian Crow





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