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Wait list for rare species lengthy

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Hawai'i has more than 100 species of rare plants, animals and insects that are candidates for the federal endangered species list, but they won't qualify for protection until the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service conducts research to determine whether they belong on the list.

Conservation groups say the long wait for many of these fragile species is unacceptable, but the Fish and Wildlife Service says it is so beleaguered by lawsuits that it has no other options.

The federal agency yesterday released an updated roster showing 286 "candidate species" for the endangered species list nationwide — 107 of them, or about 40 percent, in Hawai'i, more than any other state. Hawai'i already has more than 300 federally protected species, the large majority of them plants.

The Center for Biological Diversity said yesterday that many of the candidate species have languished on the candidate list for years, a few for as long as 25 years.

"Hawai'i just has an incredible amount of unique species, many of which are imperiled," said Noah

Greenwald, a conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Candidate species include delicate picture-wing flies, hovering damselflies, the Hawaiian bat, trees, flowering shrubs and native birds such as the Kaua'i creeper.

"The Bush administration simply has not made endangered species a priority. We need to act now, or else 20 years down the road, who knows what their fate will be," said Jeff Mikulina, director of the Hawai'i chapter of the Sierra Club.

But the Fish and Wildlife Service, which is charged with the protection of the rarest plants, is so overwhelmed by lawsuits that virtually all its money for endangered species goes to actions mandated by the courts, said Gina Shultz, acting field supervisor of the service's Pacific Islands Office.

"The reason we have not had many listings is the result of lawsuits by the Center for Biological Diversity to designate critical habitat" for already listed endangered species, she said.

Most of the service's money for endangered species is diverted to respond to litigation, which has been a nationwide issue, she said.

The last Hawai'i species that moved from the candidate list to the endangered species list was a perky forest bird, the O'ahu 'elepaio, and its 2000 listing was the result of a court-supervised agreement, Shultz said. Most recent listing activity in the Pacific region has been in Guam and the Marianas, again the result of court action.

"The problem is that they're suing all over the nation, and the lawsuits are deciding how the listing process is going," she said.

Entomologist Steve Montgomery said that he has been studying the wekiu bug, a candidate species that lives at the summit of Mauna Kea. He said he is frustrated that it and other candidates aren't getting the research needed to determine whether they deserve the protection of the endangered species list.

"We need to get information on what's best for them, how to help them. Generally speaking, when I see that there is no movement, it shows there is no progress.

"Look at their action. No matter what they say, performance is the ultimate test," he said.

"The Bush administration is simply failing to protect the nation's

wildlife. The Endangered Species Act is an effective tool for saving wildlife from the abyss of extinction, and the administration isn't using it," Greenwald said.

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