

Island birds vulnerable to global warming

By Noah Greenwald

September 2, 2010

With its striking scarlet and black plumage and long curved beak, the iiwi, or scarlet Hawaiian honeycreeper, is one of Hawaii's most recognizable forest birds. Its brilliant feathers adorned native Hawaiians' capes and clothing as a symbol of power and prestige, and its mysterious metallic call is a welcome addition to the forest symphony.

If action isn't taken today, however, the iiwi may follow in the footsteps of at least 95 Hawaiian birds that have gone extinct. Already, these honeycreepers have been squeezed out of their lowland habitat by development and disease. They've survived for generations in high-elevation forests, but now those refuges are in jeopardy, too.

Mountaintop species like the iiwi are among the earliest species vulnerable to global warming -- and a disturbing harbinger of what's to come should this crisis be left unchecked. That's why last week the Center for Biological Diversity filed scientific petitions to give endangered species protections to the iiwi and three other mountaintop species in the United States that are jeopardized by climate change.

As temperatures warm, disease-carrying mosquitoes are moving farther and farther upslope, deeper and deeper into the iiwi's territory. The endgame is easy to call: With fewer cool refuges for escape, the iiwi will increasingly fall victim to avian malaria and pox and be put on the fast track to extinction.

The honeycreeper has been nearly eliminated on the entire islands of Kauai, Oahu and Molokai, as well as west Maui, and is now restricted to high-elevation areas on Maui and the Big Island. With warming, disease-carrying mosquitoes are making troubling inroads into these areas.

It's true that where the iiwi does still live it can be abundant, in contrast to some other endangered birds in Hawaii that are down to a mere handful of individuals. But this is a crucial moment to begin restoring and safeguarding the state's high-elevation forests and the rich life they preserve. Fortunately, the Endangered Species Act specifically allows for listing of species as threatened before the situation becomes dire.

We're already witnessing changes in climate in many mountainous areas. In Hawaii, temperatures are already showing an upward trend, and the upper elevation limit of mosquito presence has increased from approximately 1,900 feet above sea level in the 1960s to 5,000 feet today.

Though the plight of the iiwi is troubling on its own, it speaks to a larger concern about the fate of our planet and its species, including people. Scientists say that, left unchecked,



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Warmer temperatures have allowed mosquitoes to survive at higher elevations where the endemic Hawaiian honeycreeper, the iiwi, live. Mosquitoes carry avian diseases that threaten the iiwi, a major pollinator of native Hawaiian plants.

global warming could condemn a third of the world's plant and animal species to extinction by 2050.

Earlier this summer, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported that the first half of 2010 was the warmest on record -- and that's on top of a string of records set over the last decade. Conditions won't improve unless we act.

Congress needs to do its job in passing climate legislation that reduces atmospheric carbon levels to 350 parts per million, the target that scientists say is needed to avoid the worst effects of this global crisis. The Obama administration should also use the Clean Air Act to regulate greenhouse pollution.

In addition, those species most immediately vulnerable to climate change need our attention and protection now. That's why the Center petitioned for three other high-risk mountaintop animals: New England's Bicknell's thrush, which is threatened by the loss of its high-elevation conifer forests; Southern California's San Bernardino flying squirrel, which faces threats to its mountain home and food; and the Rocky Mountains' white-tailed ptarmigan, whose specialized adaptations for the cold may not allow it to survive upward swings in temperature.

We're counting on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to do the right thing, because ignoring this problem -- or failing to act out of political fear -- is to place countless species on the path toward extinction and put the rest of us, even those who have never feasted their eyes on the brilliance of an iiwi, next in line.

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