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Lawsuit aims to protect threatened forest bird

By [Stephanie Shinno The Garden Island](#) | Monday, March 8, 2021, 12:05 a.m.

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Dan Clark / Special to The Garden Island

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HONOLULU — The Center for Biological Diversity has sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for failing to designate critical habitat and develop a recovery plan for the threatened ‘i‘iwi, the best-known of Hawai‘i’s imperiled honey-creepers.

‘I‘iwi are medium-sized Hawaiian forest birds known for their iconic, bright-red plumage, black wings, and distinctive, long, curved bill.

Because of the extensive threats of mosquito-borne diseases, rapid ‘ohi‘a death — an invasive fungal disease that is killing ‘ohi‘a trees at an alarming rate — and climate change, the service listed the ‘i‘iwi as threatened in 2017.

The federal Endangered Species Act required the agency to designate critical habitat with its listing determination and develop a recovery plan for the bird. Yet the service has failed to do so, according to the lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Hawai‘i.

“The beautiful ‘i‘iwi needs our help, and it needs it now,” said Maxx Phillips, the center’s Hawai‘i director and staff attorney. “The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s foot-dragging is unacceptable. Without the protections provided by critical habitat and a valid recovery plan, ‘i‘iwi will continue down a heartbreaking path towards extinction.”

The ‘i‘iwi was once one of the most abundant native forest birds across Hawai‘i. It now exists on only three islands, with the population on Kaua‘i likely to go extinct within 30 years.

Like many native Hawaiian forest birds, ‘i‘iwi have an extremely low resistance to avian malaria, with an average 95% mortality rate. The combination of low resistance and high mortality means that nearly every ‘i‘iwi that comes into contact with avian malaria dies from the disease.

Since mosquitoes can’t live at higher elevations because of cooler temperatures, ‘i‘iwi have survived in higher-elevation forests.

But as the impacts of global climate change continue to accelerate, temperatures at higher elevations in Hawai‘i are increasing at an unforeseen rate.

This warming allows mosquitoes to expand their range into higher elevations, bringing with them avian malaria and avian pox. Additionally, the virus that causes avian malaria survives better in warmer temperatures, meaning warmer, high-elevation habitats will no longer be safe refuges from the disease.

“The future looks grim for ‘i‘iwi if we don’t act now,” Phillips said.

“These rare birds deserve protected habitat and a valid plan to guide their recovery and prevent them from vanishing forever. In particular, we have to restore forests at higher elevations on the Big Island to give ‘i‘iwi space to move uphill and do whatever we can to control mosquitoes on all the islands,” he said.

Listing the ‘i‘iwi as threatened in 2017 was the first step in ensuring its survival and recovery. Species without designated critical habitat are half as likely to move toward recovery as species with critical habitat.

Without protections for its critical habitat, the ‘i‘iwi will continue to lose what little disease-free forest habitat remains. Additionally, species with timely recovery plans for two or more years are far more likely to improve than those without.

Alongside the devastating impacts of mosquitoes and climate change, rapid ‘ohi‘a death is further threatening the ‘i‘iwi’s survival. ‘I‘iwi depend on the ‘ohi‘a for nesting and foraging, surviving primarily on the nectar from lehua blossoms.

Though originally limited to the island of Hawai‘i, as of June 2020 rapid ‘ohi‘a death has spread to Kaua‘i, Maui and O‘ahu. Since there is no effective means of containing the disease, ‘ohi‘a forest death poses a significant risk to the continued survival of the ‘i‘iwi.

Hawaiian forest birds, one of the most imperiled groups of birds in the world, are in crisis.

Some 68% of Hawai'i's known endemic bird species have already gone extinct because of habitat loss, disease and invasive predators. Of the remaining 37 surviving endemic species, 33 are currently listed under the Endangered Species Act, although nine of these have not been observed recently and are thought by scientists to be extinct. Introduced mosquitoes and the diseases they carry are primary causes of the loss of all these birds.

State Department of Land and Natural Resources' Senior Communications Manager Dan Dennison declined to comment on the pending legislation against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

However, Dennison highlighted main threats to the species, including habitat loss, habitat alteration by invasive ungulates and plants, predation by non-native rats and cats, and disease.

“Especially avian malaria,” Dennison said, “which is spread by non-native mosquitoes, climate change which is extending the range of mosquitoes into a previously mosquito-free habitat, and stochastic events such as hurricanes which threaten the remaining habitat.”

According to the DLNR, there are eight species of native forest birds on Kaua'i, six of which (akikiki, akeke'e, puaiohi, anianiau, Kaua'i amakihi and Kauai elepaio) are only found on Kaua'i. The other two (i'iwi and apapane) also occur on other main Hawaiian islands.

Three species — akikiki, akeke'e and puaiohi — are classified as endangered, and i'iwi is classified as threatened. Akikiki and puaiohi are included in USFWS's 2006 “Revised Recovery Plan for Hawaiian Forest Birds.”

Dennison said akikiki and akeke'e have critical habitat designated. All eight species are classed as species of greatest conservation need by DLNR in Hawai'i's State 2015 Wildlife Action Plan.