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Lawsuit Seeks to Protect Iridescent Hawaiian Bird From Extinction

[March 3, 2021](#) [MATTHEW RENDA](#)

The Center for Biological Diversity sued the federal government Wednesday saying their designation of a colorful Hawaiian bird under the Endangered Species Act did not go far enough to protect the iconic bird.

‘I‘iwi (Credit: Dan Clark / U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)
(CN) — The ‘i‘iwi is one of the most flagrantly beautiful birds to be found in the Hawaiian Islands — a place with no shortage of birds boasting iridescent plumage.

The bird has a flame-red body with black wings that flit rapidly and a curved salmon-colored beak that combine to make it one of the most recognizable birds in the unique island ecosystem. The bird is also in trouble.

Its population numbers are dwindling due to the confluence of several harmful vectors, including the salience of a mosquito-borne avian malarial disease, the diminution of ohia trees due to an invasive fungal disease and development encroachment into the bird species’ habitat.

These trends are compounded by climate change. For instance, ‘i‘iwi are adept at avoiding mosquitos by fleeing to the higher elevation portions of the island chain, where temperatures are too cool for mosquitos to flourish. But rising surface temperatures mean that mosquitos can survive at increasingly higher elevations, giving the bird little room to find succor.

For the above reasons, conservation groups believe that while the bird recently received protection under the Endangered Species Act, the absence of a critical habitat designation does little to nothing to help the bird recover.

With this in mind, the Center for Biological Diversity [sued](#) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Wednesday, saying the agency was derelict when it refused to grant protection to the ‘i‘iwi’s habitat when it was listed as threatened in September 2017.

The central argument being put forward by the environmental group is that the Endangered Species Act requires the Fish and Wildlife Service to establish critical habitat and provide a species recovery plan, neither of which has been done in the present instance.

“Without the protections provided by critical habitat and a valid recovery plan, ‘i‘iwi will continue down a heartbreaking path towards extinction,” said Maxx Phillips, the center’s Hawaii director and staff attorney.

The bird is firmly on that path at present. Once present on all eight of the major islands, the bird is today relegated to just three. Scientists predict the ‘i‘iwi will be extirpated from Kauai by 2050.

Hawaii is the most remote land mass on Earth and as such, many of their native species struggle when exposed to nonnative pathogens. Avian malaria, imported from Africa is devastating to the ‘i‘iwi, which suffers from a 95% mortality rate.

Nearly every member of the species who is infected with avian malaria dies.

Birds native to the Hawaiian islands, particularly those that reside in the forests as opposed to along the shore, are in a crisis.

Scientists estimate that as much as 68% of the birds endemic to the island chain have gone extinct due to habitat encroachment, disease or invasive predators. Disease is perhaps the main factor as introduced mosquitos and their pathogenic vectors are ravaging native bird populations.

Of the surviving 37 species endemic to the forests of Hawaii, 33 of them are listed as endangered or threatened. Nine of those 37 have not been observed in years and are thought by some scientists to have gone extinct.

“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.”