

Call to Action – Save the Palila!

CONSERVATION COUNCIL FOR HAWAII is calling on the state and federal government to accelerate recovery actions to save the palila, an endemic Hawaiian forest bird currently found only on the upper slopes of Mauna Kea on the Big Island of Hawai'i. Recent surveys indicate that the palila is rapidly declining in number. If the current trend continues, the palila could go extinct in 5 years.

On the Brink

Palila once inhabited the slopes of Mauna Kea, Mauna Loa, and probably Hualālai on the Big Island of Hawai'i. Their range extended down to Hilo, Hāmākua, and Kona. Palila bones were found in the famous Kalaeloa (Barber's Point) sinkholes near sea level on O'ahu and in the lowlands of Kaua'i. Today, the palila occupies only 5% of its historic range on the Big Island and only lives in the native māmane-naio dry forest between 6,000 and 9,000 feet elevation on Mauna Kea. Most of the population occupies the western slopes, including Pu'u Lā'au.

The palila depends on the māmane-naio forest on Mauna Kea for its survival. It mostly feeds on immature māmane seeds and also māmane flowers and leaves, insects and other invertebrates, and naio berries. It builds a nest of grasses, stems, twigs, and bark lined with lichens and leaves in māmane, and feeds māmane pods and native caterpillars that live in māmane pods to its chicks. Palila generally produce a maximum of two fledglings a year, and pairs sometimes forgo breeding in years when māmane seed production is poor.

Destruction and degradation of the māmane-naio forest by introduced sheep,

In traditional times, when the palila's whistle-like call was heard repeatedly throughout the forest, the people believed it was a sign of coming rain.

Photo © Jack Jeffrey

...Destruction and degradation of the māmane-naio forest by introduced sheep, goats, and cattle jeopardize the continued survival of the palila...

goats, and cattle jeopardize the continued survival of the palila. Other threats include predation by non-native mammals, wildfires, drought, weed invasions, an invasive tree fungus that may be killing māmane, and invasive wasps that compete with palila for caterpillars parents feed to nestlings. Although the relative importance of these threats is difficult to determine, a larger expanse of healthy māmane forest would ameliorate the effects of these threats.

Under the federal Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the palila as endangered in 1967 and designated critical habitat for the bird in 1977. The critical habitat roughly follows the boundaries of the Mauna Kea Forest Reserve, which is under the jurisdiction of the Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR) Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW).



The palila requires māmane (a native legume) to survive. Māmane provides food and nesting, breeding, and foraging habitat.

Photo © Jack Jeffrey

Palila v. Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources

In the 1970s and 1980s, Michael Sherwood of then Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund (now Earthjustice) represented the palila and concerned citizens and organizations in legal action against the State of Hawai'i under the federal Endangered Species Act. The māmane-naio forest had been almost completely destroyed after 200 years of grazing and browsing by introduced mammals. Three federal court orders – in 1979, 1987, and 1999 – require the State to completely and permanently remove all feral, mouflon, and feral-mouflon hybrid sheep, and feral goats from palila critical habitat.

According to DOFAW, its goal is to remove all of these animals from the Mauna Kea Forest Reserve. Liberal public hunting, as well as hunters contracted twice a year by DOFAW, help control the animals. However, hundreds, if not thousands, of animals (including feral goats) remain because the State has never asked for, or secured adequate funding to comply with the court orders, nor has such funding ever been a high-priority budget item for the State. The animals continue to eat māmane, naio, and other native plants palila need to survive, and destroy critical habitat by preventing regeneration, causing erosion, and clearing the way for invasive plants. The animals also threaten the endangered 'āhinahina (Mauna Kea silver-sword), which occurs within and above palila critical habitat.

Increased funding and effort are needed to comply with the palila court orders, including construction and maintenance of a mouflon-proof fence around the lower perimeter of the Mauna Kea Forest Reserve and in other strategic areas.

Saddle Road Palila Mitigation – Off to a Slow Start

Two state parcels – Pu'u Mali on the north and Ka'ohē on the west side of palila critical habitat – were set aside as part of a 10-year palila mitigation agreement between state and federal agencies as part of the Saddle Road Realignment and Improvement Project,

Increased funding and effort are needed to comply with the palila court orders...



Above: Introduced grazing and browsing mammals, introduced predators, weeds, wildfires, and inadequate fencing jeopardize the māmane-naio dry forest and continued survival of the palila.

Right: Introduced sheep and goats on Mauna Kea also threaten the endangered 'āhinahina (Mauna Kea silver-sword).

Photos © Jack Jeffrey



which threatened 41 acres of palila critical habitat near the Pōhakuloa Training Area. The agreement was drafted by the Federal Highways

Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and is part of the Service's Biological Opinion allowing the Saddle Road Project to proceed. The two parcels were previously leased by DLNR to private ranchers. As part of the agreement, the leases were revoked, and the Federal Highways Administration pays the lease fees to the State.

Although the 10-year agreement officially began in 2002, it took the agencies over 4 years to settle land disputes and complete fencing around the two palila mitigation parcels. Meanwhile, biologists were not able to access the Pu'u Mali parcel for several years in

order to translocate wild palila and release captive-reared birds.

The fence around the Pu'u Mali mitigation parcel was breached, and sheep and domestic cattle move in and out. Fence repair and regular fence maintenance by the Federal Highways Administration are necessary to protect the parcel for the palila.

The fence around the Ka'ohē mitigation parcel was not designed to exclude mouflon, and sheep and domestic cattle remain in the parcel. A mouflon-proof fence around the Ka'ohē parcel and regular fence maintenance are needed. The Federal Highways Administration and DLNR should also require private ranchers to remove trespassing domestic cattle from the Mauna Kea Forest Reserve and from both palila mitigation parcels.



Left: An invasive parasitic wasp preys on caterpillars that live in māmane pods – an important food for palila chicks.

Photo by Paul Banko

Below: Naio (false sandalwood) is a co-dominant tree in palila critical habitat. Naio berries are a food for the bird.

Photo © Jack Jeffrey



Another serious shortcoming in the palila mitigation agreement is that no restoration plan was written for the two parcels, nor did Federal Highways provide any funding to DOFAW to actively manage the parcels for palila. Nonetheless, DOFAW staff has been planting native species and controlling invasive plants and predators. To date, 4,500 māmane and ‘a‘ali‘i have been planted in the Pu‘u Mali parcel. DOFAW staff also began predator and weed control on the western slopes of Mauna Kea, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently provided funds for two dip tanks, which will increase the State’s ability to fight wildfires.

Māmane takes about 20 years to reach the size needed to support palila. Clearly, more than 10 years are needed to reforest the two palila mitigation parcels and establish self-sustaining palila populations. DLNR should add the two palila mitigation parcels to the Mauna Kea Forest Reserve so that they

can be managed for palila after the mitigation agreement expires in 2012 and so that the public investment in these areas is protected.

A small population of palila has been established on the north slope of Mauna Kea near the Pu‘u Mali mitigation parcel by translocating wild birds

and releasing captive-reared birds. Federal agencies and the State fund the captive rearing program. Pairs are breeding, but the population is not yet self-sustaining. Managing additional habitat and establishing populations of palila on the Big Island are essential to the palila’s recovery.

What Can You Do?

Contact the following federal and state officials:



-  Senator Daniel Akaka,
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(click on contact me)
-  Senator Daniel Inouye,
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-  Representative Neil Abercrombie,
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-  Representative Mazie Hirono,
U.S. Congress 202-225-4906,
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http://hirono.house.gov/email_me.shtml
-  Patrick Leonard, Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife
Service Pacific Islands Office 808-792-9400,
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-  David Gedeon, Saddle Road Project Manager,
Federal Highways Administration 720-963-3723, fax
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-  Governor Linda Lingle 808-586-0034, fax 808-586-0006,
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-  Laura H. Thielen, Director, Department of Land and
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-  Paul Conry, Administrator, Division of Forestry and
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The palila is one of the most famous Hawaiian honeycreepers – a diverse group of more than 50 species and subspecies (most now extinct) that evolved from a North American finch.

Photo © Jack Jeffrey

Urge them to take the following actions:

-  comply with the three palila court orders and remove all feral sheep, mouflon, and feral-mouflon hybrid sheep, and feral goats from palila critical habitat
-  secure funding to build and maintain a mouflon-proof fence around the lower-boundary of palila critical habitat

-  secure funding for palila recovery actions, including habitat restoration, captive rearing and release, invasive species removal, predator control, and research
-  repair and maintain the fence around the Pu'u Mali palila mitigation parcel and remove sheep and cattle immediately
-  build and maintain a mouflon-proof fence around the Ka'ohē palila mitigation parcel and remove sheep and cattle immediately require adjacent private ranchers to keep their cattle out of the Mauna Kea Forest Reserve, Pu'u Mali palila mitigation parcel, and Ka'ohē palila mitigation parcel
-  add the Pu'u Mali and Ka'ohē palila mitigation parcels to the Mauna Kea Forest Reserve before the palila mitigation agreement expires in 2012

Support organizations, such as the
Conservation Council for Hawai'i,
that speak up for wildlife.



Conservation Council for Hawai'i
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