

## Forest Birds

Photo

# ‘O‘u

*Psittirostra psittacea*

### **SPECIES STATUS:**

Federally Listed as Endangered

State Listed as Endangered

State recognized as endemic

Hawaii Natural Heritage Ranking G1—Critically imperiled

**SPECIES INFORMATION:** The ‘o‘u is a heavy-bodied, finch-billed Hawaiian honeycreeper with a distinctive thick, pink, hooked beak. ‘Ie‘ie (*Freyceinea arborea*) inflorescences comprised much of its diet, though ‘o‘u were also reported to feed on *Clermontia* spp. and other native fruits. Geometrid caterpillars are important diet components during summer (breeding) months, and the birds were known to feed on koa leaves, nectar and alien fruits. ‘o‘u have been observed flying above the canopy to feeding sites. Nesting and breeding habits have not been described.

**DISTRIBUTION:** ‘O‘u are restricted to mid-elevation (900-1500 meters, 3000 – 5000’) ‘ohi‘a forests on the islands of Kaua‘i and Hawai‘i. Their historic range extended from lowland dry and mesic forests to montane mesic and wet forests on all the main Hawaiian Islands.

Map distribution

**ABUNDANCE:** Population estimates for ‘o‘u during the Hawai‘i Forest Bird Survey in the late 1970’s were  $400 \pm 300$  birds on Hawai‘i, and  $3 \pm 6$  birds on Kaua‘i. ‘O‘u have not been detected in more recent surveys, though unconfirmed sightings are occasionally reported.

**LOCATION AND CONDITION OF KEY HABITAT:** Although known from a wide range of forests, dense ‘ohi‘a (*Metrosideros polymorpha*) forest with ‘ie‘ie was thought to be preferred habitat. Recent sightings have been confined to mid-elevation mesic to wet ‘ohi‘a forests with an understory of ‘ie‘ie, *Cibotium* spp. tree ferns, ‘olapa (*Cheirodendron* spp.), kawa‘u (*Ilex anomala*), kolea\* (*Myrsine* spp.), and pilo (*Coprosma* spp.) These mid-elevation forests are within the “mosquito zone”. Although all recent sightings have been on state managed Forest Reserve or Wilderness Preserve lands that should be considered stable, natural disasters may have adversely impacted ‘o‘u habitat. On Hawai‘i, a large portion of the Upper Waiakea Forest Reserve was inundated by a 1984 lava flow from Mauna Loa. Strong hurricanes on Kaua‘i in 1982 and 1992 destroyed native forest habitat. ‘O‘u, along with ‘o‘o and Kama‘o, have not been seen on Kaua‘i since Hurricane Iniki in 1992.

**THREATS:** Habitat loss and degradation certainly played a role in the decline of the 'o'u. Introduced ungulates have converted forests to pasturelands, and feral pigs have caused degradation of the understory in wet forests, including destruction of food plants. As 'o'u primarily inhabited low- to mid-elevation forests, they would have been exposed to mosquito-borne diseases in these areas where most native forest birds were extirpated. Direct predation by rats and cats on the birds may have contributed to the decline, and predation by rats of fruits and flowers of native plant species may have reduced food resources.

**CONSERVATION ACTIONS:** While no conservation actions specifically target the 'o'u, their recent habitat is within the range of several research and management projects. On Hawai'i, land in Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park, Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Refuge, Pu'u Maka'ala Natural Area Reserve and the 'Ola'a / Kilauea Forest Partnership where 'o'u have been recorded in the last 25 years have active management programs to remove feral ungulates and restore forest habitat in these areas. On Kaua'i, public hunting has assisted in the control of feral pigs in accessible areas of the Alaka'i. Should this species be rediscovered, the Rare Bird Recovery Protocol contained in the USFWS Recovery Plan for Hawaiian Forest Birds would be enacted.

**MONITORING:**

- Continue regular surveys of forest bird populations and habitat conditions.
- Include 'o'u in future efforts to survey rare Hawai'i forest birds.

**RESEARCH PRIORITIES:**

- None at this time.

**References:**

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2003. Draft Revised Recovery Plan for Hawaiian Forest Birds. Region 1, Portland, OR. 428pp.