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Eric VanderWerf
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,
about the rare pouli bird



Extinction near with native bird's death

The male honeycreeper captive on Maui was one of only three believed to exist

By Jaymes Song
Associated Press

One of the rarest birds on earth came closer to being wiped out -- if not already extinct -- with the death of one of the last three believed to exist, officials said.

The male pouli bird died in captivity late Friday, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said yesterday.

"This species was a unique part of earth's history," said Eric VanderWerf, the Fish and Wildlife Service's Hawaiian bird recovery coordinator. "We'll never have another one like it if it disappears. I kind of liken it in some way to the loss of the Mona Lisa or the Sistine Chapel. If we lost that, we could never get it back. We can never get another one."

The rare Hawaiian honeycreeper had been kept at the Maui Bird Conservation Center in Olinda since it was captured for breeding on Sept. 9. Biologists failed to capture a mate for the aging bird, which was found in the Hanawi Natural Area Reserve.

"It was very sad news and it's certainly a serious blow for the recovery for this species," said VanderWerf. "The chances of success were low to begin with because we only had three birds. Now we only have two."

The remaining two pouli, believed to be a male and a female, haven't been seen for nearly a year. They might have died, moved to another area or been missed by wildlife officials.

Even if the two birds are located, they still must be caught and successfully bred. It is also uncertain if the birds are male and female.

But biologists aren't giving up hope.

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The state, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Zoological Society of San Diego, which operates the Maui conservation center, launched a search yesterday to find the remaining two poouli in the remote rainforests of Maui.

"There's so many things going against this effort that (the death) makes it all very much more desperate, but no one is giving up on it," said Alan Lieberman, the Zoological Society's avian conservation coordinator. "As long as there's a chance that there are two, a male and female, no one is willing to throw in the towel."

The poouli is part of the Hawaiian honeycreeper family and is so unique it has its own genus. It was not discovered until 1973, when a group of University of Hawaii students conducting research on the east slope of Haleakala sighted a bird they had never seen before.

It is the only Hawaiian forest bird to rely heavily on native tree snails as its food. The small, stocky, brown bird has a partial black face described as a bandit's mask.

It is possible the poouli that died Friday was the last one, making it one of the rare opportunities where scientists were able to document the moment a species became extinct.

"This unfortunately is an opportunity for people to say, 'I know the hour, the day, the hour, the minute, the second, it went extinct,'" Lieberman said. "That is a sobering moment."

Tissue samples from the bird were saved for cryogenic preservation for possible cloning in the future.

"Someday, when technology catches up with our fantasies, we may be able to resurrect the poouli because we saved these cells," Lieberman said.

The poouli's numbers have dwindled from a rough estimate of 150 because of habitat loss and introduced predators like rats, cats and mongoose. Nonnative diseases carried by mosquitos, such as avian malaria, have also taken a toll on the Hawaiian birds.

The poouli that recently died contracted avian malaria, but the exact cause of death won't be known until tests from the necropsy are completed.

Despite the bird's death, capturing it was the right decision, scientists said. It was old and missing one eye, compromising its ability to survive in the wild.

"I don't think it was a mistake," VanderWerf said. "If we had left the birds where they were, the species would certainly gone extinct. It

may anyway, but I think that was really the only option we had at the time."

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service -- Pacific

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