

Hawaiian Bird Chick is a First

by Barbara Maxfield

Marking the first time the species has been bred in captivity, an endangered Maui parrotbill (*Pseudonestor xanthophrys*) chick hatched on July 21, 2000, at the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center on the island of Hawai'i. The encouraging news makes it possible that, with captive breeding as a tool, this extremely rare forest bird will eventually recover.

"This is really a quantum leap," said Alan Lieberman, co-director of the Zoological Society of San Diego's programs in Hawaii. "It's a big step to have captive adult birds healthy and content enough to breed."

its feeding habits, and it uses its strong, parrot-like bill to tear apart decaying timber in search of insects and larvae. The number of Maui parrotbills in the wild has dwindled to fewer than 500. An introduced avian disease carried by non-native mosquitos is thought to be the primary reason for the parrotbill's decline, said Thane Pratt, a wildlife biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey's Biological Resource Division. Other major threats to the bird are habitat destruction, encroachment of invasive species, and introduced predators such as rats. Restoration of mature forests and elimination of unnatural predators will be necessary for most native Hawaiian forest birds to thrive in the wild, Pratt said.

The center currently holds three adult parrotbills, including the pair that bred. Two other endangered Hawaiian songbirds being held at the center, the palila (*Loxioides bailleui*) and the Hawaii creeper (*Oreomystis mana*), also successfully bred for the first time this year. The center plans to keep a small, genetically diverse population of each species to help replenish numbers in the wild once proper habitat has been secured. Partners in the Hawaiian forest bird conservation programs include Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources, The Peregrine Fund, the U.S. Geological Survey's Biological Resources Division, the Zoological Society of San Diego, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and numerous private landowners.

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Above, a 20-day old Maui parrotbill.

Photo by Alan Lieberman/Zoological Society of San Diego

Above right, a parrotbill peels away bark in search of food.

Illustration by Rochelle Mason,
www.rmasonfinearts.com



The chick's parents hatched at the center from eggs collected in the wild in 1997 and 1999. Until now, little has been observed of the birds' breeding behavior because they normally live in a rugged, remote area.

The Maui parrotbill, an olive-green to yellowish bird the size of a small canary, is found only on Maui's mid-to-high-elevation eastern rainforests in the Hanawi Natural Area Reserve and The Nature Conservancy's Waikamoi Preserve. The parrotbill, like other rare Hawaiian forest birds, is a specialist in