

The Pacific extinction crisis by Don Stewart

Title What is it about birds that, from mankind's earliest known origins, so informs and symbolizes our mythologies and beliefs? From the ancient Egyptians, to whose god, Thoth, with the head of a Ibis, was attributed the invention of writing; to Persia and Greece, where the mythical, winged Phoenix represented the resurrection of mortals born again from ashes; to Imperial Rome, where the Eagle was a symbol of power and strength ? as it remains today in the United States - to the Crane which represented long life and immortality in ancient China; to the early Polynesian explorers and settlers of widely-dispersed oceanic islands who considered birds to be sacred, using their plumage for religious and ceremonial purposes. Since these ancient times, birds have been regarded as the link between heaven and earth because of their connection to the sky. They are one of the few creatures that by moving their wings can lift themselves aloft to survey their environment from above. They have successfully colonized every habitat on the globe, from underwater to mountain peaks, from the tropics to the Antarctic. Today some of the earlier symbolism remains: the Dove represents peace, the Owl wisdom, the unfortunate Albatross an encumbrance thanks to Coleridge. Some fly high, some can't fly at all, others swim like fish. Save the largely hidden insect world, there are no other creatures on this planet that can match their ubiquity or adaptability. They are unique and they are everywhere. They are represented more widely than any other species in our art, our literature and our music regardless of our origins, race, creed or culture. In the Pacific, for instance, consider the customary importance of the ceremonial ornamentation of highlanders in Papua New Guinea and the traditional head-dresses of the Cook Islands and Tahiti ? both derived from the bright plumages of birds. Birds once had their more prosaic uses, too. During the industrial 19th century, it was the practice of coal miners in Europe to take canaries with them when they descended to the pits. The reason for this was elementary: these tiny, elegant creatures were much more sensitive to changes in the environment they shared with the miners than were the miners themselves. Canaries could sense the presence of combustible gases before those gases had a chance to cause an explosion. If your canary dropped off its perch, you knew to get out of the mine fast until ? if ever - it was safe for you to go back. Today, the analogy of those canaries to birds in the Pacific region, and everywhere else for that matter, is as obvious as it should be startling. The Pacific's endemic bird species are more than just bright and beautiful creatures, ornamental, ceremonial, inspirational, ingrained in the cultures of all of us, representing prophesy, birth, love, peace, religion, togetherness and many more of our positive and admirable attributes and virtues. Above all, birds, like those canaries down the mine of yesteryear, are the most visible and ubiquitous indicators of the state of our natural environments, both terrestrial and marine. They are the canaries of our age and, like those old-time miners, we ignore at our peril what they are telling us. Here are some disquieting figures. During the 17th century, fewer than 100 years after it was first recorded, the last remaining

survivor of the largest species of pigeon ever to share our planet vanished from the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius because its habitat was destroyed by man and by the animals he brought with him. Since that time, 133 more bird species have followed the unfortunate and innocent Dodo, whose very name is now a metaphor for extinction, to its fate. That's right: 133 separate species of birds have been wiped out in the past 350 years or so, virtually all of them because of the actions of humans and the creatures they bring with them. They are lost forever. Never to be seen again. Of the surviving 9,865 species of birds currently to be found on our planet, 1,227, or 12.4%, are classified as Globally-threatened. 362 of these are classified as Endangered and an additional 192 as Critically Endangered, which means that they are but one step away from extinction. I repeat: right now, as you read this, almost 200 species of birds are facing imminent extinction. And extinction is forever. The data are dismaying in the Pacific region, which holds the dubious distinction of recording the greatest number of bird extinctions of any part of the world. 65 of those 133 bird extinctions recorded globally since 1500 - an incredible 50% - are known to have occurred in the Pacific region. 67 of the endemic birds to be found in this region are classified as Endangered - 19% of the world's total. 44 of these are Critically-endangered, that is teetering on the brink of extinction and if nothing is done actively to save them, they will go the same way as the Dodo and its unfortunate followers. The reasons for this dreadful situation are well-known. Pacific birds face what the Dodo encountered. All endemic species on our islands evolved in isolation and in the absence of predators. What is now devastating them are the twin, human-induced threats of invasive alien species and habitat loss. Rats, in particular, but other pests as well, (like the mongoose, which is responsible for the disappearance of all ground-nesting terrestrial birds on Viti Levu), are destroying entire, defenceless species of birds before our very eyes while we continue to help these predators in their successfully destructive efforts by cutting down the last of our terrestrial birds' forest habitats in the cause of unsustainable logging and equally unsustainable agricultural practices. At the same time, we are devastating marine bird species by the use of intensive and destructive fishing techniques. We are actively and willingly destroying the places where our birds have lived peacefully since time immemorial and they now have nowhere else to go. Why do we continue to allow this to happen? We know what is happening and we know what must be done. All the evidence is there. The need now is to do something, to implement conservation actions on the ground across the region before it's too late for the very survival of the 44 Critically-endangered birds in this region that are on the brink of extinction. To do that, BirdLife International, through its participating NGO Partners in the region is working on a three-pronged survival strategy. First, we are researching and publishing data on Important Bird Areas, or IBAs, in the Pacific. These are sites of global significance not just to birds but to biodiversity conservation more broadly because, as I've said, birds are the best-known, and most widely studied and distributed species on our planet and tell us much about the state of our environment. So far more than 400 such sites have been identified and work is continuing to find more, particularly with regards to seabirds, about which little is known in the region. Community-based efforts are now under way in many of these IBAs to actively conserve these vital habitats and the birds whose survival depend on them. Second, we are dealing with the threat posed by invasive alien species, especially rats which were introduced to our islands by men in ships. Originally entirely foreign to our shores, rats have now reached pestilential proportions and pose serious public health problems as well as directly threatening the survival of many of our endemic birds. In the past five years, BirdLife and its NGO Partners have successfully carried out rat eradication projects on many islands important for breeding seabirds in a vast area spreading from French Polynesia in the east, Fiji and New Caledonia in the west and Palau in the north using techniques pioneered in New Zealand. Third, BirdLife International has launched its Preventing Extinctions Programme which aims to take immediate conservation actions to save the world's 192 Critically Endangered bird species before, just like the Dodo, they

disappear forever. In the Pacific, working with Forest and Bird which administers the BirdLife International Community Conservation Fund, we have raised resources to assist in taking emergency actions to save the Fiji Petrel, Tahiti Monarch, Polynesian Ground Dove, Fatu Hiva Monarch, Tuamotu Kingfisher, Crow Honeyeater, Pohnpei Starling, White-chested White-eye and Makira Moorhen, all of which are trembling on the brink of extinction. Other species that require urgent conservation action include the Kagu, Marquesan Kingfisher, Faichuk White-eye, Rarotonga Monarch and Micronesian Megapode, all of which are also in danger vanishing altogether, and in the very near future, if we don't act now. Even with these three initiatives, there is a lot more to be done. For instance, we have yet to scratch the surface of our neighbours in Western Melanesia – Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. IBA and other data do not exist – yet – for these countries but we do know, for example, from satellite imagery, the extent of deforestation on islands like New Britain which indicates that many more bird species are threatened with extinction than previously feared. An eighth of lowland forest on this island – a stronghold for a number of birds found nowhere else on Earth – disappeared between 1989 and 2000, largely driven by a rapid and uncontrolled expansion in global demand for palm oil. A similar situation exists on other Melanesian islands and it is to be hoped that funding for necessary and urgent surveys will be forthcoming so that conservation actions can be planned and implemented before it is too late for the birds of Melanesia. Our fast-moving, web-based cultures are reducing the once-widespread and remarkable symbolism of birds to tweets on Twitter. So why not repay the birds by using Twitter and the web to help ensure the very survival of our threatened endemic bird species – and our wider biodiversity – by supporting urgent conservation actions? Actions to combat invasive alien species, unsustainable and destructive logging, forestry, agricultural, urban development and fishing policies and practices need to be supported by you, the reader, and by everyone else, and by governments and NGOs. For, if you don't do this, and do it now, our region will lose forever those 44 Critically Endangered species I have mentioned well before this century is over. I have a dream, and it should, I hope, be yours, too. That is for my grandchildren and their children to be able to regard with wonder and awe the remarkable and unique species of wonderful birds with which this region has been blessed. I also have a nightmare, and I hope it is yours, too; that is my grandchildren and their children growing up to ask, accusingly, why didn't this present generation do something about the extinction crisis in the Pacific when it had the chance? Dodos or canaries? Dreams or nightmares? The choice is ours. The birds are telling us something we should be listening to. It is time to act. **Subscribe to The BirdLife Pacific Quarterly E-Newsletter**