

Why Row An Ocean For Birds?

By Mary Rose

People ask why on earth would I decide to row an ocean for birds? Surely I could find easier ways to raise awareness? Yes, but rowing an ocean grabs attention and helps raise funds.

Why now, and why in such a big way? I am a bit of a bookworm. If it's about birds, I'll read it. I have amassed a large library of books and journals on everything from bird behavior to conservation. The more I read, the more I see an impending crisis. My heart breaks when I read about a zoo forced to choose which species to work to save because of funding.



Spix's Macaw. Photo used with permission of Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation.

Birds are a key component of biodiversity and a crucial part of our ecosystem. They provide us with economic and cultural benefits. We are amazed at their beauty, which we incorporate into our religions, and even national identities. Yet through our modern lives, we directly impact the ability of these animals to survive. It is our responsibility to do all we can to save them. We have the power to do so.

Statistics illustrate why we must act immediately. BirdLife International is the official authority for birds for the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List. In BirdLife's 2012 assessment, 1313 bird species are considered threatened with extinction. All 1313 species fall into the class of Critically Endangered, Endangered, or Vulnerable. An additional 880 species are considered Near Threatened and another four are extinct in the wild. A grand total of 2197 Red List birds! This staggering number represents 22 per cent of the world's extant bird species.

A look at extinctions over the last 500 years provides some frightening figures.



Bolivian Spinetail. Photo used with permission of Asociación Armonía

In October 2012 researchers from BirdLife International and Charles Darwin University (Australia) identified 279 bird species and subspecies that have become extinct in the last 500 years. They showed that species extinctions peaked in the early twentieth century, fell by mid-century, and subsequently accelerated. To me this is a tragic state of affairs.

Of the birds on the IUCN Red List and those already extinct, some are very close to our home. Hawaiian birds are among the most endangered birds. Of 71 known species endemic to Hawaii, 23 are extinct, and 30 of the remaining 48 species and subspecies are classified as Endangered or Threatened. What are the problems? Predators, feral cattle, pigs, nonnative disease-carrying insects, and of course, loss of habitat. Humans play a huge role.

We need to make a concerted effort to act sooner rather than later when it comes to conservation for birds. I certainly do not want to sit back and watch it happen, so rowing an ocean to raise awareness and funding is my solution for now.

A quick update: With less than a year until the start of the race, the next stage of training has begun. I'm now fully immersed in classes for just about everything I need to know to safely do

this race. I'm doing Sea Survival training in California and editing has started for the documentary about my effort. I'm also working with several groups to obtain video, which can be used as part of the awareness campaign. In September, I travel to the Keauhou Bird Conservation Center in Hawaii to examine its work. What an honor it will be to be so close to some of Hawaii's rarest birds. I hope it will not be the last time I see them. 🐦

Reference:

Szabo J.K., Khwaja N., Garnett S.T., Butchart S.H.M. 2012. Global patterns and drivers of avian extinctions at the species and subspecies level. *PLoS ONE* 7(10): e47080. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0047080

June 7, 2014 marks the start of the race to show that Extinction is Optional™. Through the Pacific Rowing Race, Mary Rose will be rowing almost 3000 miles from California to Hawaii to raise funds to benefit avian conservation. A 90 day journey across the Pacific Ocean, powered only by oars. Don't let another species become another Carolina Parakeet or Passenger Pigeon. Let's do something now to help the birds. For more information visit www.chirpingcentral.com



Kakapo. Photo by Barbara Heidenreich.



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