

Robby Kohley
Director of Aviculture
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Can you please introduce yourself?

Robby Coley

My name is Robby Coley. I work for Pacific Rim Conservation, which is a non-profit organization that specializes on what I've called "boots on the ground conservation": translocations, predator control, exclusion fences, and things like that, the basic conservation needs. My title is Director of Aviculture. PRC specializes in translocations, and I oversee that program. My involvement with the 'akikiki conservation project is linked to my experience working in the field in Hawai'i, having avicultural experience with the birds, having experience in incubation, capture of adults, transfer of adults, and how to make that happen in the field.

Tell us more about your involvement with the 'akikiki conservation project, about this translocation.

Robby Coley

I wouldn't call the 'akikiki conservation project a translocation project per se. The classical definition of a translocation is moving one species, adults, eggs, or chicks to another point in the wild. In this project, we're trying to bring the last remaining individuals into captivity to hopefully safeguard the population for when they can be re-released. Even though we're moving the 'akikiki into captivity for safe holding, the same skill sets are required.

So how did we end up here? Why is relocating the 'akikiki into captivity so urgent?

Robby Coley

There's real no short answer to how we got to this point. I remember when I first got asked to participate, a couple years back, in the decision-making process of bringing these birds into captivity. I came to the meeting, prepared to say maybe bringing them into captivity isn't the best choice, but then, when the other scientists involved laid out where we were at with the species, I realized we had no choice. We were staring extinction in the face. The number of 'akikiki individuals left, the rate at which they were decreasing, and so on.

There are a lot of things that got us to this point. I wish there were more options on the table right now, but unfortunately, we waited until there are very few individuals left. The mosquito stuff is super important, but it has taken a long time to get to this point. Whereas it relates to this honeycreeper species, bringing them into captivity is its only hope. There are really just a few birds left in the wild and there will be none left if we wait until the mosquito suppression techniques actually get used at the landscape level.

What's the greatest challenge of this conservation effort?

Robby Coley

Government agencies sometimes move very slowly because people within these agencies need to be sure they're making the right decisions. You're also dealing with the public, and a lot of times, the public isn't really well informed on how desperate the situation is for these species. Many people don't know mosquitoes aren't native to Hawai'i, or they don't even really know these birds exist. Sometimes, you have a small group of uninformed people who seem to be clamoring much louder than the people working with the birds, and then the government has to take all those different peoples and voices into consideration. I think that slows down the recovery process. A lot of times, funding is difficult to get, and it takes a long time to get the money needed to do a lot of the large-scale actions that are needed. That said though, there's a small group of scientists that is working really hard and who are really passionate about saving those species.

Where does the 'akikiki stand right now? Can you sum it up for us?

Robby Coley

The first time I saw the bird was in 2000. I was working as an intern on the Big Island. I flew over to Kaua'i and hitchhiked up to the Alaka'i. I saw a pair of 'akikiki off the boardwalk. At that point in time, most mosquitoes were still right around 34, 36 hundred feet, so a good portion of the mountains, the Alaka'i, was still safe. I came back to Kaua'i in 2006 when I worked for the San Diego Zoo and was overseeing the releases of puaiohi, and we were still getting 'akakiki in Wai Koa drainage where we were doing the releases. Today, the birds are gone from all those places. I've been working in conservation in Hawai'i for over 20 years and I've watched the species decline dramatically to the point where we're at now. And I'm going to sum it up: the only reason I didn't go into the field this week is because we're putting an emphasis on collecting eggs, and they are not finding any nests. The birds are literally dying as fast as we can find them. It's really frightening out there right now.

That's terrible. When nests and eggs are found though, what happens? What role do you play?

Robby Coley

I was brought on by the State, and Fish and Wildlife to help with recovering the eggs. The Kaua'i Forest Bird Recovery Project has an excellent staff of dedicated field biologists who are excellent at finding the territories and finding the nests. The San Diego Zoo has wonderful facilities on Big Island and Maui, but there's not a lot of experience in between that, as far as liaison of getting the eggs, chicks and adults out of the field. So the way it works is the Kauai Forest Bird team biologists find a nest, they find a pair, and then I come in. We work together with the capture and the safe transfer of either eggs, adults, or chicks to the San Diego Zoo facility where they're then cared for from that point on. So my role is that of a middleman between the capture or collection of adults, chicks, or eggs, and then getting them out of the field safely, and then to the zoo safely. From then on, the zoo takes it.

Are the stakes higher because there are only forty individuals left in the wild?

Robby Coley

I've been on the front lines of a lot of these kinds of projects, where there's only a few individuals left, and I always tell people that it's really stressful. Of course, it's only really stressful if you care, but every person on this team cares a whole. For us, every single individual matters. I mean, whether it's an egg, a chick, or an adult, that genetic potential, each individual matters. So a lot of work goes into being ready for what I like to call the "what ifs". You know, what if it's too foggy or too rainy for the helicopter to fly the eggs out in time, do we have the backup generator? How long does the brooder/incubator in the field work? Same with adults; what if an adult was to crash from for the stress, or they've already been exposed to malaria, do we have an ICU that can be ran in the field off battery? Do we have the medicine prepared? Do team members have the aviculture skill sets? So you try to think of all the "what ifs". At some point in time, it does become a rabbit hole because there is so many things that are out of our control, but you owe it to the species to be ready. If you're going to take on this responsibility, you need to be ready.

What is the future of the 'akiki and the other Hawaiian forest birds? Is it too late for them?

Robby Coley

Conservationist and environmentalists are often labeled as pessimists. It feels like we're always negative and preaching a message of doom. The reality is we're trying to bang the drum for the environment, for these species, and at the root of it all, it's because we're all optimists. The fact is, if we didn't believe that a species could be saved, or we didn't believe that a difference could be made, we wouldn't be trying to do it. I work with a passionate group of people who prove that point every day. We're right there, on the front lines, working in the field to save a species that sometimes it feels not a whole lot of people really care about. I hope that's not true, but sometimes, it feels that way. So you have to be an optimist. To be brutally honest, right now, things don't feel optimistic with the timeline that it will take to control the mosquitoes. There's a high probability that 'akikiki will go extinct in the wild. However, if the captive population is large enough, if that genetic reservoir is kept, then the species can be returned to the wild at some point. That's why what we're doing now is so important, and that's why the mosquito suppression efforts are super important. So even though things don't look good right now, I am optimistic, otherwise I wouldn't be working with this passionate group of people, trying to make a difference for this species.

There seems to be misinformation, and perhaps even disinformation about the eradication of invasive mosquitoes to save Hawaiian forest birds. How do you feel when someone with a big social media presence and little understanding of the topic wields more weight than scientists who are in the field, and actually collecting data and working with the birds. Is it frustrating?

Robby Coley

I find it very frustrating. Not just with this topic, but in many other instances. The internet was supposed to make us all smarter, and we've got into this thing where whoever yells the loudest

is the one that gets listened to, and it's really unfortunate. I wouldn't say scientists are introverts, but many of us want to work outside, and we want to do our thing and be experts in our field. We didn't get into politics to change people's mind. I'm not the person on the internet being louder than the last person because that's not my role. So yes, the misinformation is really frustrating, and I don't know what to do about it to be completely honest.

With the hope that your answer will inspire others to care, my last question is simply: why do you care?

Robby Coley

That's actually a difficult question to answer. I remember a long time ago, I was helping an individual seabird on a project that I was working on. And I remember a fellow scientist said to me: "I don't know why you're doing that because they're not endangered. There are a lot of them, and it doesn't matter with the population level that they have." And I remember, my answer was: "Well, it matters to him!" From an empathy standpoint, the individuals who don't have voices, whether they're humans or animals, they also deserve a voice, they deserve to live. They deserve our empathy. They deserve our caring just by their actual existence. And for me, it hurts because the 'akikiki is part of Hawai'i. It's part of the ecosystem, it's Hawaiian, it belongs to that ecosystem and it's endemic to Kaua'i, and the thought of it missing, like all the birds that have gone extinct before them, makes that forest a very different place. In my opinion, if we lose the 'akikiki, we also lose a part of Hawai'i. It deserves the right to be up there, and to be healthy and happy, just like the rest of us. So for me, that potential loss feels very real and very personal.