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World's birds on death row: Race against time to save 189 species from extinction

The world's most ambitious bird conservation project will be launched this week amid evidence that hunting and loss of habitat has caused species to disappear at an unprecedented rate. David Randall reports

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The biggest and most wide-ranging bird conservation programme the world has ever seen will be launched next week with the aim of saving every one of the planet's critically endangered species from extinction.

The task is urgent. There are now no fewer than 189 birds in this most precipitous category – 51 more than there were just seven years ago. Scientists say that if no action is taken then all of them could be gone within the next 10 years; 15 are already classified as "possibly extinct".

The death of bird species is now happening faster than at any time in history. Without human interference, the natural rate of loss would be one bird each century. But extinctions are accelerating and running at 50 times that rate. In the past 30 years alone, 21 have gone – three of them since 2000.

BirdLife International, which acts as a scientific and conservation "United Nations" for bird organisations worldwide, now aims to stop the rot. So next week at Birdfair, the three-day festival for British enthusiasts co-organised by the RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts, Birdlife will launch a project to pull each and every one of the 189 species back from the brink.

This danger list includes six owls, three albatrosses, 16 birds of prey, 10 hummingbirds, 17 parrots, four woodpeckers, six ducks and umpteen pigeons, plovers, wrens, warblers, finches, curlews and larks.

Their names are some of the most evocative in the bird world: the gorgeted wood-quail, sapphire-bellied hummingbird, Alagoas foliage-gleaner, Pernambuco pygmy-owl and Iquitos gnatcatcher (some of which have never been photographed), Bulu Burti boubou (a shrike, discovered in Somalia in 1988), the kakapo (the world's only flightless, nocturnal parrot), and the turquoise-throated puffleg, a hummingbird so rare no one has seen it since 1850. There are, happily, no British birds on the list.

BirdLife's project, called "Preventing Extinctions: Saving the World's Most Threatened Birds", will launch what are in effect 189 different races against time.

For each bird there will be a "species guardian", a local body that will work with BirdLife to carry out the conservation. And, for each of the 189 at risk, BirdLife is also seeking a "species champion" – a company, organisation or institution that will "adopt" a threatened bird and provide regular funding.

Donations from individuals are also, of course, very welcome. Some £20,000 is needed to kick-start a protection project for each species of bird, and, to save all 189, BirdLife calculates it will need to raise at least £19m over the next five years.

Dr Mike Rands, chief executive of BirdLife International, told The Independent on Sunday: "Through this innovative approach every single critically endangered bird can be saved from extinction. We know the priority conservation actions needed for each species – what we need now is the support of companies, organisations or even individuals. This is an enormous challenge, but one that we are fully committed to achieving."

TV's Springwatch presenter and wildlife film-maker Simon King said: "This is an exciting and ambitious project and deserves to be supported by every nature lover in the country."

Birdfair, which he, Bill Oddie and tens of thousands of other enthusiasts will attend at Rutland Water next weekend, has singled out four of the most pressing cases as the focus of its fund-raising. The birds' plight illustrates the desperately urgent work that needs to be done. There is the Bengal florican, the world's rarest bustard, now down to fewer than 1,000 in south-east Asia through loss of its wet grassland habitat; the Restinga antwren – a mere 10 square kilometres of its Brazilian beach-scrub habitat remains, and even that's under threat; Belding's yellowthroat, a warbler of Mexican wetlands, now confined through development to just a few marshes; and the Djibouti francolin, which is blighted by habitat loss, climate change and hunting.

Other emergency projects will try to save the long-billed apalis (a warbler of central east Africa suffering through destruction of woodland); the dwarf olive ibis (a forest dweller endemic to the west African island of São Tomé, suffering from tree-clearance); the Puerto Rican nightjar (confined to the south-west of the island, under pressure from development and feral cats); the Mindoro bleeding heart (a ground-living pigeon endemic to one Philippine island, it was once common but now nearly all of its wooded habitat is gone); and the white-shouldered ibis (a wetland species of south-east Asia, whose habitat has been wrecked through logging and intensive agriculture).

Some of the birds on the list, such as the black stilt, are now down to just a handful of individuals, while others, including the red-headed vulture, still number in the thousands but have lost nearly 90 per cent of their population in the past 10 years.

There is concern, too, about some long-lived species, such as the three albatrosses on the list and the Philippine eagle, whose young are not surviving to replace the adults who will die out in the next decade or so.

The task is to stop these birds following into oblivion the 72 species that were lost in the 20th century, the most costly era for extinctions in recorded history.

Those that will fly no more include the slender-billed grackle, a songbird endemic to Mexico not seen since 1910; the thick-billed ground-dove (1927); robust white-eye (small Australian songbird, 1928); the Hawaiian oo (one of four honey-eaters that became extinct after Europeans arrived, 1934); the red-moustached fruit-dove (1950); laughing owl (1970); the Alaotra grebe (killed off in Madagascan waters by fishing and an introduced carnivorous fish, 1988); and the po'o-uli (a honeycreeper, presumed extinct in Hawaii through habitat destruction and disease-carrying mosquitoes, 2004).

What gives BirdLife hope is some recent successes. In the 10 years between 1994 and 2004, 16 species were saved from extinction, all as a result of targeted conservation. They include the Norfolk Island green parrot, which in the Nineties was down to just four females of breeding age, but which now can boast 200-300 and is rapidly increasing; the Bali starling, which poaching eradicated in the wild but which thanks to captive breeding is now thriving once more; and the Chatham Island taiko, a seabird from the petrel family – it was reduced to just four pairs in 1994 but control of predators has seen it start to recover, with 11 chicks hatching in 2006.

And, in a demonstration of how apparently insuperable obstacles can be overcome, only last week Timor-Leste, formerly the deeply troubled land of East Timor, announced its first national park just five years after gaining independence.

The Nino Konis Santana National Park covers 304,000 acres and includes the territory of the yellow-crested cockatoo, one of the species on BirdLife's list. It continues to be severely threatened by illegal trapping for the exotic bird trade, but the safeguarding of its home is a good omen for the work ahead with the other 188 critically endangered birds.

Additional reporting by Rachel Wolff

SOS: species on the BirdLife International list

White-winged guan & Trinidad piping-guan & blue-billed curassow & gorgeted wood-quail & Djibouti francolin & Himalayan quail & crested shelduck & Laysan duck & Campbell Islands teal & pink-headed duck & Madagascar pochard & Brazilian merganser & Amsterdam albatross & waved albatross & Chatham albatross & Galapagos petrel & Jamaica petrel & magenta petrel & Chatham petrel & Fiji petrel & Beck's petrel & Mascarene petrel & Balearic shearwater & Townsend's shearwater & New Zealand storm-petrel & Guadalupe storm-petrel & Alaotra grebe & Junin grebe & white-bellied heron & white-shouldered ibis & giant ibis & northern bald ibis & dwarf olive ibis & Christmas frigatebird & Chatham Islands shag & California condor & white-collared kite & Cuban kite & Madagascar fish-eagle & white-rumped vulture & Indian vulture & slender-billed vulture & red-headed vulture & Ridgway's hawk & Philippine eagle & Bengal florican & New Caledonian rail & Samoan moorhen & Makira moorhen & Siberian crane & black stilt & Javan lapwing & sociable lapwing & St Helena plover & Eskimo curlew & slender-billed curlew & Jerdon's courser & Chinese crested tern & Kittlitz's murrelet & silvery wood-pigeon & blue-eyed ground-dove & purple-winged ground-dove & Grenada dove & Mindoro bleeding-heart & Negros bleeding-heart & Sulu bleeding-heart & Polynesian ground-dove & Negros fruit-dove & Marquesan imperial-pigeon & kakapo & yellow-crested cockatoo & Philippine cockatoo & blue-fronted lorikeet & New Caledonian lorikeet & red-throated lorikeet & Malherbe's parakeet & orange-bellied parrot & night parrot & Lear's macaw & glaucous macaw & spix's macaw & blue-throated macaw & yellow-eared parrot & grey-breasted parakeet & indigo-winged parrot & Puerto Rican amazon & Sumatran ground-cuckoo & black-hooded coucal & Siau scops-owl & Anjouan scops-owl & Moheli scops-owl & Grand Comoro scops-owl & Pernambuco pygmy-owl & forest owlet & Jamaican pauraque & Puerto Rican nightjar & New Caledonian owlet-nightjar & short-crested coquette & sapphire-bellied hummingbird & Honduran emerald & chestnut-bellied hummingbird & purple-backed sunbeam & dusky starfrontlet & Juan Fernandez firecrown & black breasted puffleg & turquoise-throated puffleg & colourful puffleg & Tuamotu kingfisher & Sulu hornbill & rufous-headed hornbill & Okinawa woodpecker & imperial woodpecker & ivory-billed woodpecker & Kaempfer's woodpecker & Gurney's pitta & Araripe manakin & Kinglet calyptura & Minas Gerais tyrannulet & Kaempfer's tody-tyrant & Rondonia bushbird & Rio de Janeiro antwren & Alagoas antwren & Restinga antwren & Stresemann's bristlefront & Bahia tapaculo & Royal cinclodes & Masafuera rayadito & Alagoas foliage-gleaner & Uluguru bush-shrike & Bullo Burti boubou & Sao Tome fiscal & Isabela oriole & Sangihe shrike-thrush & caerulean paradise-flycatcher & Seychelles paradise-flycatcher & Tahiti monarch & Fatuhiva monarch & black-chinned monarch & Banggai crow & white-eyed river-martin & Archer's lark & Raso lark & Taita apalis & long-billed apalis & Liberian greenbul & millerbird & blue-crowned laughingthrush & Mauritius olive white-eye & Rota bridled white-eye & Sangihe white-eye & white-chested white-eye & Faichuk white-eye & golden white-eye & Niceforo's wren & Munchique wood-wren & Iquitos gnatcatcher & Socorro mockingbird & Cozumel thrasher & Pohnpei starling & Bali starling & olomao & puaiohi & Somali thrush & Taita thrush & Rueck's blue-flycatcher & Cebu flowerpecker & Mauritius fody & Sao Tome grosbeak & Azores bullfinch & Nihoa finch & ou & Maui parrotbill & nukupuu & akikiki & Oahu alauahio & akohekohe & po'o-uli & Bachman's warbler & Belding's yellowthroat & Semper's warbler & Montserrat oriole & Guadalupe junco & hooded seedeater & Entre Rios seedeater & Carrizal blue-black seedeater & mangrove finch & pale-headed brush-finch & cone-billed tanager & cherry-throated tanager

How 'IoS' readers can help

We are asking every reader to support BirdLife's Preventing Extinctions project in its efforts to protect endangered species. For full details, and to make a donation, visit: www.birdlife.org