



Proposed Critical Habitat for the O`ahu `Elepaio

Once described as “the commonest native land bird to be found on the island,” the O`ahu `elepaio is now an endangered species. To further protect this small forest bird, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to designate five areas of critical habitat encompassing approximately 66,350 acres for the O`ahu `elepaio. The proposed rule was published in the Federal Register on June 6, 2001. We hope this summary will further clarify the proposed rule and the process of critical habitat designation.

What is an O`ahu `elepaio?

The O`ahu `elepaio (*Chasiempis sandwichensis ibidis*) is a small forest bird that is found only on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. It is a member of the monarch flycatcher family. Adults have a dark brown crown and back, white underparts with light brown streaks on the upper breast, and white wing bars, rump, and tail-tips. Their long tail is often held up at an angle. `Elepaio are nonmigratory, territorial, and often mate for life. The O`ahu `elepaio was placed on the list of endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on May 18, 2000.

The O`ahu `elepaio was once common and widespread in forested areas throughout the island at all elevations. Currently, it is most often found in streamside vegetation and in mesic forest with a tall canopy and well-developed understory. The species is thought to occupy less than four percent (about 13,600 acres) of its original range.

Six core subpopulations and several smaller subpopulations totaling approximately 1,982 birds are thought to remain in the world. The number of birds is divided about evenly between the Wai`anae Mountains in the west and the Ko`olau Mountains in the east.

Primary threats to the O`ahu `elepaio are diseases carried by introduced mosquitos,



Photo by Eric VanderWerf

including avian pox and malaria; predation by introduced mammals, especially rats; and habitat degradation and loss caused by human impacts. Storms with high winds and heavy rains also are known to destroy nests.

In Hawaiian legend, `elepaio helped canoe makers judge the quality of koa logs to make into canoes. If the bird landed on the log and pecked at it, the wood was considered to be of poor quality. If, however, it landed on the log and sang “ono-ka-ia,” the log was considered sound. Because the `elepaio is an insect-eater, its ability to identify insect-infested wood made it a valuable resource to early Hawaiians.

What is critical habitat?

Critical habitat is the term used in the Endangered Species Act to define those areas with the physical and biological features essential to the “conservation” of a threatened or endangered species, and that may require special management considerations or protection. “Conservation” means to *recover* a species to the point where it is no longer threatened or endangered. So, critical habitats are those areas of habitat that are needed by an endangered or threatened species in order to recover and that may require special management or protection.

How did you determine what areas to consider as critical habitat?

The Fish and Wildlife Service considers the species’ current range (*i.e.*, areas in which the species currently exists) and historical range (*i.e.*, areas that the species formerly occupied within historical memory). Then, we identify elements of the habitat within those areas that are needed for the species in question to live, reproduce, and recover to the point where it can be removed from the list of threatened and endangered species.

In the case of the O`ahu `elepaio, identification of critical habitat began with its current range. `Elepaio are highly territorial, and each pair of `elepaio defends a territory of a certain size. The currently occupied area is too small and fragmented to support a population that is safe from extinction. Recovery will require restoration of `elepaio in areas where they do not occur currently but did in the past. Therefore, we added unoccupied lands containing the elements needed by `elepaio that were part of its historical range.

Because a recovery plan that would identify target population levels and distribution for this species has not been completed, we turned to the historical range for the best and most recent information available on the distribution of what we believe was a viable O`ahu `elepaio population to propose critical



Photo by Eric VanderWerf

habitat areas. Extensive surveys in 1975 showed that subpopulations of `elepaio were larger, less isolated, and probably viable at that time. The distribution of this historical population provided a basis for identifying areas needed for recovery.

In selecting currently unoccupied lands, we gave priority to lands that provide the species' more preferred forest types, were more recently occupied (since 1975), and form large blocks of suitable habitat. Unoccupied areas will allow existing populations to expand, and help link subpopulations by encouraging genetic exchange as single birds move from one area to another. Based on the known size of territory that each pair requires, the proposed critical habitat would be sufficient to support an `elepaio population of approximately 10,100 birds.

Within the boundaries of the critical habitat units shown on the map on the next page, existing features and structures such as buildings, roads, aqueducts, antennas, water tanks, agricultural fields, paved areas, lawns, and other urban landscaped areas are not proposed as critical habitat because they do not contain the habitat elements needed by the `elepaio.

We are required to use the best scientific data available and to consider the economic and other impacts of designating an area as a critical habitat. An economic analysis of this proposed critical habitat designation is being prepared and will be made available for public review at a later date.

Can the public participate in the process for deciding whether to designate critical habitat?

Yes. The Endangered Species Act ensures the public ample opportunity to comment on critical habitat proposals, and our policy is to encourage such participation in the rulemaking process. Proposed designations are published in the

Federal Register and provide for a public comment period of at least 60 days.

To ensure that all interested members of the public are aware of the proposals, announcements of the proposed rulemaking and the public comment period are published in local newspapers. In addition, we directly notify Federal, State, and local agencies, as well as other interested parties. If requested within 45 days of the published proposal, a public hearing is held in the vicinity of the affected area.

All information provided during the public comment period is analyzed carefully by the Fish and Wildlife Service prior to a final decision on critical habitat designation, and responses to comments received are published in the decision document.

How does critical habitat affect the State or private landowner?

A. Critical habitat designation does not affect activities on State or private lands unless some sort of Federal permit, license, or funding is involved. Activities of the State or a private landowner, such as farming, grazing, and logging, generally are not affected by a critical habitat designation, even if the landowner's property is within the geographical boundaries of the critical habitat.

The designation has no impact on individual, town, county, or State actions if there is no Federal involvement, nor does it signal any intent of the Federal government to acquire or control the land. It does not in any way create a wilderness area, preserve, or wildlife refuge, nor does it close an area to human access or use.

How does critical habitat affect Federal agencies?

A. Federal agencies are required to ensure that any activity they fund, carry out, or authorize is not likely to jeopardize the survival of a listed species or destroy or adversely modify its critical habitat. By consulting with the Fish and Wildlife Service, an agency can usually minimize or avoid any potential conflicts with listed species and their critical habitat, and the proposed project may be undertaken.

How do I obtain a copy of the proposed rule?

Copies of the proposed rule are available through the Government Printing Office's website at <http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/index.html>, or by calling the Fish and Wildlife Service at 808 541 3441.

Where do I submit my comments?

Written comments may be submitted to:

Field Supervisor, Pacific Islands Office
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
300 Ala Moana Blvd., Room 3-122
Box 50088
Honolulu, HI 96850

You may send comments by electronic mail to:

FW1PIE_OahuElep_crithab@r1.fws.gov.

When are the comments due?

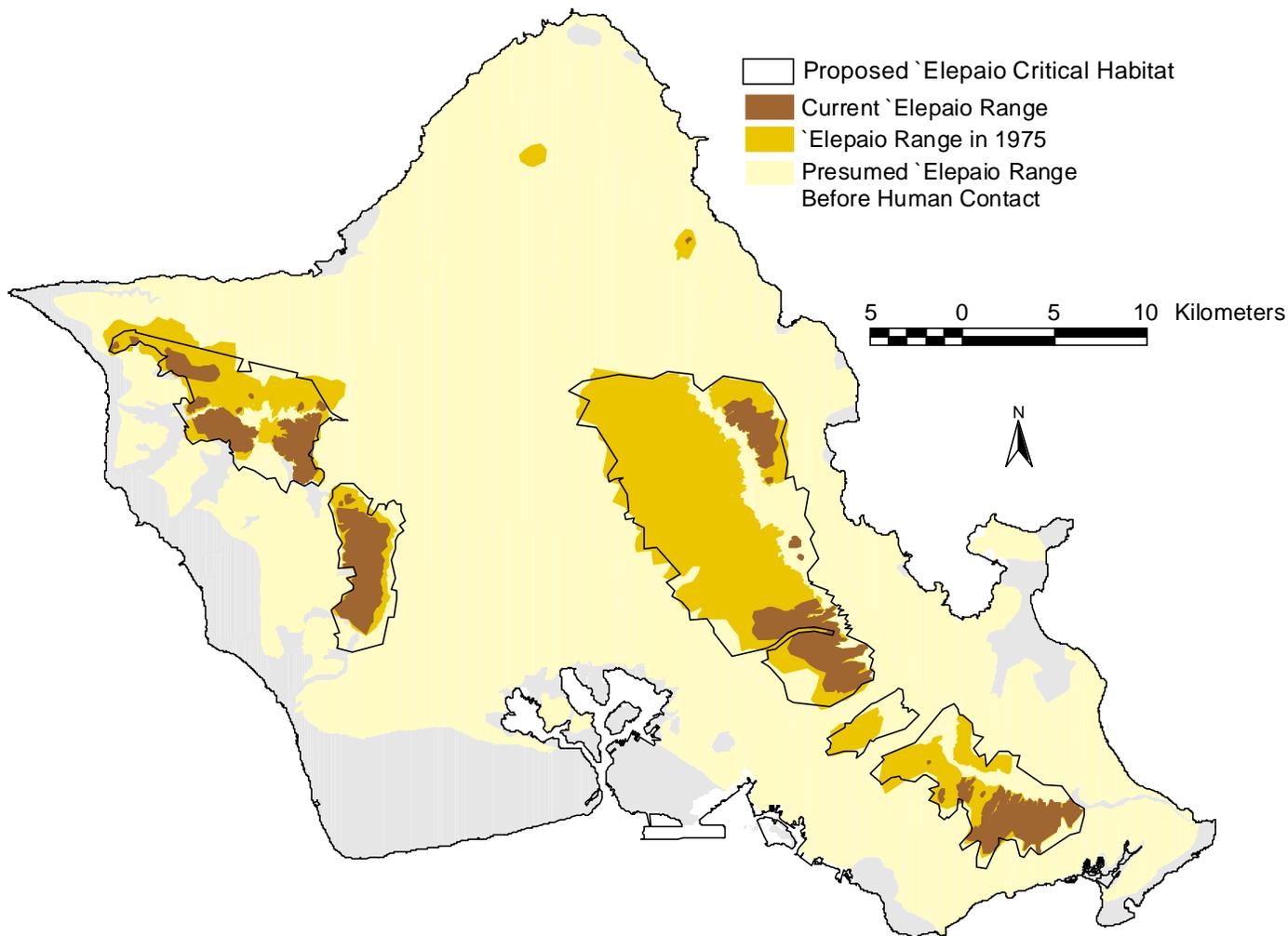
All comments received by the Fish and Wildlife Service by August 6, 2001, will be considered in developing a final rule.

When do you anticipate issuing the final rule?

The United States District Court for the District of Hawai'i ordered that the Fish and Wildlife Service publish its final critical habitat designation for the O'ahu `elepaio by October 31, 2001.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office
300 Ala Moana Blvd., Room 3-122
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Approximate Area of Proposed Critical Habitat Units by Land Ownership

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Federal Lands</u>	<u>State Lands</u>	<u>County Lands</u>	<u>Private Lands</u>	<u>Total</u>
Northern Wai`anae Mountains	2,031 acres	7,495 acres	1,596 acres		11,122 acres
Southern Wai`anae Mountains	1,523 acres	932 acres		3,760 acres	6,215 acres
Central Ko`olau Mountains	2,270 acres	9,363 acres	762 acres	24,274 acres	36,669 acres
Kalihi-Kapalama		971 acres	442 acres	564 acres	1,977 acres
Southern Ko`olau Mountains	7 acres	6,334 acres	1,187 acres	2,843 acres	10,371 acres
Total	5,830 acres	25,095 acres	3,987 acres	31,441 acres	66,354 acres