

Recently discovered species gain protection

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The chestnut-capped piha is an unassuming robin-sized bird restricted to a few tiny remnant forest patches in the Antioquia Department of Colombia, in the Central Cordillera of the Andes. It is so restricted in its distribution that it evaded discovery until 1999, and has been identified by the Alliance for Zero Extinction as a priority conservation species.

Affectionately called Arrierito Antioqueño or "little herdsman of Antioquia" by the locals for its call, reminiscent of the whistles made by horsemen herding cattle, this Endangered species hangs on in an area devastated by gold mining in the early 20th Century and subsequently by broad scale deforestation for pasturelands. Only 370 acres of the bird's habitat previously had been in any way protected, but even this limited sanctuary is at risk from timber extraction clearing the last subtropical forest fragments surrounding it.

Now, support from the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) and partners has allowed for the purchase of further habitat area in a crucial move to protect the chestnut-capped piha and other Endangered species.

"Thanks to the generous support of Conservation International, the IUCN/SSC Amphibian Specialist Group, Robert Wilson, and Robert Giles, ABC has funded the purchase of an additional 1,310 acres, to be owned and managed by Colombian partner Fundación ProAves," said George Fenwick, the ABC president.

The reserve is also critically important for globally threatened frog species, whose last remaining habitat is diminishing rapidly within the

Central Cordillera. Seven Vulnerable and four Endangered frog species occur within the new reserve, as do five additional species so new to science that they are still awaiting formal descriptions. At least one of these species is believed to be found only at this site, known as La Forzosa, and belongs to one of the most globally threatened amphibian groups, the harlequin toads.

In addition to the piha, the reserve also contains populations of many other rare and restricted birds, including the black tinamou (known from one other site in southern Colombia, and one in central Peru), sharpbill, Stiles' tapaculo, Parker's antbird, semi-collared hawk, red-bellied grackle, multicolored tanager, black-and-gold tanager, and a wintering population of the rapidly declining cerulean warbler – a migratory songbird that nests in North America.

"The area is such a remarkable center of micro-endemism that scientists believe more species may be there waiting to be discovered," said Claude Gascon of Conservation International, who is co-chair of the IUCN/SSC Amphibian Specialist Group. "The new Arrierito Antioqueño Bird Reserve will ensure that the piha, its habitat, and the astonishing biodiversity contained there are better protected and can thrive into the future."

Source: Conservation International

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