

Endangered status considered for Bicknell's thrush

August 14 2012, by MARY ESCH

(AP) — The Bicknell's thrush, a rare songbird that breeds atop mountains in the northeastern United States and winters in the Caribbean, is being considered for endangered species status, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Tuesday.

The sparrow-sized brown bird, which nests at elevations over 3,000 feet (914 meters) in New York, Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, has one of the most limited breeding and wintering ranges of any bird in North America. The main threat to the bird is climate change that's reducing its boreal mountain habitat of spruce and fir forest, said Mollie Matteson of the Center for Biological Diversity in Richmond, Vermont.

"This year is the warmest on record in the Northeast so the need to protect the Bicknell's thrush couldn't be more urgent," Matteson said Tuesday.

Scientists consider the decline of a plant or animal species to be an indication of the overall health of the natural environment. Measures to protect the Bicknell's thrush would also benefit other species that depend on the boreal forests they inhabit.

Matteson said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is launching a yearlong review of the songbird's status after receiving a petition from the center.

The Bicknell's habitat is also shrinking in the Dominican Republic, where it winters. The Caribbean country has only about 40 percent of its

forest cover left because so much has been burned down and converted to pasture. Conservationists are creating a nature reserve in the Dominican Republic to protect winter habitat from deforestation.

The bird was first discovered by amateur ornithologist Eugene Bicknell on Slide Mountain in New York's Catskills in 1881, according to the state Department of Environmental Conservation. With a total population believed to be less than 50,000 birds, it's one of the rarest American songbirds.

Matteson said widely accepted climate models show the species' coniferous breeding habitat shrinking dramatically in the Northeast. Scientists have documented 7 percent to 19 percent annual population declines in parts of its range. The thrush also faces threats from development such as wind farms and ski areas, logging, acid rain, and mercury pollution brought by air emissions from power plants.

On New York's Whiteface Mountain, a state-owned ski center scaled back expansion plans and funded a habitat study in 2005. The Olympic Regional Development Authority, which operates the ski center, launched a project in 2006 in cooperation with environmental groups to raise money for the Dominican Republic preserve.

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