

Extinction looms for two rare bird species after devastating hurricanes

October 25 2017, by Joann Adkins



Credit: Florida International University

Conservation biologist Paul Reillo is torn between two worlds in the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria—one of swift action and one of waiting.

There is little time to rest. More than 200 animals, many fighting extinction, are relying on him. The FIU scientist is the founder of the Rare Species Conservatory Foundation (RSCF), a partner in FIU's Tropical Conservation Institute (TCI), which offers safe haven, captive breeding programs and field-based conservation to help save endangered [species](#). In a matter of two weeks, two species of birds on the brink of extinction were dealt devastating blows when Hurricanes Irma and Maria crossed the Caribbean, leaving devastation in their wakes. The team at the Tropical Conservation Institute knows it is facing an unprecedented conservation crisis.

Working

Hurricane Irma caused more than \$200,000 in damages at RSCF's property in Loxahatchee, Fla. Little could be done to save enclosures and fences from the storm, but Reillo and his team secured the animals, including 40 endangered east African bongo antelopes, 35 primates including endangered golden lion tamarins, nearly 100 parrots representing a variety of threatened and endangered species and 42 critically endangered Florida grasshopper sparrows.

The TCI team is putting in long hours to rebuild what was destroyed at the RSCF facility and to help the animals recover from the stress brought on by the storm. The Florida grasshopper sparrows are the greatest cause for concern. It is the world's most endangered bird with less than 100 remaining in the wild before Irma. The team fears the hurricane has crippled the wild population which resides exclusively in the prairie grasses of Central Florida. They are working with state and federal wildlife officials on strategies to help preserve the small number of birds that remain on the planet.

Waiting

Meanwhile, Reillo is waiting for news about Dominica's critically endangered Imperial Amazon.



Credit: Florida International University

Since the late 1990s, he has been working with Dominica's Forestry, Wildlife and Parks Division to help restore the rare parrot's population

in the wild which has been devastated by habitat loss, the pet trade and natural disasters. In 2000, the local government established a national park to protect critical habitat for the rare parrot species. Reillo raised many of the funds himself to purchase the land necessary for the initiative.

Hurricane Maria, in a matter of a single day, destroyed more than 20 years of work to save the species.

"The flagship species we have fought to save for so many years may now face imminent extinction," Reillo said, pausing for a rare break from post-hurricane clean-up.

When Maria marched across the Caribbean, the expansive forests of the island were decimated. Tree canopies were gutted and critical habitat for the Imperial Amazon was destroyed. Dominica is among the most hardest hit countries by the recent spate of storms that attacked the Caribbean. Fewer than 250 mature Imperial Amazons were known to populate the forests of Dominica before Maria. Local forestry officials have been looking for any signs that some of the rare parrots weathered the storm, but the bird is elusive and difficult to find under normal circumstances. These are not normal circumstances.

"TCI's fight to save endangered species is critical," said Mike Heithaus, dean of FIU's College of Arts, Sciences & Education, which houses TCI. "Recent hurricanes have proven how very vulnerable many species are. Our programs can make the difference between an animal being here and not, but the monumental task before us is going to require tremendous local, national and international support."

Even if Imperial Amazons survived, the catastrophic destruction of the island's richly biodiverse forests is causing alarm for conservationists. Locals have spotted the more common Jaco parrot among the gutted

forests, but those are struggling to find food. Their plight represents a much larger crisis looming over Dominica's wildlife and especially the Imperial Amazons.

Reillo believes the Imperial Amazon still has a fighting chance. For now, the focus is on getting supplies to the island including tarps, chainsaws, tools and veterinary supplies. Researchers and forestry officials are still trying to assess the status of the population and develop a strategy for recovery. The FIU Tropical Conservation Institute team is preparing for an aggressive plan that Reillo knows will come at a significant cost. But the alternative—loss of another flagship species—poses a far greater cost to the health of the planet.

Provided by Florida International University

Citation: Extinction looms for two rare bird species after devastating hurricanes (2017, October 25) retrieved 13 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-10-extinction-looms-rare-bird-species.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--