

Seeking the Sacred Raven: Politics and Extinction on a Hawaiian Island

Author(s):

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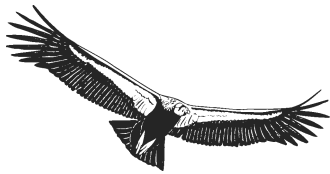
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BOOK REVIEWS

EDITED BY DAVID L. SWANSON

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Seeking the Sacred Raven: Politics and Extinction on a Hawaiian Island.—Jerome Mark Walters. 2006. Island Press, Washington, DC. 286 pp. ISBN 1-55963-090-6. \$24.95 (cloth).

Seeking the Sacred Raven: Politics and Extinction on a Hawaiian Island, by Jerome Mark Walters, DVM, is the author's very personal version of the decline of the 'Alalā or endemic Hawaiian Crow (*Corvus hawaiiensis*). Walters's writing belies his training as a scientist; his book is infused with what some readers will find contrived spirituality that can be distracting or downright annoying and is laden with hubris. In our opinion, the book lacks objectivity; Walters chooses sides—a private landowner is the heroine, and biologists are portrayed as antagonists. The veracity of much of what is written, especially the direct quotations, cannot be verified, although the bias of the author (e.g., the title of chapter 14, "Scientist to the Rescue") comes through loud and clear. The book also has numerous errors of fact and, more importantly, errors of omission. For starters, the 'Alalā is not extinct. At present, there are many more individuals in captivity (57) than there were in initial captive populations of other critically endangered species, like the California Condor (*Gymnogyps californianus*) and Whooping Crane (*Grus americana*), and, like the 'Alalā, these species are now increasing. A number of what seem like minor errors (see Tummons [2006] for examples) will be aggravating to those readers who, through personal experience, know the story better than Walters. On the positive side, this book communicates many of the frustrations of doing conservation work in Hawai'i.

Walters's description of the captive propagation program's history is perhaps the most incomplete part of the account. According to Dr. Fern Duvall, who directed the 'Alalā captive propagation program from 1984 to 1996, the author spoke to him only once for about an hour about ten years before the book was published; hardly enough to get a very complete picture of that period of the program. In 1984, when Duvall took over as a temporary hire, the captive crows were housed adjacent to a U.S. Army training area where the sound of artillery, exploding bombs and helicopters flying a few hundred feet over the aviaries were daily occurrences. After years of pressure from Duvall, other biologists, and environmental organizations, the U.S. Army and the State of Hawai'i found funding to construct aviaries at a run-down former state prison facility on the Island of Maui. We read virtually nothing of this in the book. Instead, Walters merely recounts the captive propagation program's inadequate infrastructure and funding under Duvall, as well as the lack of genetic variation in the captive flock, neither of which Duvall had any control over. Having informed readers of the captive flock's low genetic variation and the possible role of this in the program's lack of success, Walters denigrates virtually all efforts made by state and federal biologists to bring new genetic material into the captive flock. Those efforts

were thwarted, if you like, by politics, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) failure to take action and demand access to private property to carry out 'Alalā recovery actions. By the time there was sufficient political will to bring additional birds or eggs into captivity, there were almost none to be had.

For reasons poorly explained, Walters demonizes most of the biologists and conservationists involved in the 'Alalā's recent history. His portrayal of the biologists seems to have been strongly influenced by his relationship with Cynthia Salley, the owner of the land occupied by the last wild Hawaiian Crows, and, according to Walters, the only ethical voice in the Hawaiian Crow saga. The author includes derogatory quotes and statements that contribute little to the story he is telling. For example Andrew Berger, a noted ornithologist and "an old-family friend" (p. 168) of Cynthia Salley, is quoted as saying "Nor have I yet met Fern Duvall. I begin to doubt that he knows very much about passerine birds and especially endangered species" (p. 155). As mentioned above, Fern Duvall ran the 'Alalā breeding program from 1984 to 1996 and as noted on page 148, received a Ph.D. in zoology studying crows. Walters's judgment seems to be that most of the scientists involved in 'Alalā conservation were or are "bad guys" out to earn fame and fortune by working on a high profile endangered species. This misguided perception of the motivation of most scientists is revealed in the following: "Rare, glamorous, and still mysterious, with little having been published on its biology or behavior, by the late 1970s, the 'Alalā had become a golden topic for academic research. The bird's continuing descent toward extinction only increased its allure (p. 127)." If this was a true statement, Hawai'i should be swarming with ornithologists (and funding); unfortunately, neither is true.

In reality, conservation biologists often work with species at the brink of extinction. Nonaction is not a solution: letting species after species fade into oblivion is unacceptable. With action, however, comes the risk of making mistakes, and it is easy to judge these harshly with hindsight informed by contemporary experience and knowledge. In the case of the 'Alalā, despite mistakes that were made (see below), the species would be extinct today if dedicated biologists had not intervened. Like many Hawaiian birds, declines were noted prior to 1900, and by the 1980s, only relict and widely scattered small populations remained. These remnant populations were beset by a litany of threats including habitat losses associated with outright habitat destruction by humans, feral ungulates, fire, invasive plants and disease; human persecution; and predation by nonnative mammals. Unfortunately most of what is known about the 'Alalā comes from observations of fragmented and declining populations; thus, our understanding of the species' habitat needs, social behavior, movements, and life history is compromised. Given the dearth of life history information, attempts to document the causes of the crow's

decline were necessary. The potential impacts on the birds of efforts by scientists to gather this information is a contentious point of Walters's book. In the late 1970s, 11 nesting pairs of crows were filmed to determine the cause(s) of reproductive failure. Some of these pairs subsequently abandoned their nests because of disturbance by biologists. By devoting an entire chapter to this topic, Walters suggests that disturbance by researchers contributed to the species' decline more than other causes. This is completely disingenuous. If research activities did disrupt breeding pairs, such research was inappropriate, but the scale of harm should have been more carefully calculated, compared, and articulated.

Walters seems clearly enamored with Cynthia Salley, co-owner of McCandless Ranch where the last wild crows existed. It seems unlikely that Walters spent as much time with any of the scientists involved in this story as he did with Salley (p. 71, 207–213). Until legal actions were taken against the FWS and McCandless Ranch, Cynthia Salley at whim successfully denied various researchers access to the crows on her ranch for many years. The long-term effect of this on the 'Alalā is difficult to quantify but may have been significant. The motivation for her "leave them alone project" (p. 141) was questionable. Given that the species declined precipitously before biologists began studying them, even in Salley's opinion (p. 209), it was obviously not in their best interest to be just left alone. However, Salley had many reasons, other than concern for the 'Alalā, for keeping scientists off her land and for wanting the birds to stay on her property. To be fair, Walters does include several points that indicate the economic importance of the 'Alalā to the McCandless Ranch (p. 189, 212, 233), that their habitat was being destroyed on the ranch (p. 227), and that Salley's conservation ethic was somewhat shallow (p. 166, 189, 248). However, her role as a compromiser (p. 190), conservationist (p. 165), data analyst (p. 200), fortune teller (p. 211), friendly landowner (p. 159, 209), philosopher (p. 201), and private property rights advocate (p. 165) are not directly disputed by Walters.

In 1991, the Hawai'i Audubon Society and the National Audubon Society represented by the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund sued the Department of the Interior (which houses FWS) and the McCandless ranch, owned by Salley and her sisters, to force the issue of allowing access to the birds for management actions (such as removing eggs to captive propagation facilities). Walters expresses outrage that the suit was brought against a private party, detailing the hardships this caused the family. There is no mention of the fact that more than one official in each branch of government (state and federal) repeatedly begged plaintiffs (including one represented by reviewer SC) to bring suit, apparently hoping litigation would result in a court order forcing them to do the job they otherwise lacked the courage to do. Had he conducted more and better interviews, Walters might have discovered this, as well as the fact that the plaintiffs and their attorneys made every possible effort to avoid naming McCandless Ranch as a plaintiff.

A course of events that one finds disappointing is easily attributed to "politics." If politics is money and power, then it's amazing that any of Hawai'i's endangered species, including 31 birds, 57 invertebrates and 276 plants, survive at all. And these are just the formally listed species! Instead of placing blame on the people and agencies involved in the long struggle to save the Hawaiian Crow, Walters could have focused on outlining the lack of resources that were available to prevent the 'Alalā's extinction. For example, in spite of the fact that Hawai'i supports 32% of the 95 birds listed under the Endangered Species act, between 1996 and 2004, Hawaiian birds received approximately 4% of all funds

allocated to the recovery of listed birds; during these years, 'Alalā conservation efforts received approximately 1.7 million dollars.

Although Hawaiian Crows were maintained in captivity beginning in 1970, captive propagation did not begin in earnest until 1986, with a captive population of nine individuals. In 1996, a state-of-the-art captive breeding facility was completed on the island of Hawai'i; prior to this, crows were housed at dilapidated facilities on the islands of Maui and Hawai'i. Wild individuals had large home ranges; this reason and the fact that 'Alalā are intelligent have resulted in the need to have large, expensive breeding aviaries. Currently both breeding facilities (on Maui and Big Island) have aviary space for 14 breeding pairs. Seven more breeding pairs could be formed with the birds now in captivity if additional aviaries were available (A. Lieberman, Zoological Society of San Diego, pers. comm.). However, limited funding has precluded building an adequate number of breeding aviaries, let alone repairing plumbing or roofs of the Maui facility.

Captive propagation has been a critical part of the efforts to recover the Whooping Crane and California Condor, and efforts to conserve these species, including the building of needed infrastructure, has been ongoing for many decades (Lewis 1995, Snyder and Schmitt 2002). Despite the fact that captive breeding infrastructure for Hawaiian Crows is still needed, between 1996 and 2004, the crane and condor received 24 and 6 times, respectively, the funding provided for the crow, even though the crow's population size is smaller than that of either the Whooping Crane or California Condor, and the threats facing the crow are more difficult to mitigate than those of either the crane or condor.

People in Hawai'i personally witnessed this species decline year after year for nearly five decades—a period spanning entire professional careers or more. During these years, countless petitions and pleas from government biologists, academic scientists and conservation advocates for support to save the species went virtually unanswered, as do similar requests for other endangered Hawaiian bird species today. Agency biologists dutifully counted and reported lower and lower numbers of 'Alalā each year. They lacked resources to do much more than conduct counts, and their agencies lacked the political will to take strong action like adding wild birds to the captive flock or restoring habitat over the protest of a handful of private citizens. Walters's version of the story gives absolutely no sense of the depth this tragedy has for those who witnessed it close at hand.

Despite all our criticisms of this book, Walters does make some important and poignant points. Even though a lack of funds and personnel continue to hamper conservation in Hawai'i, serious mistakes were made by the State of Hawai'i and the FWS, the federal agency charged with overseeing endangered species. Many of these mistakes were indeed due to turf wars between state and federal agency personnel and conflicting land use interests. Perhaps most egregious was the fact that a person, Barbara Lee, with absolutely no avicultural or biological background was permitted to oversee the captive flock maintained by the State of Hawai'i (p. 105–121). Even more distressing is her statement, "If the 'Alalā were so important, why hadn't the state hired a professional bird person to run the propagation program?" Lee was correct, and by extension, this was not simply a failure by the State of Hawai'i, but by the FWS and by society in general. Walters successfully captures the frustration that many working in the Hawai'i conservation community feel. If a lack of funding, personnel, and crumbling infrastructure were not obstacles enough, a conflicting mandate by the State to conserve native species and simultaneously provide opportunities to hunt alien ungulates that

degrade native habitats makes conservation a laborious process (see Chapter 11).

In the reviewers' opinion, the book is biased and incomplete, and the accuracy of the account is compromised by the author's determination to choose sides, while placing himself above the fray. This book will be a tremendous disappointment not only to the majority of the real players in this tragedy but also to those who read Walters's first book, *A Shadow and a Song*—a carefully researched account of the extinction of the Dusky Seaside Sparrow, written with passion and deep regret at the passing of a unique form of life.

Finally, we were disappointed that Walters failed to report any recent information regarding the status of the 'Alalā. As of 2003, the Hawaiian Crow population was comprised of 40 individuals. The program has been expanding since, and the population has continued to slowly grow to the current (2007) size of 57. State, federal, and private landowners in a newly formed watershed partnership on the island of Hawai'i, are committed to habitat protection, threat management, and restoration at multiple sites and have agreed to continue to work to develop additional land management plans that will contribute to 'Alalā recovery. While the fate of the 'Alalā is still precarious, and much work remains, the likelihood of eventual recovery is higher than it has been in many years.

Sadly, unless there are many changes in Hawai'i, we predict that there will soon be more books chronicling the extinction of Hawaiian birds.—SHEILA CONANT, Department of Zoology, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2538 McCarthy Mall, Honolulu, HI 96822. E-mail: conant@hawaii.edu and DAVID LEONARD, 2574 Klebahn Place, Honolulu, HI 96817.

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Ivorybill Hunters: The Search for Proof in a Flooded Wilderness.—Geoffrey E. Hill. 2007. Oxford University Press, New York. 260 pp., 60+ black-and-white photographs, sketches, and 6 maps. ISBN 978-0-19-532346-7 \$24.95 (cloth).

The Choctawhatchee River originates in Barbour County, Alabama and flows 170 miles southward through the central panhandle of Florida to the Gulf of Mexico. James T. Tanner never mentions the river in his thesis survey of potential southeastern river valleys for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker *Campephilus principalis*. The indefatigable A. T. Wayne collected no Ivory-billed specimens along its shores, and no other ivory bill specimens are definitively known to have been collected there. The river was not mentioned by anyone in recent years as a potential hotspot for searches for this icon of American birds. Most ivory-bill searchers likely never gave the river a second look, even after glancing at its cypress-lined banks from the Interstate 10 bridge, speedily intent on getting to better-known swamps such as the Apalachicola or Atchafalaya.

The book begins as Geoff Hill, professor of biology at Alabama's Auburn University, follows up on a 10-year-old telephone call from a south Alabama hunter reporting a sighting along the Pea River, and recent local newspaper accounts of an oral history of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers along the Choctawhatchee River. With little more than some disappointment from a short inspection trip on the Alabama side of the river and some suggestive memories of extensive forest cover from perused aerial photos of the Florida side, Hill gathers together a couple of students and kayaks, crosses the Alabama border, and enters the world of the mature bottomland forest. Tantalizing kent calls, flashes of white, and double-knocks provide fodder for a return visit, and a major documentation effort for ivory bills ensues.

Hill has succeeded in writing a very readable account of the continued search for the Ivory-billed Woodpecker and an interesting natural history of one of the South's unknown places. In doing so, he has managed to stir the pot of Ivory-billed controversy once again. The doubters will decry his evidence and lack of the definitive photo, and mention Sasquatch and the Loch Ness Monster in the same sentence. But those creatures have never been proven to exist, and the Ivory-billed Woodpecker was very much a real species, historically widely distributed through the Florida Panhandle. Hill purports to be hot on the trail, with auditory and foraging evidence, brief sightings by multiple observers, and suggestive roost holes.

Hill presents the Choctawhatchee as no ordinary river, but a waterway lined with local stands of magnificent cypress and water-loving spruce pine, and consisting of a complex riparian labyrinth of oxbows, chutes, main channel, and mature flooded forests replete with favored ivory-bill food trees like oaks and tupelo. Little visited by birders or other natural historians, the watershed is protected in large part by a water management district and its own remoteness. People visiting Morrison Spring, a major tributary to the main river, know that they have come upon a special place where it is not hard to imagine ivory bills flying through the canopy and the ghosts of native paroquets screeching at dawn.

Except for the initial months of the search, there is no attempt at secrecy, and the book follows the accounts of the searchers from month to month as they attempt documentation of this rarest of birds. The reader cannot but be impressed by the openness of Hill's account, presenting the details as they happened with an abundance of habitat information and recommending areas along the river for readers to search for themselves. He makes no attempt to sugarcoat some of his and his rookie crew's documentation failures. The crew's photographic failures would be laughable if it weren't for the recent history of other alleged encounters with this species that have produced a potpourri of blurry photos, half-second glimpses, suggestive videos, and birds and even squirrels disappearing behind trees. This crew seemed to excel at photographic failure to the point where this exasperated reader wanted to scream for just one accomplished professional wildlife photographer to come kayaking to the rescue. Hill, though, is fair in extolling praises for his students who live in a remote field camp and maintain a rigorous schedule of exhausting kayak searches from dawn to dusk, day after day, week after week.

A considerable part of the book is spent on discussing the controversy of the Arkansas sightings. There is some gentle chiding of some aspects of the Cornell University approach, but Hill is strong in his support for their efforts and the efforts of searchers in other states. He is firm in his belief that other folks, including his own students, are definitely seeing and hearing something out there, something that is not just oddly plumaged