'Aki is Spotted at the Top of Mauna Loa Road

On August 6, 2013, a celebrated member of the Hawaiian honeycreepers, the ‘akiapōlā‘au (*Hemignathus munroi*), was observed and photographed in the 3-trees area of Mauna Loa Road in Hawai‘i Volcanoes NP. This is the first verifiable report of this endangered species in the area in over forty years. Stacia Near, a U.S. Geological Survey intern and student at Colorado State University, made the observation while conducting studies of the ‘i‘iwi (*Vestiaria coccinea*), also a Hawaiian honeycreeper.

While she was eating lunch, Stacia became aware of soft tapping in the koa (*Acacia koa*) tree above her. She looked with her binoculars to see an ‘akiapōlā‘au foraging for insect prey in the branches of the young koa. Stacia was able to photograph the bird, which was apparently preoccupied with eating its lunch, with her cell phone camera. Many of the images were indistinct, but several showed the bird in classic foraging poses seldom used by other species and one clearly showed the long hooked upper mandible and straight, chisel-like lower mandible. The few photos that showed plumage color suggested that the bird was probably an adult female.

The bird did not call or sing during the 20 minutes or so that Stacia observed it.

Having spent much time in the area observing ‘i‘iwi during the past several years, we are confident that the ‘akiapōlā‘au is not a local resident. The nearest population from which she may have dispersed is Keauhou Forest, only a few miles to the east. Although Stacia searched for the bird in the following days and weeks, there was no further sign of the species.

‘Akiapōlā‘au were often seen in this and other koa kipuka along Mauna Loa Road during the 1940s, but the range of the species has contracted and numbers have decreased markedly since then. Following the removal of feral goats and pigs in the 1970s and 1980s, habitat conditions have been improving in the region. We might wonder if this lone ‘akiapōlā‘au was prospecting for a mate while she sampled the habitat during her travels.

As habitat conditions continue to improve, we also might expect ‘akiapōlā‘au sightings to become more frequent. Eventually, ‘akiapōlā‘au may become re-established as a resident in this section of Mauna Loa, where the mix of koa, ‘ōhi‘a (*Metrosideros polymorpha*), and māmane (*Sophora chrysophylla*) provide foraging opportunities not found in the wetter portions of the species' range.

—Rhonda Loh, NPS HAVO
Chief of Natural Resources

Click for more photos of this bird

I&M will conduct forest bird monitoring near Mauna Loa Road in 2015. We'll keep an eye out for the ‘aki.

Google Earth Tour of the PACN

Have you ever wanted to travel to all the national parks in the Pacific islands? I am talking about Hawaii, Saipan, American Samoa, and Guam! It would be very expensive and time consuming.

Take, for example, the National Park of American Samoa. This park is spread out over 3 different islands: Tutuila, Ofu-Olosega, and Ta‘u. Wouldn't it be interesting to "fly" to these islands using Google Earth and learn exactly where Ta‘u is?

With this app (for computer or phone), you can get a great aerial view of the parks, and develop a sense of the vast distances among these amazing places, as well as the mainland United States.

The Google app gives you information about the parks through NPS park and Inventory & Monitoring web sites. The app also provides a touring section which locates points of interest in the vicinity of the park you are visiting.

The app is so easy to use. Just contact me at: scott_kichman@nps.gov and I will email you a small KML file to drop into Google Earth to get you started. Happy travels.

—Scott Kichman, NPS
GIS Specialist