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Humanity and Animal Life: World Species Vanishing Before our Eyes. Elegies Lost 23

Here are the stories of nearly two dozen species recently declared extinct.

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There's never been a time in human history when so many of the world's species were vanishing before our eyes.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service recently declared 23 species extinct, from a tiny catfish and several colorful mussels to some of the world's most spectacular birds. Without swift and powerful action, we risk losing a million more species in the coming decades to the wildlife extinction crisis.

Here are the stories of the Lost 23:

1. The last time anyone saw a **Bachman's warbler** was in Cuba in 1981. For decades, though, it was considered one of the rarest songbirds in North America, living mostly in swampy forests of the Southeast. A Lutheran minister named John Bachman, a friend of John James Audubon, provided the first written description of the warbler in 1832 from a specimen found near Charleston, South Carolina. They were small, yellow and black birds with a charming, if monotone call, sometimes sounding like *tsip* or *zee-e-eep*. Extinction was due to logging and collection.

2. The **Guam bridled white-eye** was impossible to miss if you knew what to look for. It was a little green, yellow and white bird with a short beak and a distinctive white ring around its eyes. Known as the Nosa' by the Chamoru people, it was considered one of the most common birds on the island in the early 1900s, inhabiting forests, grasslands and even swamps. The accidental introduction of the brown treesnake to Guam in the 1950s marked the beginning of the end for the bridled white-eye. The last individual of the subspecies was seen in 1983, one year before it was protected under the Endangered Species Act.

3. The **little Mariana fruit bat** wasn't all that little, actually — it had a two-foot wingspan. And loved to dine on tropical fruits. Also known as a flying fox, this bat lived on the island of Guam and was noticeable for the gold on the side of its neck and yellowish-brown fur on its

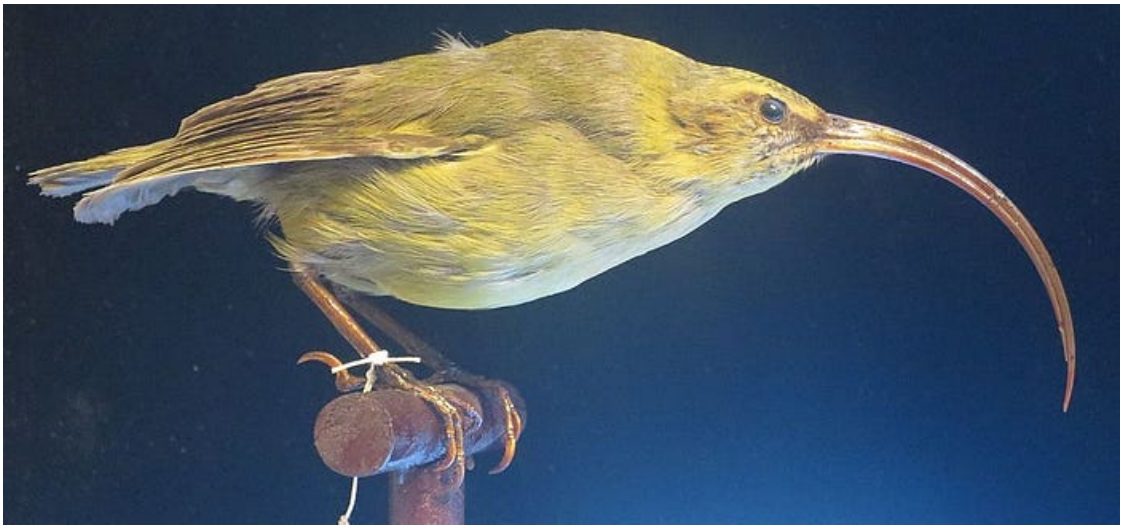
head. It was last seen in 1968, and went extinct because of habitat loss, invasive brown treesnakes and hunting.

4. In Ohio, there used to be a small, shy catfish called the **Scioto madtom**. By day, it hid under rocks and vegetation. At night, it came out to quietly feed along the stream bottom. Only 18 individuals were ever collected — so it was extremely rare. It was last seen in 1957 and went extinct because of agricultural runoff and silt that spilled into Big Darby Creek, where many endangered species are currently under dire threat from sprawl from the city Columbus, which is polluting this very special habitat.

5. So stunning was the **ivory-billed woodpecker** that it was sometimes referred to as the "Lord God Bird." The third-largest woodpecker in the world, it once flew in the old-growth forests of 13 Southeast states. Often it could be seen picking beetles out of dead and dying trees or soaring through the forests with its 30-inch wingspan. It had a nasal-sounding call some compared to a tin horn or clarinet. The last verified sighting was in 1944 in an area known as the Singer Tract; pleas made to the Chicago Mill and Lumber Company, which owned the timber rights to the land, were ignored and the area was logged — driving the Lord God bird to extinction.

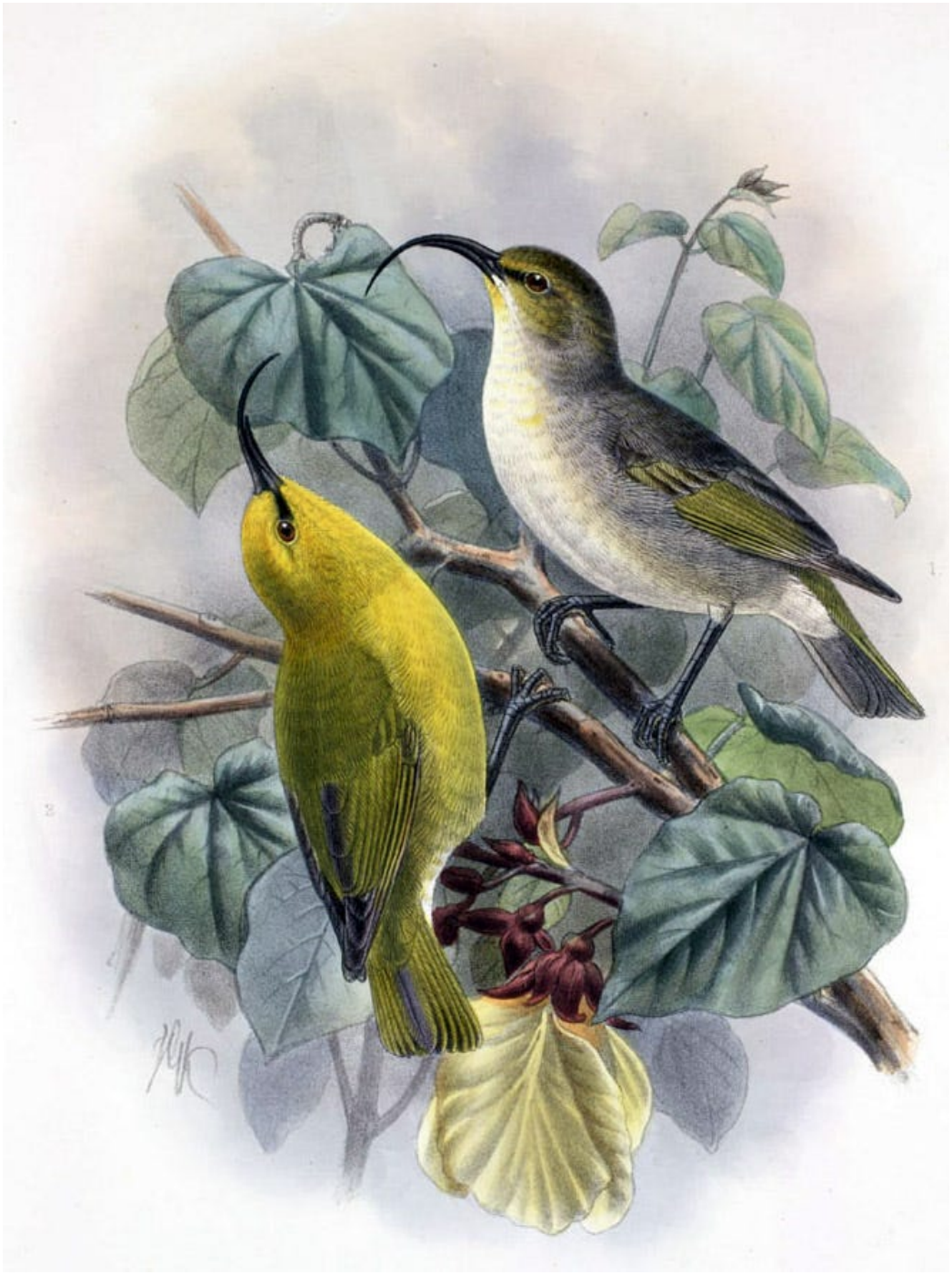
San Marcos River by WisdomFromIntrospect (CC BY-SA 3.0)

6. Small but mighty, the **San Marcos gambusia** made its home in a half-mile, slow-flowing section of the upper San Marcos River in Texas. It was only an inch long and earned its living eating insects. Unlike many other fish, the San Marcos gambusia gave birth to live young rather than laying eggs. It was already extremely rare by the time it was protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1980, and was last seen in the wild in 1983, driven extinct by people's overuse of its water.



Kaua’i ‘akialoa specimen by Hiart, Bishop Museum, Honolulu

7. The **Kaua‘i ‘akialoa** was a Hawaiian honeycreeper that lived only on the island of Kaua‘i. It had an extraordinarily long, downcurved bill, which spanned about of a third of its body length and was used to obtain nectar and insects. Never very common, the ‘akialoa was last seen in 1967. It went extinct because of habitat loss and introduced mosquitos that spread avian diseases.



Kaua’i nukupu’u by John Gerrard Keulemans

8. The **Kaua‘i nukupu‘u** was a stout, short-tailed honeycreeper — extremely elusive but delightful to find. Males of the species were a stunning combination of bright yellow, olive and white, with a black mask and bill. The females were mostly olive-gray-white, with yellowish highlights in the face, wings and tail. Although there have been sporadic *unconfirmed* reports of it over the past century, this bird was likely extinct sometime shortly after 1899, the date of the last confirmed sighting. It was lost to clearing of its lowland forest habitats for agriculture.

Kaua’i ‘ō‘ō by John Gerrard Keulemans

9. The **Kaua‘i ‘ō‘ō** had a distinctive, bell-like call that cut through the forests of Kaua‘i. This small black-and-yellow songbird was common in the late 1800s and considered rare by the 1920s. It ultimately went extinct because of habitat destruction and the introduction of rats, pigs and mosquitos. The Kaua‘i ‘ō‘ō was the last surviving member of the Mohoidae family, a group of honey-eating birds, and represents the only complete extinction of an entire avian family in modern times. Its call was last heard in 1987.

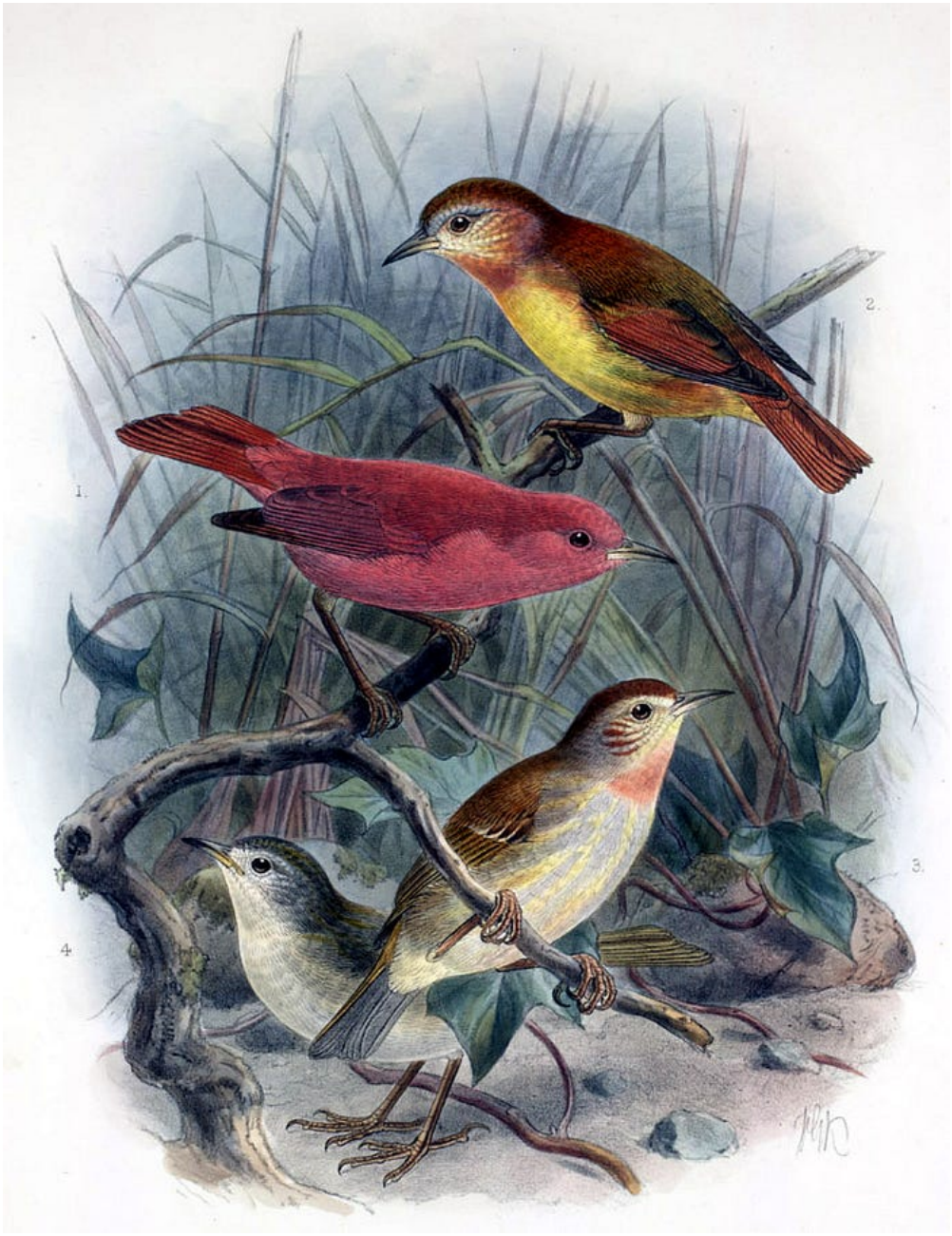
kāmaʻo (top) by John Gerrard Keulemans

10. **Kāmaʻo**: In the 1880s, the kāmaʻo was the most common bird on Kauaʻi. Sometimes called the large Kauaʻi thrush, it lived mostly in the forest and feasted primarily on fruit and insects. It grew to be about 8 inches long with a brownish body and a gray belly. By 1928 it had mostly disappeared from the island's outer forests and by 1980 there were just 24 left. The last one was seen in 1987. Extinction was mostly due to habitat loss and introduced mosquitos.

11. In former times, a keen listener on the island of Maui would recognize the lovely call of the **Maui ākepa**: a quivering whistle ending in a long trill. Already extremely rare by the early 1900s, this 4-inch, dusty-green songbird with a small cross bill was seen only once in 1970, the year it was protected — and just five times after that. The last sighting was 1988, the last hearing in 1995.

12. The **Maui nukupuʻu** was a small bird found in the wet, high-elevation forests of Maui. Tenacious, this bird used its inch-long bill to peck for insects in the bark of ʻōhiʻa lehua and koa trees. It was feared extinct by 1896, but there were unconfirmed sightings for decades, and a research expedition recorded seeing the bird in 1967 in the Kīpahulu Valley. It was

protected in 1970 in the hopes that it might make a resurgence, but the last confirmed sighting is said to have been in 1996.



kākāwahie by John Gerrard Keulemans

13. Also known as the Moloka‘i creeper, the **kākāwahie** was a striking bird with bright orange or red feathers that some said resembled flames. In fact, Hawaiians traditionally used the kākāwahie’s bright plumage in the capes and leis of royalty. If that wasn’t enough, its call sounded like someone cutting wood. The bird largely vanished before it could be thoroughly studied. There were a few sightings in the early 1960s, with the last confirmed report in 1963. Extinction was due to mosquito spread disease, habitat loss and invasive species.

po‘ouli by Hawai’i DLNR Division of Forestry and Wildlife

14. The **po‘ouli,** or black-faced honeycreeper, was once thought to exist in the hundreds on Maui. It inhabited only the very wet, easternmost side of the island and was considered an extremely quiet bird. Extremely rare by the early 1900s, it suffered from habitat loss, disease and a decline in the native tree snails that served as a key food. In 2004 the last three po‘ouli were brought into captivity in an effort to save them, but they didn’t survive.

15. On the Hawaiian island of Lāna‘i, there used to be a pretty flowering plant in the mint family that lived in steep, wet canyons. It had white flowers that were occasionally tinged with purple. It was so rare and barely noticed that it was only ever assigned a Latin name: ***Phyllostegia glabra*var. *lanaiensis***. It was last seen in 1914.

flat pigtoe mussel by Todd Amacker Conservation Visuals

16. The **flat pigtoe mussel** inhabited the Tombigbee River in Mississippi and Alabama. It had a preference for clean, fast-flowing water and tended toward shallow stretches of the river, where the bottom was silt-free. The flat pigtoe was just over a couple of inches across, with dark lines on the outer shell and blueish-white inner shells. It went extinct because of dams: The construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee waterway lock and dam system, whose construction began in 1972, sealed its fate. It didn't get protection under the Endangered Species Act until 1987, seven years after it was last seen.

green-blossom pearly mussel by Todd Amacker Conservation Visuals

17. The **green-blossom pearly mussel** was an elusive species, spotted just a handful of times, mostly before 1918. It had an elliptical outer shell — smooth and shiny, with fine green rays — and its inner shell varied from white to salmon-red. Muskrat middens reveal that the green-blossom pearly mussel lived in the Clinch, Powell, Holston and Nolichucky rivers in Tennessee and Virginia. Dam building ruined some of its most important habitat in the headwaters of the Tennessee River; then pollution from coal mining drove it over the edge of extinction. It was last seen alive in the Clinch River in 1982.

southern acornshell mussel by Todd Amacker Conservation Visuals

18. The **southern acornshell mussel** was small, smooth, shiny and yellow. It lived in freshwater stream riffles in Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee, mostly in the Coosa River system and the Cahaba River. It was identified as endangered in 1971, but its Endangered Species Act protection wasn't finalized until 1993. Meanwhile extensive damming had already driven it to extinction.

stirrupshell mussel by Todd Amacker Conservation Visuals

19. The **stirrupshell mussel** had a way of standing out in a crowd, with its bumpy and ridged shell with zig-zagging lines. It lived in Alabama in the fast-flowing waters of the Black Warrior and Alabama rivers, as well as in the Tombigbee River in Mississippi. Scientists put it on a list for Endangered Species Act protection in 1971, but it wasn't protected until 1987, 7 years after the last live individual was encountered. Extinction was prompted by dams, river channeling and sedimentation that smothered its habitat.

female turgid-blossom pearly mussel by Todd Amacker Conservation Visuals

20. The **turgid-blossom pearly mussel** was once relatively common in the clean, fresh waters flowing out of the southern Appalachian Mountains in Tennessee and Alabama and the Ozarks in Arkansas. It was yellow and fairly small, at 1.5 inches. The elliptical males were shaped so differently from the rounder females that scientists once thought they were separate species. It was protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1976, four years after it was last seen alive in the Duck River. These mussels could live to be 50 years of age but were driven extinct by dams that cut off the fast-flowing waters they needed to survive.

tubercled-blossom pearly mussel by Todd Amacker Conservation Visuals

21. The **tubercled-blossom pearly mussel** was once widespread and abundant, making its loss even more tragic because it was known from more than 18 major rivers — it ranged from Ontario, Canada, through seven states south to Alabama. This 4-inch long bumpy mussel was wiped out due to dams and pollution from coal mining, logging, industry and agriculture. But it was last seen in 1969: The Endangered Species Act and Clean Water Act came too late to throw it a lifeline.

upland combshell by

22. The **upland combshell** rarely exceeded 2.5 inches and sometimes came in a shape described as “rhomboidal.” It had a tawny shell that was occasionally sprinkled with small green dots or broken green rays. The upland combshell was historically found in the Black Warrior and Cahaba river drainages in Alabama and the Coosa River drainage in Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee. Scientists identified it as endangered in 1971, but it wasn’t protected under the Endangered Species Act until 1993, five years after the last live individual was seen. Declining without protection, dams and pollution drove it over the edge.

yellow-blossom pearly mussel by Todd Amacker Conservation Visuals

23. The **yellow-blossom pearly mussel** made its home in shallow, fast-moving waterways in Alabama and Tennessee, including in the Cumberland and Tennessee River systems. It had an elliptical shell that was shiny and sometimes honey-colored. A lucky viewer might spot one with green rays shooting across its shell. Lost to dams and pollution, it was last seen in 1967 in the Little Tennessee River before it was protected under the Endangered Species Act in 1976.

We’re at a critical moment in stemming the global wildlife extinction crisis. It can be done but it takes leadership, courage, vision and action.

The best way to honor the Lost 23 is to get involved. Check out our plan for addressing the extinction crisis and how you can help Save Life on Earth.

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Featured image: Bachman's warbler by Louis Agassiz Fuertes (All images in this article are from Alex Bonk/Medium)

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