



CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

protecting endangered species and wild places through science, policy, education,
and environmental law.

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Lawsuit Seeks Protection for Okinawa Woodpecker, One of the World's Rarest Birds

Washington, D.C. - The Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit today in U.S. District Court in Washington D.C. to compel the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to protect one of the world's most imperiled bird species, the Okinawa woodpecker (*Sapheopipo noguchii*), under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA).

This rare woodpecker lives in undisturbed subtropical, evergreen broadleaved forests of Yanbaru, the northern mountainous region of the island of Okinawa, Japan. The few remaining pairs of woodpeckers are on the brink of extinction, primarily due to the ongoing destruction of their forest habitat. The population is estimated to be 100-500 birds.

The Okinawa woodpecker is threatened by road construction, clear-cutting, agriculture, golf course development, construction, and other activities that destroy and fragment the woodpecker's forest habitat. Its limited range and extremely small population also make it highly vulnerable to extinction from disease and natural disasters such as typhoons.

A significant amount of the remaining habitat for the species is found on lands controlled by the U.S. Marine Corps, Northern Training Area (NTA). This habitat, which up to now has remained relatively intact, is now threatened by plans to construct new helicopter landing pads and associated infrastructure.

The International Council for Bird Preservation sought protection for the Okinawa woodpecker in 1980 by petitioning FWS to list the species as threatened or endangered under the ESA. While FWS determined that listing the Okinawa woodpecker "may be warranted," it subsequently determined in 1984 that listing the species was "precluded" by higher priority listing actions. FWS had a mandatory duty to revisit this determination every year and show expeditious progress toward listing the woodpecker, but has failed to do so since 1991.

"The Okinawa woodpecker is an international treasure, an ecological and cultural monument. The FWS has left it to languish in bureaucratic purgatory for far too long. We must act now to

protect this wonder of nature from extinction,” Peter Galvin, Pacific Director for the Center for Biological Diversity, stated.

The Center for Biological Diversity is working to protect other rare species in Japan and throughout the Pacific. On September 25th, 2003, the Center for Biological Diversity and a coalition of conservation groups from both sides of the Pacific filed a lawsuit in U.S. Federal District Court in San Francisco (*Okinawa Dugong v. Rumsfeld*, C-03-4350) against the U.S. Department of Defense over plans to construct a new airbase facility on a coral reef on the east coast of Okinawa, Japan. Conservationists are concerned that the proposed 1.5-mile-long airbase would not only destroy the coral reef, but also the prime remaining habitat of the endangered Okinawa dugong.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a science-based environmental advocacy organization that works to protect endangered species and wild places throughout the world through science, policy, education and environmental law. The Center is headquartered in Tucson, Arizona.

The case # is 03-2611. The case has been assigned to Judge Rosemary Collyer.

BACKGROUND

The Okinawa woodpecker is approximately 10 inches tall, and is a dark brown bird with red-tipped feathers and white spots on its wings. It lives only in Yanburu, a small area of forested woodlands of northern Okinawa, Japan. Yanburu is a very unique ecological area that supports a number of specialized native animals and plants, including the Okinawa woodpecker.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has designated the Okinawa woodpecker as a “critically endangered” species because of its single, tiny, and declining population.

Japan’s Ministry of Environment has similarly designated the species as “critically endangered.”

The Okinawa woodpecker is the prefectural bird of Okinawa and is also designated as a national natural monument.

The greatest danger to the woodpecker, aside from the small extent of remaining undisturbed forests, is the fragmentation of its population into scattered tiny colonies and isolated pairs.

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