



Ralph W. Schreiber Conservation Award, 2013

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RALPH W. SCHREIBER CONSERVATION AWARD, 2013

SHEILA CONANT



Sheila Conant, on the Laysan Atoll, August 2012.
(Photograph by Ryan Hagerty.)

This year, the AOU proudly awards the Ralph W. Schreiber Conservation Award to one of the pioneers of avian research and conservation in the Hawaiian Islands, Professor Sheila Conant.

For nearly five decades, Sheila has helped shape the direction of conservation activities in Hawaii as a researcher, an educator, and an active participant and leader in numerous conservation groups and community outreach efforts in the islands. She published her first paper on a native bird of Hawaii in 1967, and her 1969 paper with Andrew Berger and Charles Eddinger (Berger, A. J., C. R. Eddinger, and S. C. Frings [Conant]. 1969. The nest and eggs of the Anianiau. *Auk* 86:183–187) was the first to describe the nest and eggs of the Anianiau. That paper was the beginning of a 40-year research effort by Sheila and her students and postdocs on the biology, ecology, evolution, management, and conservation of the native birds of Hawaii.

A faculty member at the University of Hawaii from 1975 to 2012, Sheila served as Chairman of the Department of Zoology for six years and as major professor for 23 graduate students while mentoring countless others. Her 1988 paper on “Saving endangered species with translocation: Are we tinkering with evolution?” (*BioScience* 34:254–257) anticipated, by a quarter of a century, the current discussions surrounding “assisted colonization.” The work of Sheila and her students with the birds of Laysan Island and her development of management options for the birds of Hawaii’s Leeward Islands in response to climate change have informed many management decisions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), including the recent successful translocation of the Millerbird from Nihoa Island to Laysan Island. Much of the information on the ecology, limiting factors, behavior, and evolution of Hawaii’s endemic avifauna needed to

implement and revise recovery plans for endangered birds was the product of research by Sheila and her graduate students.

To complement her findings from research in the referenced literature, Sheila has also written numerous management plans and detailed ecological descriptions of island sites that have been used to inform USFWS management actions and policy decisions. These include a Laysan Island Ecosystem Restoration Plan for Northwestern Hawaiian Island Passerines, a prioritization of translocation sites for Northwest Island passerines. Sheila also wrote the “Draft Proposed Rule for listing the O’ahu Elepaio (*Chasiempis sandwichensis gayi*) as an endangered species under the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973 (as amended); Endangered Species Information Workbooks for the Nihoa Millerbird, Laysan Finch, and Nihoa Finch; an analysis and comparison of habitat types on Necker and Nihoa islands, Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, as they relate to the feasibility of establishing the Nihoa Millerbird on Necker Island; and “Ecological requirements and management options for the Nihoa Millerbird and the Nihoa Finch.”

In addition to her teaching and research, Sheila has been a science advisor and leader in the conservation community. She is an active leader and Life Member of the Hawaiian Audubon Society and has served with distinction on several advisory councils, including

- Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Reserve Council
- Hawaii State Natural Area Reserves Commission
- Board of Directors, Hawaii Wildlife Fund
- Friends of Hakalau Forest National Wildlife Reserve (founding president)
- USFWS Pacific Avifauna Recovery Coordinating Committee
- Board of Directors, Sub-Committee on Land Vertebrates for the Hawaii State Department of Agriculture

Sheila is a Fellow of the AOU and has received numerous awards for her efforts, including

- Hawaii Secretariat for Conservation Biology’s Lifetime Achievement in Science, Policy and Management
- Charles Dunn Lifetime Achievement Award from the Hawaii Audubon Society
- Honu Award for 2000, for contributions to environmental education and research, from the Conservation Council for Hawaii

- University of Hawaii Faculty Award for Outstanding Community Service
- University of Hawaii Fujio Matsuda Research Scholar
- University of Hawaii Regents Medal for Excellence in Teaching
- Professor of the Year for Hawaii, 1994, from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

To summarize, Sheila’s career has been dedicated to research, community service, and educational activities focused on developing and disseminating information that could be used to save the birds and habitats of Hawaii. Through her classes, mentoring, public lectures, assistance to the development of a K–12 biology curriculum, and other educational materials for the schools of Hawaii, she has led the effort to educate a new generation of conservation professionals to follow in her footsteps. At the same time, she has educated policy makers, land managers, and the general public in Hawaii and nationally about the plight and needs of Hawaii’s endemic birds, the world’s most endangered avifauna. She has been very effective in asking management- and policy-relevant questions and ensuring that the answers to those questions and their implications for Hawaii’s imperiled avifauna are brought to the attention of decision makers. As a consequence, Hawaii’s endangered species are much better off today than they would have been without her efforts. She has truly made Hawaii a better place for its unique avifauna.

It is for this remarkable record of accomplishment in working with America’s most imperiled avifauna that, with great pleasure, the AOU presents the 2013 Ralph W. Schreiber Conservation Award to Dr. Sheila Conant.

Award criteria.—The Ralph W. Schreiber Conservation Award recognizes extraordinary scientific contributions to the conservation, restoration, or preservation of birds and/or their habitats by an individual or small team (usually fewer than 10 people). Contributions from throughout the world and over any time course are eligible. Appropriate activities include (a) applied research, restoration, and educational actions that conserve birds or preserve significant bird habitats; (b) scientific examination of the principles of avian conservation and application of new insights into species restoration; and (c) scientific evaluation, guidance, creation, and oversight of avian recovery programs or habitat reserve–restoration programs. The award consists of a framed certificate and an honorarium.