



Photo: Eric VanderWerf

Migratory Birds

'Ūlili or Wandering Tattler

Heteroscelus incanus

SPECIES STATUS:

State recognized as Indigenous
U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan—Moderate concern

SPECIES INFORMATION: The 'ūlili, or wandering tattler, remains one of North America's least known birds. 'Ūlili winter in the Hawaiian Islands, arriving in stages (adults from July to August, juveniles September to November) and showing strong winter range fidelity. Diet varies with season, and in winter mainly consists of invertebrates such as marine worms, aquatic insects, mollusks, crustaceans, and small fish. On nonbreeding grounds, forages in intertidal habitats (such as coral reefs), less frequently in soft mud or sand, picking food from moist substrates or surface of shallow water. 'Ūlili also forage along mountain streams, in wetlands, fish ponds, and human-modified areas.

DISTRIBUTION: 'Ūlili breed mostly in mountainous areas of Alaska, and also in eastern Siberia, but densities are sparse so that precise identification of breeding areas is lacking. Winter range includes most of Oceania from Hawai'i through more southerly archipelagos. Most abundant in southern and central Pacific. Less common or infrequent in more distant areas of the Pacific. In Hawai'i, 'ūlili are more prevalent on shorelines of the NWHI than in the MHI.

ABUNDANCE: Global population has been estimated at between 10,000 and 25,000 birds, of which 90 percent breed in North America. 'Ūlili are not particularly common in Hawai'i: State waterbird surveys from 1986 through 2004 yield an average summer count for the MHI of 81 ± 8.7 (SE) and a winter MHI count of 74 ± 6.5 (SE). NWHI populations are probably larger: estimates at Laysan Island in 1984 and 1985 were 450 and 170, respectively. Monitoring in Hawai'i has not been regular or thorough enough to detect trends, but where monitoring data are more detailed, trend analysis is inconclusive.

LOCATION AND CONDITION OF KEY HABITAT: Wintering habitats throughout the Pacific and mainland Asia are more varied than breeding habitat. 'Ūlili are common in coastal areas on coral reefs and the basalt platforms of most atolls and islands. They will also make use of soft substrates, especially river mouth areas and littoral margins of lagoons. In the NWHI, they can be found on pickleweed (*Sesuvium portulacastrum*) flats, and elsewhere in Hawai'i they will forage in grassy areas around airports and golf courses.

THREATS: Primary threats include the following:

- Loss of wetland habitat to development, pollution, or habitat-modifying invasive plants.

- Avian disease.

CONSERVATION ACTIONS: To protect the ability of wintering ‘ūlili to survive while in Hawai‘i and to return in good condition to breeding grounds in North America, statewide and island-specific conservation actions should include:

- Protection of current habitat.
- Protection and restoration of additional wetland habitat, especially where it can be reclaimed from abandoned urban or agricultural uses.

MONITORING: Continue surveys of population and distribution in known and likely habitats.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES: ‘Ūlili have been only minimally studied. Research priorities should include the following:

- Basic research on demography in wintering habitat.
- More information about population sizes and trends, and population regulation.
- Better understanding of habitat needs and preferences, including foraging needs, population limiting factors, and adaptation to modified wintering habitats and how they affect migration routes.
- Increased understanding of movements of individuals that overfly the Hawaiian Islands.

References:

Gill RE, McCaffery BJ, Tomkovich PS. 2002. Wandering tattler (*Heteroscelus incanus*). In The Birds of North America, No. 642 (Poole A, Gill F, editors). Philadelphia, (PA): The Academy of Natural Sciences; and Washington DC: The American Ornithologists' Union.