Conservation issues for Darwin’s finches in the Galápagos Islands: invasive species and loss of genetic diversity

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Table of Contents

List of Figures ............................................................................................................. 6
List of Tables ............................................................................................................. 9
List of Appendices ................................................................................................... 12

Summary .................................................................................................................. 13

Declaration .............................................................................................................. 15

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................. 16

Statement of Authorship ......................................................................................... 18

1 General Introduction ............................................................................................. 19
   1.1 Island birds and vulnerability to extinction ....................................................... 19
   1.2 Darwin’s finches in the Galápagos Islands ......................................................... 20
   1.3 Philornis downsi parasitism causes endemic finch declines ............................ 21
   1.4 Genetic diversity and hybridisation in Darwin’s finches ................................. 22
   1.5 Thesis scope and objectives ............................................................................. 23
   1.6 Organisation of this thesis ................................................................................ 24

2 Avian Population Survey in the Floreana Highlands: Is the medium tree finch declining in remnant patches of Scalesia forest? ........................................ 27
   2.1 Abstract ............................................................................................................. 28
   2.2 Introduction ...................................................................................................... 29
   2.3 Methods ........................................................................................................... 31
      Study site: Cerro Pajas Volcano (2004 and 2008) .............................................. 31
      Study site: Other highland forest areas (2008 only) ......................................... 31
      Survey methods ................................................................................................. 32
      Analysis of population density ......................................................................... 33
      Male age structure in medium tree finches ....................................................... 33
   2.4 Results ............................................................................................................. 34
      Avian population trends in 2004 and 2008 at Cerro Pajas ............................... 34
      Avian population size across four highland sites in 2008 ................................. 35
      Calculating population estimates for the medium and large tree finch according to habitat suitability ............................................................... 35
      Male age structure in medium tree finches ....................................................... 36
   2.5 Discussion ....................................................................................................... 36
      Population trends in tree finches ....................................................................... 36
      Tree finch habitat on Floreana Island .................................................................. 38
      Male age structure in medium tree finches ....................................................... 39
      Population trends in other bird species .............................................................. 39
   2.6 Conclusion ...................................................................................................... 41
   2.7 Acknowledgements ......................................................................................... 41

3 P. downsi parasitism is the primary cause of nestling mortality in the critically endangered Darwin’s medium tree finch (Camarhynchus pauper) ......................................................................................................................... 46
   3.1 Abstract ............................................................................................................. 47
   3.2 Introduction ...................................................................................................... 48
   3.3 Methods ........................................................................................................... 51
Study species and site ................................................................. 51
Parasite intensity ................................................................. 52
Nest Monitoring ................................................................. 53
Measuring Rainfall ............................................................. 54
Statistical Methods ............................................................. 55
Ethical Note ............................................................................ 55

3.4 Results .................................................................................. 56
   *Philornis downsi* intensity across the three tree finch species .................. 56
   Rainfall and *P. downsi* intensity ............................................... 57
   Nesting outcome in medium tree finches ...................................... 57

3.5 Discussion ............................................................................. 58
   *P. downsi* intensity co-varies with host body size ...................... 58
   Rainfall and *P. downsi* intensity ............................................ 60
   *P. downsi* intensity and nestling mortality in the medium tree finch .... 61
   Impacts of nest predators on nesting success ............................ 63

3.6 Conclusion ............................................................................. 64
3.7 Acknowledgments .................................................................. 65

4 Parasite infestation and predation in Darwin’s small ground finch: contrasting two elevational habitats between islands .................................................. 71

4.1 Abstract ................................................................................. 72
4.2 Introduction ............................................................................. 73
4.3 Methods .................................................................................. 75
   Study species ............................................................................ 75
   Study site ................................................................................ 75
   Nest monitoring ....................................................................... 76
   Parasites ............................................................................... 77
   Predators ............................................................................. 78
   Statistical analysis ................................................................... 78

4.4 Results ..................................................................................... 79
   *Philornis downsi* parasitism ................................................ 79
   Nest predation and brood loss ............................................. 80
   Clutch size and fledging success ........................................... 80
   Descriptive results for 2005 .................................................. 81

4.5 Discussion ............................................................................... 81
   Parasitism across habitats .................................................... 81
   Nest predation across habitats ............................................ 83
   Clutch-size variation .......................................................... 84

4.6 Acknowledgements .................................................................. 85

5 Video analysis of host-parasite interactions in Darwin’s finch nests. ... 91

5.1 Abstract ................................................................................. 92
5.2 Introduction ............................................................................. 93
5.3 Methods .................................................................................. 95
   Study area and study species ............................................. 95
   Video monitoring system ................................................. 95
   Parasite intensity ............................................................ 96

5.4 Results ..................................................................................... 97
   Adult fly activity ............................................................... 97
   Larval activity ................................................................. 98
   Nestling evasive behaviour ............................................... 99
   Parental care ................................................................. 99
   Parasitism and fledging success in filmed nests .................. 100

5.5 Discussion ............................................................................... 100
6 Begging does not signal need in parasitised Darwin’s finch chicks, but it
does stimulate parental feeding ............................................. 108

6.1 Abstract ........................................................................... 109
6.2 Introduction ...................................................................... 110
6.3 Methods ........................................................................... 112
Study site and species .............................................................. 112
Philornis downsi life cycle ....................................................... 112
Nest monitoring ...................................................................... 113
Chick growth and begging behaviour ..................................... 113
Statistical analyses ................................................................. 115
6.4 Results ............................................................................. 116
Chick begging intensity and parental care in videoed nests ......... 116
Chick condition and fledging success in videoed nests .............. 117
Chick mortality and nesting outcome in all nests ...................... 118
6.5 Discussion ....................................................................... 118
Parental nest visitation ............................................................. 119
Inter-sibling competition .......................................................... 120
Chick condition and growth ...................................................... 121
Male and female contributions to compensatory feeds ............. 122
6.6 Conclusion ...................................................................... 122
6.7 Acknowledgements ........................................................... 123

Are Darwin’s tree finches a hybrid swarm? The difficulty of assessing
speciation and extinction in sympatry ........................................... 129

7.1 Abstract .......................................................................... 130
7.2 Introduction ..................................................................... 131
7.2 Methods .......................................................................... 134
Sample collection .................................................................... 135
Morphology .......................................................................... 135
Historical morphology ............................................................. 137
Size assortative pairing ............................................................ 137
DNA extraction and PCR amplification .................................... 138
Microsatellite analysis ............................................................. 138
Population genetic structure ..................................................... 139
7.3 Results ............................................................................. 141
Morphology .......................................................................... 141
Historical comparison of morphological data ........................... 141
Size assortative pairing ............................................................ 142
Locus characteristics and genetic diversity .............................. 143
Population genetic structure ..................................................... 143
The association between morphology and population genetic structure ..................................................... 144
7.4 Discussion ...................................................................... 146
Relaxed selection for mate choice: the mechanism for hybridisation ..................................................... 148
Outcompeting parasites: the function of hybridisation ............. 149
Conclusion ............................................................................. 150

8 General Discussion ............................................................... 163

8.1 Darwin’s tree finches are at high risk of future population decline .......... 164
Habitat loss and high parasite intensity in native highland forest ..................................................... 164
Low recruitment ..................................................................... 165
List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Map of the Galápagos Islands (northern islands of Darwin and Wolf not pictured). The archipelago is located 1000km west of mainland Ecuador.................................25

Figure 1.2 Floreana Island, Galápagos. Photo shows the island’s largest volcano: Cerro Pajas (around the base of which lies the highland forest zone).................................25

Figure 1.3 a) Adult Philornis downsi fly, b) small ground finch (Geospiza fuliginosa) nestling with signs of P. downsi larval feeding (body wounds and enlarged nares), c) dead medium tree finch (Camarhynchus pauper) nestling, d) dead medium tree finch nestlings with signs of parasitism along with 2nd and 3rd instar P. downsi larvae collected from the same nest..........................................................26

Figure 2.1 Map of Floreana Island, Galápagos Archipelago, Ecuador. The highlands zone includes all areas within the 300m contour line. Site locations and contour lines were established using GPS coordinates and Google Earth ProTM.................................44

Figure 2.2 Change in the percentage of male colour categories at active medium tree finch nests in the Floreana highlands between 2006 and 2008. Note that there were no Black 0 (young) males in 2006, which suggests unsuccessful breeding in the previous year(s). No Black 5 (old) males were observed in either study year.................................45

Figure 3.1 Map of Floreana Island, Galápagos Archipelago, Ecuador. The highland zone includes elevations above the 300m contour, within which the largest area of prime Scalesia habitat was chosen as our field site (base of Cerro Pajas volcano). The site was accessed via the road leading from the town of Puerto Velasco Ibarra to the agricultural area.................................................................67

Figure 3.2 Total P. downsi intensity (per nest) (shown as mean±se) in three tree finch species on Floreana Island in which nestlings were at least 6 days old (n=29): (1) small tree finch, C. parvulus, 29.93 ± 5.29, (2006, n=10; 2008, n=5), (2) medium tree finch, C. pauper, 51.77 ± 7.77, (2006, n=8; 2008, n=5), (3) large tree finch, C. psittacula, 50, (2008, n=1), which has been included in the figure for illustrative purposes only and was not included in the ANOVA.................................................................68
Figure 3.3  Number of medium tree finch nests across years that fledged (1) 0% of hatchlings ($n=11$), (2) 33% of hatchlings ($n=1$), (3) 50% of hatchlings ($n=1$), (4) 66% of hatchlings ($n=1$), or (5) 100% of hatchlings ($n=3$). Causes of 0% fledging success in nests are as follows; total brood loss due to parasitism ($n=5$), nestling predation ($n=3$), partial brood loss due to parasitism followed by nestling predation ($n=1$), tree falling on nest ($n=1$). Partial brood loss due to parasitism was responsible for all other nestling deaths leading to categories of 33, 50 and 66% fledging success.

Figure 3.4  The percentage of medium tree finch nestlings that died due to (1) nest predation (2006, $n=9$; 2008, $n=6$), or (2) $P. downsi$ parasitism (2006 $n=10$; 2008, $n=12$). 13 nestlings fledged (2006, $n=7$; 2008, $n=6$), and 3 nestlings died when a tree fell on the nest (2006). The sample size was 53 nestlings from 17 nests. For this figure, each nestling was treated independently because some nests had partial brood mortality due to parasitism and partial fledging success.

Figure 5.1  Recently deceased nestling with larval damage to beak. 1st instar larvae present feeding in beak cavity.

Figure 6.1  The positive association between strength of chick begging behaviour and the number of feeds received per feeding event in parasitised and parasite-free nests. Data is from 13 videoed nests with a total of 42 chicks. Mean feeds per event is shown as mean ± s.e (from 5 feeding events per nest).

Figure 6.2  Mean body mass (± s.e) of chicks in parasitised and parasite-free nests. Age categories represent grouped values for each 2-day range in chick age. Data is from 19 chicks in 6 parasitised nests and 23 chicks in 7 parasite-free nests.

Figure 6.3  Mean naris diameter (± s.e) of chicks from parasitised and parasite-free nests. Data is from 19 chicks in 6 parasitised nests and 23 chicks in 7 parasite-free nests.

Figure 7.1  Tree finches from Floreana Island: a) small tree finch ($C. parvulus$) male (~2 year old), b) medium tree finch ($C. pauper$) male (~4 year old), c) large tree finch ($C. psittacula$) male (~3 year old).

Figure 7.2  A projection of the Floreana tree finch morphological data (male only) collected by Kleindorfer and O’Connor in 2005 & 2010. Analysis was performed on principal components scores for body size and beak size. The method distinguished two clusters.
which are indicated with different symbols. For each cluster, component means are marked by an asterisk, and ellipses with axes indicate covariances.

Figure 7.3 A projection of the Floreana tree finch morphological data (male only) collected by David Lack in 1938-39. The method distinguished three clusters, which are indicated with different symbols. For each cluster, component means are marked by an asterisk, and ellipses with axes indicate covariances.

Figure 7.4 The relationship between pair male and female beak shape. Evidence for size assortative pairing within species in 2004/05 (a low rainfall year), whereas size assortative pairing in 2010 (a high rainfall year) occurred across species, but not within species.

Figure 7.5 Mean individual cluster memberships across the two clusters detected by the LOCPRIOR model in STRUCTURE. Data is shown for individuals classified as a small tree finch (STF), medium tree finch (MTF) or large tree finch (LTF) in 2005 and 2010.

Figure 7.6 Interannual variation in beak size and body size (shown as principal component scores) for putative species and genetic populations of tree finches on Floreana. Data are for males only and separated by year (2005, 2010). Genetic populations are represented by three categories: 1) Population 1 (Pop 1); 2) Population 2 (Pop 2), and 3) mixed assignment (Mixed).
List of Tables

Table 2.1 Description of vegetation found at each of the four survey sites. The total area with native forest is regarded as any forested area dominated by native tree species. We have noted the occurrence of seven of the most common dominant highland plant species across sites in the following descending order of abundance: (1) Dominant, (2) Common, (3) Patch (common, but only within a specified area in km2), (4) Present, (5) Absent. Site sizes were calculated using Google Earth ProTM.

Table 2.2 Population density estimates for bird species surveyed at Floreana Island highland forest sites in 2006 & 2008. Methods for calculating density are detailed in the methods section. The maximum population size for 2008 was calculated using the mean density (birds/km2) across the four sites divided by the total area of native forest (22.5 km2). For the large tree finch, a range in population size was calculated (see results, Cerro Ventanas was excluded from the lower estimate). The inflection point (distance from the observer at which the density of each species declined) was 70m for each of the five species of Darwin’s finches, 50m for the smooth-billed ani and dark-billed cuckoo, 40m for the yellow warbler, and 30m for the Galápagos flycatcher.

Table 3.1 Nesting outcome in medium tree finches. Data were collected in 2006 (dry year) and 2008 (wet year).

Table 4.1 Overview of Geospiza fuliginosa nesting outcome on Floreana Island (2004 and 2006). Brood loss refers to nestlings found dead in the nest. The causes of partial or total brood mortality are unknown, although indirect evidence suggests mortality due to Philornis downsi. Nests in which some or all nestlings fledged are within ‘% nests with fledglings’. Sample size is shown in parentheses, and percentages were calculated in relation to the number of nests with eggs with known outcomes in each habitat. Means are shown ± SE. P-values are reported from either: student’s t-test analyses (t-test) or chi-squared analyses ($\chi^2$) (Likelihood ratio), and are denoted as * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$, or ns (not significant).

Table 4.2 Mean Philornis downsi intensity (defined as the number of $P. \text{downsi}$ per nestling) and range in total $P. \text{downsi}$ intensity (defined as the number of $P. \text{downsi}$ per nest) in Geospiza fuliginosa for each clutch size (with nestlings ≥ 6 d old) observed across habitats (lowlands, highlands) for 2004 and 2006 (sample size). N = sample size of nests.
Table 4.3 Type of nest predation in *Geospiza fuliginosa* across the lowlands and highlands on Floreana Island for 2004 and 2006. Sample size is shown in parentheses, and percentages were calculated in relation to the number of nests with eggs with known outcomes in each habitat (23 nests in the lowlands; 17 nests in the highlands). P-values are reported from chi-squared analyses (Likelihood ratios) to test for differences between habitats. Significance is denoted as: * P < 0.05, ** P < 0.01, *** P < 0.001.

Table 4.4 Overview of clutch size and nesting success in *Geospiza fuliginosa* in the lowlands and highlands of Santa Cruz Island (from Kleindorfer 2007a) from 2000 to 2004, and Floreana Island in 2004 and 2006. Data for Santa Cruz Island parasite intensity in *G. fuliginosa* (1998-2005) are from Dudaniec et al. (2007). For some nests, nesting outcome was unknown.

Table 5.1 Description of nests fitted with in-nest cameras on Santa Cruz (SC) or Floreana (F) Island in 2008.

Table 5.2 Overview of Darwin’s finch and *P. downsi* host/parasite interactions observed in video during the day and night. We filmed at two nests with eggs and nine nests with nestlings (total No. nests=11). We have identified the number of nests at which each behaviour was observed. Corresponding nest ID details and nest characteristics are given in Table 5.1.

Table 6.1 Overview of nesting outcome and parental care in the subset of videoed small ground finch nests in 2010. Values given as means ± standard error with N in parentheses.

Table 6.2 Summary of nesting success: all small ground finch nests containing chicks (only nests with known outcome included). Values given as means ± standard error with N in parentheses.

Table 7.1 Morphological variation between the small, medium and large tree finch on Floreana. Shown are range in measurements (minimum and maximum in mm), means (mm) with standard deviation for males from 2005 and 2010 combined.

Table 7.2 Variation in mean morphological traits between putative species and year. Shown are mean values and standard deviations for males (females excluded). Results of MANOVA show the effect of dependent variables on variation in male morphology (for
putative species). F-values (F), and P-values are shown. Bold indicates significant values…………………………………………………………………………………………..158

Table 7.3 Mean and variance of: (1) beak size (principal components) and wing length for tree finches assigned to each of the three clusters in 1938-39, and (2) beak and body size (principal components) for tree finches assigned to each of the two clusters in each 2005 and 2010. Distance between cluster means is given between clusters one and two (1&2) and two and three (2&3) for historical data and clusters one and two for modern data……………………………………………………………………………………159

Table 7.4 Comparison of Floreana tree finch morphological measurements taken by David Lack (1938-39) and Sonia Kleindorfer and Jody O’Connor (2005 & 2010). All data is for male finches. Results of one-way ANOVA show the effect of dependent variables on variation in male morphology. F-values (F), and P-values are shown………………160

Table 7.5 Percentage membership of putative species (small, medium and large tree finch) to a genetic population based on STRUCTURE assignment (Population 1 (Pop 1), Population 2 (Pop 2), or mixed assignment (probability of assignment (<0.75)). Data is for both males and females………………………………………………………………………………..161

Table 7.6 Variation in mean morphological traits between genetic populations and year. Shown are mean values and standard deviations for males (females excluded). Results of MANOVA show the effect of dependent variables on variation in male morphology. F-values (F), and P-values are shown. Bold indicates significant values…………………162
List of Appendices

Appendix 7A. Allelic variation at 10 microsatellite loci across two years (2005 and 2010). Loci that depart significantly from Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium are indicated in bold……………………………………………………………………………………………………173

Appendix 7B. Global allelic variation at 10 microsatellite loci across two years (2005 and 2010). Loci that depart significantly from Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium are indicated in bold……………………………………………………………………………………………………175

Appendix 7C. Mean logarithm of probability of the data for $K = 1$-$6$ estimated using the standard STRUCTURE model. Dashed line represents maximal logarithm of probability of the data……………………………………………………………………………………………………176

Appendix 7D: Delta K for $K = 1$-$6$, calculated by transforming logarithm of probability of the data estimated using the standard structure model……………………………………………………………………………………………………177

Appendix 7E: Mean logarithm of probability of the data for $K=1$-$6$ estimated using the locprior model in STRUCTURE. Dashed line represents maximal logarithm of probability of the data……………………………………………………………………………………………………178

Appendix 7F: Delta K for $K = 1$-$6$, calculated by transforming logarithm of probability of the data estimated using the LOCPRIOR model in STRUCTURE…………………179
Summary

This study examines the impacts of a novel host-parasite system for population dynamics in Darwin’s finches on Floreana Island, Galápagos Archipelago. I focus in particular on the interaction between Darwin’s finches and parasitic larvae of an introduced fly, *Philornis downsi*, which causes high nestling mortality. This is the first project to systematically study Darwin’s finches on Floreana Island since the pioneering work of David Lack in the 1930s, and Robert Bowman in the 1960s. I provide the first descriptive study of the breeding biology of the locally endemic medium tree finch, *Camarhynchus pauper*, which – at the start of the study – was listed as “data deficient” on the IUCN RedList.

I begin with a study of the population status and population trends of finches on Floreana Island. The only population of Darwin’s medium tree finches (*C. pauper*) had declined by 61% between 2004 and 2008 to ~1660 individuals. I also document evidence for lack of recruitment into the breeding population, given my finding that medium tree finches had an age-biased population, with few one year old or 5+ year old males. The survey reports on the lack of suitable habitat for highland birds. I devote several chapters to the study of the impacts of *P. downsi* on host mortality, and the potential for Darwin’s finches to adapt to the negative impacts of this invasive parasite. *P. downsi* is unanimously considered the biggest threat to the survival of Galápagos landbirds, including Darwin’s finches. The parasite caused 38-92% of nestling mortality across all five host species studied in this thesis. The impacts of this parasite are greatest for Darwin’s tree finches (*Camarhynchus* spp) because parasite intensity is highest in their highland forest habitat. In particular, *P. downsi* is identified as the primary cause of nestling mortality in Darwin’s medium tree finch. As a result of this research, the medium tree finch status
was reassessed from “vulnerable” to “critically endangered” on the IUCN RedList. Video surveillance of finch behaviour showed that parent and nestling finches now have a range of anti-parasite behaviours that can partially mitigate the impacts of the parasite, including preening and removal of larvae. Experimental studies using parasitised and parasite-free nests showed that finch parents increased food provisioning to parasitised nestlings, but did not compensate for the negative impacts of parasitism (P. downsi caused 92% of nestling mortality in 2010). Collectively, these findings indicate that P. downsi parasitism is a major conservation concern for the finches on Floreana Island. I also examine population genetic structure and gene flow between the three sympatric tree finch species on Floreana Island, and find evidence for the loss of genetic diversity in the sympatric tree finches. High levels of hybridisation were detected within the tree finch group, suggesting that the mechanism for loss of genetic diversity is via introgression with closely-related taxa, that is – “speciation in reverse”.

This thesis represents a novel and multi-faceted approach to understanding the complex interactions of human impacts, introduced species, and endemic species decline in island birds. The results of this research will have immediate impacts on the development of P. downsi control programs, and highlight the need for focussed recovery plans for the medium tree finch.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Jody Anne O’Connor

30th September 2011
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Data collection: J.O’C
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1 General Introduction

1.1 Island birds and vulnerability to extinction

Understanding and managing the causes of species decline is fundamental to the conservation of biodiversity. This study aims to identify the processes and causal mechanisms behind bird population declines in the Galápagos Islands. Endemic island birds typically exist in small populations within restricted and specialised habitat (Simberloff, 1995), where they are 40 times more likely to go extinct than continental species (Johnson and Stattersfield, 1990). Since 1800, 90% of all bird extinctions have been island taxa (Banko and Banko, 2009), and very few island systems retain their full suite of avian inhabitants. For example, habitat degradation and the introduction of predators and pathogens following human settlement has caused the extinction of 90% of Hawaiian birds (Pimm et al., 1995, Banko and Banko, 2009) and 73% of land birds on Guam (Pregill and Steadman, 2009). One in eight species of birds are at risk of becoming extinct by the year 2100 (BirdLife, 2000), and most of these threatened species are tropical forest birds on islands (Johnson and Stattersfield, 1990, Banko and Banko, 2009).

The ominous history and predicted continuation of island bird extinctions has provided the impetus for this study of Darwin’s finches on the Galápagos Islands. So far, no species of bird on the Galápagos has become extinct, and the archipelago retains 95% of its original biodiversity. However, there is only a small window of opportunity to identify and mitigate the threats to Darwin’s finches as we are already witnessing the first local extinctions (Grant et al., 2005) and population declines across the archipelago (Curry, 1986, Dvorak et al., 2004, Fessl et al., 2010, Dvorak et al., in press). This thesis is mainly focused on conservation issues for birds on Floreana Island (Figures 1.1 & 1.2), because the island has the longest history of human settlement, has the worst record for local bird
extirpations and is home to the only population of Darwin’s medium tree finch. Current population sizes and recruitment processes for Floreana birds are unknown (Chapter 2).

1.2 Darwin’s finches in the Galápagos Islands

The 14 species of Darwin’s finches in the Galápagos Islands are textbook examples of evolution in action. They are internationally recognized as prime examples of natural selection and adaptive radiation in a unique natural laboratory (Grant, 1999, Schluter, 2001, Grant and Grant, 2008). The ancestors of Darwin’s finches traversed over >1000km of ocean to colonise the volcanic islands about 2.3 million years ago (Sato et al., 2001), where they have since evolved into a diverse and endemic group in isolation from humans, pathogens, and with few predators. Charles Darwin himself noted that: 'The natural history of this archipelago is very remarkable: it seems to be a little world within itself” (Darwin, 1839). But since Darwin’s famous voyage through the Galápagos in 1835, the islands have undergone intense and rapid degradation as a result of increasing human settlement and tourism (Steadman et al., 1991, Mauchamp, 1997). In fact the most pivotal Galápagos species for the development of Darwin’s theory of evolution, the Floreana Mockingbird, is now critically endangered and only persists on two small islets after being extirpated from it’s main habitat on Floreana (Curry, 1986, Deem et al., 2011). Darwin’s finches are now under threat as their habitat is cleared for agriculture and introduced predators and parasites consume their nestlings (Curry, 1986, Steadman, 1986, Fessl and Tebbich, 2002, Grant et al., 2005, Chapters 2-5). In particular, the accidental introduction of the parasitic fly, Philornis downsi, to the Galápagos Islands is considered the most severe and imminent threat to the survival of endemic birds. P. downsi has been given the highest risk ranking for invasive organisms that threaten biodiversity in the Galápagos (Causton et al., 2006).
1.3 *Philornis downsi* parasitism causes endemic finch declines.

Parasites have such a strong impact on bird hosts they are ‘likely to play a role in practically every aspect of (avian) evolutionary biology’ (Price, 1991). Although Darwin’s finches are famous for rapid evolution, they have certainly met their match in the new host-parasite relationship with *P. downsi*. Adult *P. downsi* flies are vegetarian but have three free-ranging parasitic larval instar stages, which feed on the blood and flesh of nestling birds (Fessl et al., 2006b)(Figure 1.3). Parasitism results in reduced haemoglobin concentration (Dudaniec et al., 2006), multiple body wounds and infections, substantial blood loss (18-55%) (Fessl et al., 2006a, Fessl et al., 2006b), reduced growth rates (Fessl et al., 2006a), grossly deformed nasal cavities of nestlings (Fessl et al., 2006b) and deformed beaks of fledglings that survive into adulthood (Galligan and Kleindorfer, 2009). Consequently, it is not surprising that *P. downsi* parasitism was found to cause 19-76% of Darwin’s finch nestling mortality across years, when studied between 1998 and 2005 (Fessl et al., 2006b)(Figure 1.3).

The detrimental impacts of *P. downsi* on Darwin’s finches are well documented, but because larval parasitism occurs within finch nests at night (Fessl et al., 2006a), we have very few observations of the host-parasite interaction in the wild. Developing effective control methods requires a more detailed understanding of within-nest activity such as the fly’s reproductive characteristics, larval feeding strategies, and finch anti-parasite defences. This thesis represents the first study to use in-nest surveillance footage to examine real-time host-parasite interactions between Darwin’s finches and *P. downsi* parasites (Chapters 5&6). Behavioural and nesting studies are used to examine the potential for Darwin’s finches to adapt to parasitism, for example by showing anti-parasite behaviour and altering the expression of key life history variables such as clutch size and parental care (Chapters 3-6). I quantify fledging success and causes of brood
Chapter 1: Introduction

mortality across species, habitats, and islands to examine the vulnerability of Darwin’s finch species to the effects of introduced parasites and rodent predators (Chapters 3-6).

1.4 Genetic diversity and hybridisation in Darwin’s finches

The evolution of Darwin’s finches has been greatly influenced by the isolation of the archipelago, extreme climatic variation, and limited opportunities for dispersal (Grant, 1999, Grant and Grant, 2008). These conditions created a unique environment, which promoted rapid adaptive radiation facilitated by niche competition and character divergence between species (Grant, 1999, Grant and Grant, 2008). But human-induced landscape changes such as the introduction of new food resources, predators and pathogens can alter the evolutionary trajectory of closely-related taxa, and should be considered when evaluating modern drivers of hybridisation, speciation and extinction (Hendry et al., 2006, Taylor et al., 2006, De León et al., 2011). To date, most field research about Darwin’s finches has come from long term studies of the ground finches (Geospizinae), while remarkably little is known about any aspect of the tree finches (Camarhynchus spp), including speciation scenarios, temporal and spatial patterns of hybridisation, and population genetic structure. This is the first study to systematically examine species boundaries, genetic diversity and divergence in three sympatric species of Darwin’s tree finches on Floreana Island: the small, medium, and large tree finch (C. parvulus, pauper and psittacula)(Chapter 7). Notably, the medium tree finch is endemic to Floreana Island and at the time of commencing this research in 2006, the species was listed as “vulnerable” but “data deficient” on the IUCN redlist of threatened species. I studied gene flow between the three sympatric tree finch species on Floreana Island and contrasted patterns of gene flow between study years with low and high rainfall (Chapter 7). Previous research by Peter and Rosemary Grant has shown that Darwin’s ground
finches are likely to hybridise during high rainfall years (Grant and Grant 1992). This finding is significant because hybridisation can result in extinction when declining taxa are genetically overwhelmed by introgression from closely-related species (Dabrowski and Fraser, 2005, Hendry et al., 2006, Taylor et al., 2006, De León et al., 2011), and this process is predicted to become increasingly prevalent as species’ distributions are altered by human-induced changes (Dabrowski and Fraser, 2005, De León et al., 2011). Understanding patterns of hybridisation is therefore important for the effective conservation of sympatric populations of Darwin’s tree finches that may be threatened by interspecific genetic interactions (Chapter 7).

1.5 Thesis scope and objectives

The chapters of this thesis examine the effects of bio-ecology of invasive species as well as an assessment of genetic processes that will affect the persistence of common and threatened Darwin’s finch species. This information is integral to the development of control programs for invasive species and conservation management guidelines for threatened birds and habitats.

Specifically the aims of this study are to:

1. Survey population numbers of Darwin’s finches in the degraded highland forest of Floreana island.
2. Identify the major cause of population decline in the critically endangered Darwin’s medium tree finch.
3. Identify variation in *P. downsi* impacts and prevalence across species, years, habitats and islands.
4. Examine the impacts of nest predation and parasitism on the life history strategies of Darwin’s small ground finch across two distinct habitats (arid lowlands and forest highlands).
5. Examine host-parasite interactions inside finch nests to increase our understanding of the life-cycle of *P. downsi* and the development of anti-parasite behavior in host birds.
6. Use experimental techniques to examine the role of parasitism on chick begging behavior and parental food compensation.

7. Use molecular techniques to test the idea that hybridisation will change in frequency across years that differ in rainfall, and will affect genetic diversity in Darwin’s tree finches.

1.6 Organisation of this thesis

The thesis is presented as a series of manuscripts that are either published, submitted or in preparation for publication in peer-reviewed, scientific journals. The thesis is comprised of four published papers (Chapters 2-5), one paper that is submitted and “in review” (Chapter 6), and the final paper is in preparation (Chapter 7). A general discussion of the main findings of this research and suggestions for future work is included at the end of the research chapters.
Figure 1.1 Map of the Galápagos Islands (northern islands of Darwin and Wolf not pictured). The archipelago is located 1000km west of mainland Ecuador.

Figure 1.2 Floreana Island, Galápagos. Photo shows the island’s largest volcano: Cerro Pajas (around the base of which lies the highland forest zone).
Chapter 1: Introduction

Figure 1.3 a) Adult *Philornis downsi* fly, b) small ground finch (*Geospiza fuliginosa*) nestling with signs of *P. downsi* larval feeding (body wounds and enlarged nares), c) dead medium tree finch (*Camarhynchus pauper*) nestling, d) dead medium tree finch nestlings with signs of parasitism along with 2\(^{nd}\) and 3\(^{rd}\) instar *P. downsi* larvae collected from the same nest.