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News and Notes

This new section, 'News and Notes', is intended to provide a forum for up-to-date information on threatened species, on-going conservation work and other issues related to bird conservation. It will include pieces abstracted from other publications. Please send any contributions to BCI News and Notes Editor, BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge CB3 0NA, or e-mail them to Rob.Williams@birdlife.org.uk.

Ants take over from rats on Bird Island, Seychelles

Until 1967, Bird Island, Seychelles, was free of rats, although the island's vegetation had been substantially modified by the planting of coconuts and the introduction of accompanying exotic plant species. In 1967, during construction of a hotel black rats *Rattus rattus* were accidentally brought ashore in a shipment of palm leaves, imported from Praslin Island for thatching. Rats quickly infested the whole of the 80 ha island.

Rat control, using anticoagulants, was practised around the hotel but this required the continued use of poisons and did not keep the hotel completely clear. The owners decided to seek advice on eradication and this was achieved by Don Merton in late 1995. Following the disappearance of rats several faunal changes were apparent. Common Noddies *Anous stolidus* began nesting successfully on the ground and Turtle Doves *Streptopelia picturata*, many showing characteristics of the endemic race *rostrata*, became numerous; they had not been seen on the island since 1973. In 1997, however, it was apparent that an exotic ant, the crazy ant *Anoplolepis longipes* was infesting a large part of the island. This ant which was accidentally introduced to the main island of Mahe in the 1960s, was first noticed on Bird Island in 1991 when small numbers were noticed near the hotel kitchen. Its numbers remained small and its range restricted until the increase noted in 1997. By 1998, crazy ants infested about half of Bird Island, including part of the Sooty Tern *Sterna fruscata* colony and the owner was concerned about their increase and the problems that they were causing.

These problems included: the deaths of land crabs *Cardisoma* sp. and the disappearance of the endemic skink *Mabuya seychellensis* from areas where the ant was abundant; the failure of Sooty Terns to occupy parts of their nesting colony occupied by crazy ants, amounting in 1998 to c. 1.5 ha, space for 60,000 pairs; the deaths of some White Tern *Gygis alba* chicks, the killing of some bushes, and even large trees, in beach crest vegetation where particularly dense infestations of ants had undermined the roots; and the killing of large numbers of insects, especially large beetles.

These activities of the crazy ants are thus causing concern for the island's environment and help has been sought for their control. After discussions with several ant specialists, the Clorox Company kindly supplied samples of untreated bait for experiments on the attractiveness of the bait base to non-target components of the island's fauna. These experiments showed that this particular bait base was not attractive to crabs, skinks and geckos, or to those land birds which could readily gain access to the bait. Clorox also provided samples of bait containing hydramethylon, a slow acting stomatch poison which the ants take back to the nest, thereby killing the queens. Hydramethylon has a very low toxicity to birds and mammals.

We can only speculate about the sudden increase in the numbers and distribution of crazy ants. The coincidence of this increase immediately following the eradication of the rats is, however, notable. Black Rats are omnivorous and the imagines, eggs and larvae of the ants could have provided them with a readily available source of protein and fat. High

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densities of rats could have prohibited the initial spread of the ants but with the eradication of the rats, crazy ants may have been released from predation and have been permitted to increase to their present numbers.

This scenario, if correct, raises the prospect that the eradication of exotic vertebrates, as a contribution to the restoration of oceanic islands, may not necessarily lead to the anticipated benefits of such restoration. In particular, an investigation of the presence of other exotic animals and plants that might benefit from the absence of the vertebrates should form an integral part of vertebrate eradication programmes.

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Discovery of a large proportion of wintering North American Razorbills *Alca torda* in the lower Bay of Fundy, Canada

The wintering areas of Razorbills *Alca torda* and other auks in the North-west Atlantic are poorly known. Based on occasional reports from local birders we conducted standardised surveys for seabirds, particularly Razorbills, on 26 days between November 1997 and March 1998 on which we counted up to 53,000 auks off Grand Manan Island. Extrapolated numbers based on identified auk observations suggest that c. 52,000 Razorbills may have been encountered during a transect 23 January (this would represent c. 74% of the North American breeding population). This number dropped 8 days later to 64 identified Razorbills, suggesting very strong movement patterns of wintering auks in the larger Gulf of Maine region. Other auks and seabirds were found to show distinct patterns of occurrence, but absolute numbers fluctuated. A distinct core zone of auk distribution was found in mid-winter around the Old Proprietor Shoals (c. 4 km south-east of Grand Manan Island). Based on our findings, backed up with published Christmas Bird Counts, it becomes clear that the lower Bay of Fundy serves also as a resting and wintering ground for a variety of other species, such as Dovekie *Alle alle*, Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*, Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*, Purple Sandpiper *Calidris maritima* and Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*. Most of these aspects are not well monitored. The waters off Grand Manan Island could present a marine hotspot of international importance for Razorbills and other waterbirds. Further research on this subject concerning seabird migration, feeding and winter ecology is now under way.

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