

News and Notes

New bird reserve will expand an extensive system of protected areas in Seychelles

The Government of Seychelles has published its intention to turn Conception Island into a legally protected conservation area. Conception is a small and very rocky islet off the west coast of the main island of Mahe. It is privately owned, although abandoned since the decline of the plantation-based economy in the 1970s. It is covered mostly with secondary vegetation although some endemic bird species still persist. In 1997 a population of the Critically Endangered Seychelles White-eye *Zosterops modestus* was discovered on the island. The Seychelles' Ministry of Environment and Transport estimates the population to consist of 242–347 individuals. The only other population is on Mahe island where habitat modification, competition, predation and other impacts have reduced the numbers to about 25–50 birds. Conception Island therefore holds the bulk of the world's population of this species.

The Government intends formally to declare the island a Special Reserve under the National Parks and Nature Conservancy Act if the owners agree. Negotiations are currently under way. Existing Special Reserves include the atoll of Aldabra, and the islands of Cousin and Aride, which belong to BirdLife International and the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (RSNC) respectively. When Conception is declared a Special Reserve it will become part of a system that characterizes the Seychelles as the country with the largest percentage of its national territory under formal conservation protection. This small island nation currently has four Special Reserves, eight National Parks (including six marine parks), one Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and six Nature Reserves. About 42% of the country's land area is protected under

these designations. In addition, other legal categories such as River Reserves, Sensitive Areas (which include Important Bird Areas, IBAs), Areas for the Protection of Landscape, Protected Areas, Shell Reserves and Fisheries Protected Areas provide management control over several hundred sites.

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Eradication of rats from Fregate Island, Seychelles.

The island of Fregate in the Seychelles archipelago holds approximately 50% of the world's population of the Critically Endangered Seychelles Magpie-robin *Copsychus sechellarum*, and was previously one of the largest rat-free tropical islands in the world. However, in 1995 Brown Rats *Rattus norvegicus* were accidentally introduced, and the animals quickly became established. In 1998 a team from New Zealand estimated the population to be in the magnitude of hundreds of thousands. The rats not only affected the native avifauna but also had impacts on invertebrates and proved a nuisance to the island's plantation and hotel. From 1999 onwards, the management on Fregate Island worked with the Seychelles Ministry of Environment and Transport and BirdLife Seychelles on a plan to eradicate rats in 2000. Fregate was to be 'deratted' along with Curieuse and Denis islands. However, Fregate was the only island with several species of sensitive native wildlife, Seychelles Magpie-robin being a particular concern. BirdLife Seychelles agreed to manage the operation to hold all the endemic birds in captivity. RSPB and BirdLife Seychelles provided funding for the captive management.

Eradication was funded by Fregate Island and the Seychelles Government

and was conducted between June and July 2000 by a team from New Zealand led by Don Merton. It involved dropping poison bait, a cereal pellet, on all parts of the island from a helicopter. The poison used was Brodifacoum which, although poisonous to mammals, is less dangerous to birds and reptiles and poses no risk to invertebrates, such as snails or insects. The formulation was designed to minimize danger to birds; the pellets are coloured green to make them unappetizing to birds. Three drops were made.

Despite minimal risk to birds, BirdLife Seychelles caught the entire population of Magpie-robins and over 300 Seychelles Fodies *Foudia sechellarum* and held them in custom-made aviaries for several months until the bait had rotted away. In

all, 20 large aviaries were built and positioned throughout the island. The robins conditioned well and even bred in captivity. During August and September 2000, the birds were released, adapting very well to freedom. One pair of magpie-robins started breeding on their first day of liberty. Importantly, the eradication has been an apparent success. Seven months after the last poison drop in July no rats have been seen. Fregate Island management has put in place a series of rat control measures to prevent reinvasion.

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