

Indian Ocean Seabird Group



Newsletter



Indian Ocean Seabird Group

IOSG NEWSLETTER n° 4

Coordinators / Editors

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April 18

Following a 10-year hiatus, we are very happy to announce the reactivation of the Indian Ocean Seabird Group. Special thanks to our colleagues and friends who supported this reactivation with their enthusiasm and contributions.

The group now comprises 71 individuals from diverse backgrounds (academic research, NGOs, private companies, managers of protected areas, etc.), from 9 different countries (South Africa, Germany, England, Australia, France (among which Reunion, Mayotte and mainland France), Mauritius, Madagascar, Seychelles, and Tanzania).

The objectives of our group are 1) to improve networking and information sharing of research outcomes to further the conservation of Indian Ocean seabirds (including sub-Antarctic, temperate, tropical and equatorial habitats); 2) to conduct transnational collaborative projects; 3) to increase the visibility of our actions and facilitate exchanges with other seabird groups (African Seabird Group, Australasian Seabird Group, etc. ...) and with the World Seabird Union.

Anyone interested in joining the group (whether you are working on seabirds of the Indian Ocean or not) is invited to contact Matthieu Le Corre (lecorre@univ-reunion.fr) or Aurélie Labbé (aurelie.mt.labbe@gmail.com). The website is currently under construction.

We hope that this first newsletter will be representative of the geographical extent and the diversity of the group with news coming from Australia, Madagascar, Réunion, Seychelles...

Enjoy this Newsletter and please send us your future contributions.

Matthieu, Aurélie, Nic

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Island Biology 2019 in Réunion Island: ideas for a “seabird session” and a side event “Indian Ocean Seabird 2019 annual conference”?

From 8 to 13 July 2019, the University of Réunion will host the third Island Biology Conference. This international conference of the Society for Island Biology (<http://www.islandbiology.com>) is organised every 2 or 3 years (the previous sessions were in Hawaii in 2014 <https://sites.google.com/a/hawaii.edu/islandbiology2014> and in the Açores in 2016 <http://www.islandbiology2016.uac.pt>).

“Island Biology stands for the ecology, evolution, conservation, biogeography, macroecology, and paleoecology of all types of islands in the ocean and involving all groups of organisms. It also encompasses the interface of terrestrial and marine ecosystems.” (Island Biology Society website)

As seabirds are both marine and terrestrial animals, sessions on seabird ecology, conservation, biogeography, interactions with island ecosystems would be highly relevant. For this reason, we are thinking about proposing a seabird session at this conference. If anyone is interested in participating or organising this session, please let us know!

Also, we think that this conference would be a wonderful opportunity to organise the 2019 Indian Ocean Seabird Conference, as a side event of the Island Biology Conference. Again, if anyone is interested in participating or organising this side event please let us know!

Matthieu Le Corre, Dominique Strasberg and Claudine Ah-Peng (Dominique and Claudine are the chairpersons of the local organising committee of Island Biology 2019).

The Fourth World Seabird Twitter Conference #WSTC4

The 4th World Seabird Twitter Conference (#WSTC4) will take place all around the world between 17th and 19th of April. The previous three conferences were a huge success with over 100 presenters showcasing their research and findings in a few tweets. This event is entirely free, and you can catch up with presentations in the comfort of your own home (or field station!).

For more information, please check <http://www.seabirds.net/wstc4.html> and if you need any help with using Twitter and/or creating an account, ask Aurélie for help (Twitter handle: @amtlabbe, email: Aurelie.mt.labbe@gmail.com).

MEMBERS CONTRIBUTIONS

Sooty tern studies on Bird Island, Seychelles

Chris Feare

Following many years of studying Bird Island's Sooty Terns in the colony, miniaturisation of tracking devices has allowed us more recently to investigate the birds' distribution and behaviour at sea, both when dispersing at the end of the breeding season and while foraging during it.



In 2011 we began a study of post-breeding dispersal using geolocators, with Christine Larose from Seychelles and Ron and Bozena Summers from UK. In 2012 we were joined by

Camille Lebarbenchon and Audrey Jaeger, from Matthieu Le Corre's team, based at the University of Reunion, to deploy more geolocators and to search for already marked birds. Further searches for marked birds were undertaken by Christine, Camille, Audrey and me, along with Muriel Dietrich, also from Reunion, in 2013. Of the 96 geolocators deployed we recovered 43, from which 36 provided data on the journeys undertaken between breeding seasons. Remarkably, the tracks of these birds ranged over much of the Indian Ocean north of 25°S, but concentrations of activity were in the Bay of Bengal, areas straddling the Chagos-Laccadive and Ninety-East ridges, and in the northern Mozambique Channel. Data from salt-water sensors indicated very little contact with sea water, confirming the long-held assumption that Sooty Terns spend most time flying (See Jaeger *et al.* 2017, *Frontiers in Marine Science* doi: 10.3389/fmars.2017.00394).

Following trials of attachment methods for GPS loggers in 2014 and 2015, we have identified attachment using a specific elastic around the upper thighs as most suitable for Sooty Terns (and Brown Noddies_ (<https://wildbirdconservation.wordpress.com/2015/12/14/investigation-of-methods-of-attaching-gps-loggers-to-sooty-terns/>)).

Studies of foraging areas used by nesting Sooty Terns are still in progress. So far, preferred foraging areas are over or on the margins of the Seychelles bank but their distribution differs between years. Short trips are interspersed with longer ones, these reaching extremes during food shortage (Neumann *et al.* 2018, *Marine Ornithology* 46: 11-18). We hope that these findings will be considered when deciding boundaries of protected areas in Seychelles waters.

Pre-breeding behaviour: the key to conserving the threatened Australian Fairy Tern

Claire Greenwell

Increased extreme weather events, intensive coastal use, and predation by feral and domestic animals are significant threats to the survival of many beach-nesting seabirds including the Australian Fairy Tern, *Sternula*

nereis nereis, which has suffered reduced breeding success and adult survivorship over the past few decades (Dunlop 2015).



However, a new study into the pre-laying behaviour of these terns seeks to understand the environmental and social cues used to select colony and nest sites, which will be used to guide future conservation efforts. The study will investigate how food resources vary over the breeding season (i.e., types of fish caught, the location of bait schools, and prey abundance), how the timing of breeding is influenced by food availability, how far the birds travel to obtain food, and the distance between nesting and feeding sites. Breeding performance will be measured by assessing the ratio of fledglings to adults during the post-breeding period, and information from banded birds will provide important insights into the level of philopatry and structure of the Western Australian meta-population (Dunlop 2015).

This research will focus primarily on three 'managed sites', a contemporary strategy used to limit disturbance to breeding colonies and maximize local reproductive success. These managed sites include two constructed sites that have been designed to mimic natural nesting habitat and are fully fenced to increase protection to the breeding colony, and one natural protected site on an offshore island.

The project will embrace the work of citizen scientists involved in the highly successful "South West Fairy Tern Project (SWFTP)", who undertake surveillance and monitoring of local populations along the West Australian coastline (www.facebook.com/groups/1003098659787647/; www.ccwa.org.au/fairyterns). The knowledge gained from this study will provide a greater understanding of the breeding ecology of the species, enabling improved conservation

actions that focus on rebuilding populations. This information may also be used as a basis for the development of a national species recovery plan.

This research will be undertaken by Claire Greenwell (PhD Candidate), supervised by Dr Nic Dunlop and Professor Neil Loneragan, and supported by Murdoch University and the Conservation Council of Western Australia.



Dynamics and Conservation of Tromelin Island (DyCIT)

Matthieu Le Corre

Rats introduced on islands have devastating effects on seabirds, and their eradication is generally followed by a spectacular recovery of seabird communities. Tromelin Island (western Indian Ocean) is a remarkable example of this process. Until the mid-1800s, the island had a large and diverse avian population with at least ten breeding species and several hundred thousand individuals. In 1761, the French ship *L'Utile* wrecked on the island while partaking in the illegal slavery trade between Madagascar and l'Île de France (now Mauritius). After the wreck, a community of about 70 people survived over 15 years on the island, feeding on what was available (turtles, seabirds, fish, etc...).

It was probably at that time that black rats and mice were introduced on the island. After the survivors were rescued in 1776, the island remained deserted until 1954, but the rat population continued to upset the island's ecological balance. Several expeditions conducted in the 19th and 20th centuries described a seabird community reduced to 6 breeding species in 1856, four in 1954 and two in 1992. This loss of biodiversity is highly representative of what has happened on most islands invaded by rats almost everywhere on

Earth. Based on this very important loss of biodiversity, the TAAF (Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises) decided to eradicate rats and mice from the island. The operation was conducted in December 2005 by the TAAF, in collaboration with the CEBC-CNRS and the University of Réunion Island. The eradication of black rats was a success but mice remained. Since the rat eradication took place, several works have described the dynamics of the seabird community, but also the changes in vegetation cover. Less than 12 years after the rat eradication, the seabird community increased from two breeding species and less than 400 pairs in 2005, to five breeding species totaling more than 2600 pairs in 2017.

We are currently studying this recovery within the framework of the European program BEST 2.0 DyCIT " Dynamics and Conservation of Tromelin island ".



*The white tern *Gygis alba*, restarted to breed at Tromelin in 2014, 9 years after rat eradication. The last recorded breeding event of this species on this island was in 1856 !*

The DyCIT project has three work packages. The first one is related to seabird population dynamics. We investigate the processes that explain such a recovery (survival and breeding success estimates, age at first breeding, density-dependence processes, immigrations and connections with other populations in the region,...).

The "vegetation" work package investigates the changes in vegetation cover and the positive (manuring) and negative (toxicity) impacts of seabirds on plants.

The "mice" work package investigates the population ecology, diet and impacts of mice on

the island (potential mesopredator release effect, etc...).

This program is undertaken by the UMR ENTROPIE of the University of Réunion Island in association with the Conservatoire Botanique National de Mascarin (CBNM), with the support of the TAAF. More information in Le Corre *et al.* 2015 Biological Conservation. The website of the project DyCIT is under construction.

Seabird research at Houtman Abrolhos under threat

Chris Surman

Dr Chris Surman runs an environmental consultancy, Halfmoon Biosciences, which has been conducting research into seabird ecology at the Houtman Abrolhos, Western Australia since 1991. Our key interests are seabird demography, community ecology and the relationship between seabird diet and reproductive performance in seabirds and the Leeuwin Current, the principal current in Western Australia.



Dr Chris Surman with 'Lisa' the Lesser Noddy on Pelsaert Island, the 1.6g GPS shown on her tail feathers

More recently, we have tracked several species of seabirds throughout Western Australia, and

at the Houtman Abrolhos have successfully tracked Lesser Noddy, Brown Noddy, Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and Bridled Terns with Geolocators. Over the past four years we have used nano-fix trackers to look at fine scale movements of Lesser and Brown Noddies during the egg laying and chick rearing parts of their breeding season. Our research continues to raise awareness of the importance of this group of islands as a breeding area for key seabird species. Based at my island research hut for three months (see photo) we are located a few kilometres from one of the most significant seabird breeding sites in the eastern Indian Ocean. Our long-term research continues to be unfunded.



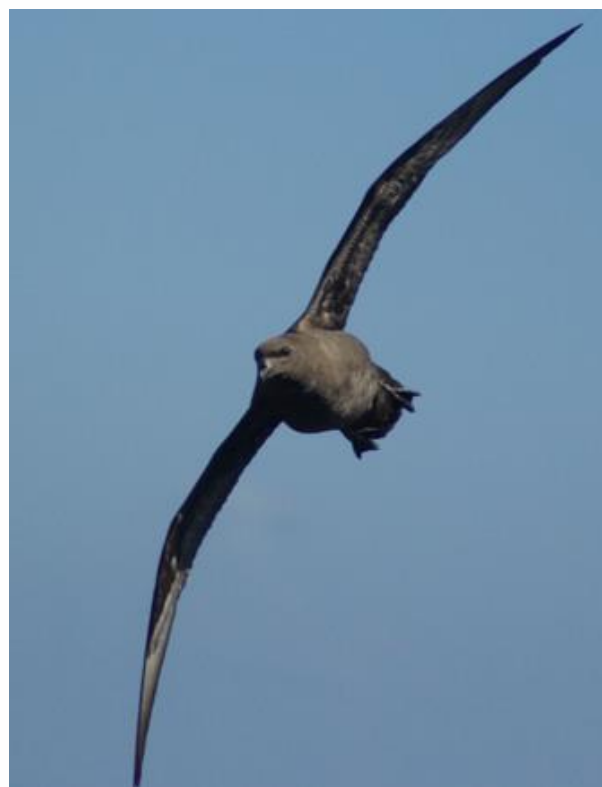
The research base (Blue) and vessel, Houtman Abrolhos Western Australia, just a few km from one of the most significant seabird breeding islands in the Eastern Indian Ocean.

Migrants of Mauritius - Round Island Petrels

Katherine Booth Jones, Vikash Tatayah and Malcolm Nicoll

The Indian Ocean hosts a rich diversity of seabirds, but few as enigmatic as the Round Island petrel complex. Since its official discovery in 1943, on Round island (Mauritius), the petrel has been a source of much taxonomic confusion. The population consists of a mix of at least three species of tropical Gadfly petrel, the Trindade Petrel (*Pterodroma arminjoniana*) from the South Atlantic, and two Pacific-based species, Kermadec and Herald Petrels (*P. neglecta* and *P. heraldica*) and molecular evidence suggests that these species hybridise on Round Island.

Round Island petrels have been the focus of a long-term ecology study; the oldest bird recaptured at the colony is at least 40 years old.



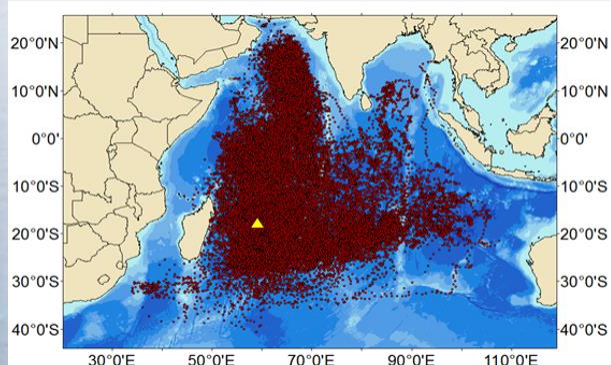
Dark plumaged Round Island petrel in flight.

Since 2009, 424 Round Island petrels have been fitted with geolocators to explore their non-breeding season migration. These 'wing runners' (Pteron – wing, dromos – runner) make journeys of approximately 26,000km (max recorded ~45,000km) in this time and cover almost all of the Indian Ocean above 40° S. Within the population, individuals have specific areas that they visit each year, and these fall into three broad categories. Some birds remain in the Seychelles-Mascarene region, others head east towards the Ninety East Ridge and others travel north to the fertile waters of the Arabian Basin.

The variation we see in the distribution of Round Island Petrels may be a result of their hybrid genetics. However, this blend of individuals from different species may not be unique to the Indian Ocean with colonies in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans also showing evidence of hybridisation. Round Island may well be one point in the widespread movement of petrels between the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific Oceans.

Research continues into how individual migration patterns are fixed through genetics, learning and timing of breeding. There are clearly more secrets to be uncovered in the

Round Island petrel population and elsewhere outside the Indian Ocean; it is an exciting time in the study of these Indian Ocean immigrants.



Map shows locations from 136 non-breeding migration tracks. The yellow triangle shows the location of Round Island.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation and National Parks and Conservation Service for their long-term support for the project and to the British Antarctic Survey for their support with geolocation.

Aldabra Atoll's frigatebirds

Lorraine Cook

Aldabra Atoll's breeding frigatebirds have become the subject of an in-depth study by the Seychelles Islands Foundation. The research team is following each of the four frigatebird colonies on Aldabra for two years through the various stages of their breeding cycles. This is to establish how breeding stages differ between greater and lesser frigatebirds and also how they have changed since the last detailed study that was carried out in 1977.



Greater frigatebird males displaying. Photo by April Burt

The monitoring began in August 2017 and already it appears that the nesting peak of lesser frigatebirds is substantially later than the previously documented period of August to September. The information will help SIF to manage activities around breeding colonies so that they avoid times when breeding birds are most sensitive to disturbance. This is important because Aldabra's frigatebirds are very quick to take flight when people or boats come too close, sometimes leaving their nest exposed to be plundered by other adults without a nest of their own. Aldabra is home to one of the largest breeding populations of frigatebirds in the world. SIF have conducted annual censuses of the breeding population since 2011 and estimate that between 6,000 and 11,000 birds attempt to breed each year. A better understanding of the breeding chronology will help research staff to interpret the numbers of each species being counted during the census and lead to a more accurate estimate of the breeding population.



Lesser frigatebird colony on Aldabra. Photo by April Burt

**Where do all these boobies come from?
Censusing and satellite tracking of Red-footed Boobies *Sula sula* roosting at St. François Island, Alphonse Group, Seychelles**

Gérard Rocamora and Josep Nogués

Red-footed Boobies *Sula sula* are colonial breeders, and terrestrial tree and shrub nesters on oceanic islands. The race occurring in the western Indian Ocean is *Sula sula rubripes*, also present in much of the tropical Pacific Ocean; its global population is currently estimated at c.

60,000 pairs, half of which in the Malagasy region.



Red-footed Boobies, especially juveniles and immatures tend to disperse widely outside their breeding season. However, their movement patterns in the Indian Ocean are mostly unknown. In the Alphonse group (South Amirantes), where the species does not breed, between 500 and 5,000 birds are known to roost throughout the year at Alphonse Island, with a peak from November to March (NW monsoon).

In July 2016, the Island Conservation Society (ICS) team based at Alphonse Island discovered an unprecedented night roost of Red-footed Boobies probably well over 100,000 birds on St. François Island (Josep Nogués, Ariadna Fernández & Chris Narty, 2016, unpublished). The roost was formed by a mix of adults (c. 60%) and juveniles (c. 40%). In October 2016, a census was conducted using circular plots and although the roost had reduced in size, the presence of over 60,000 birds was confirmed, after which the roost reduced to only a small part of St. François Island. High numbers were again present during the SE monsoon (June to September 2017), and last November we estimated through crepuscular counts that about 20,000 birds were still present (G. Rocamora, pers. obs.).

This discovery has added a new dimension to the importance of St. François Island, which already verify criteria of international importance for several waders and seabirds. We do not know since when these spectacular booby numbers occur, but judging from the impact observed on the vegetation it must be

relatively recent. But the most intriguing question is: where do all these boobies come from? The presence of such a huge roost during the expected breeding period of the larger colonies known in the region (Cosmoledo, Aldabra, and Farquhar) suggests that the Malagasy region population is probably underestimated and that some of these birds may come from breeding colonies from other parts of the Indian Ocean.

This motivated the start of a satellite tracking research project aiming first at determining where RFBs coming to roost at St. François Island breed, and to identify other (potentially unknown) major roosting areas over the annual cycle. We are currently testing solar powered devices (Platform Terminal Transmitters type) designed to last a minimum of two years while taking four GPS positions per day, and will be soon deploying them on adults and sub-adults from both sexes. During a second phase, we want to identify more precisely the foraging areas at sea for Red-footed Boobies roosting at St. François, define marine Important Bird Areas and propose conservation measures for potential threats that may affect these boobies both on land and at sea.

The devices are funded by the Alphonse Foundation, Gran Kaz and ICS, whilst data acquisition from satellite ARGOS is funded by Miguel Torres wines and private individuals through the IBC centre of the University of Seychelles. This is the first tracking program to investigate movements and foraging ecology of boobies in Seychelles, something we hope can be soon extended to the main breeding colonies of this species and two other species of boobies (Masked and Brown) occurring in The Seychelles.



New insights on two shearwaters species breeding on Aride Island (Seychelles)

Licia Calabrese, Gerard Rocamora and Vincent Bretagnolle

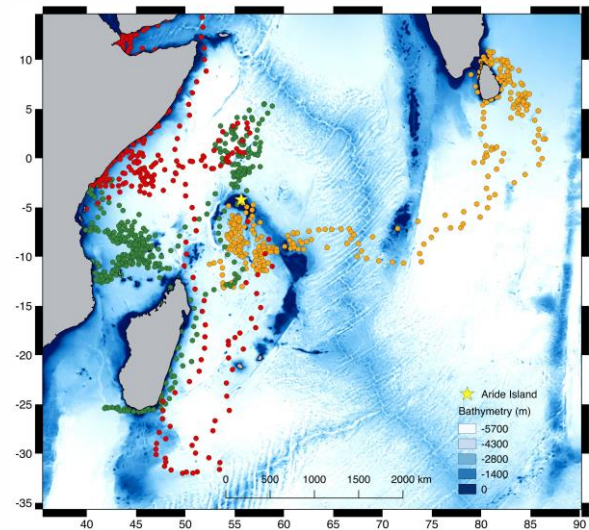
Aride Island Nature Reserve is an Important Bird Area and a hotspot for biodiversity. It hosts one of the largest shearwater (and seabird) colonies in the Indian Ocean and it is one of the few tropical islands where two species of shearwaters breed in a mixed colony: the tropical shearwater (*Puffinus bailloni*) and the wedge-tailed shearwater (*P. pacificus*). The 'Aride Shearwater Project' was carried out from 2011 to 2015 and was mainly sponsored by Fondation TOTAL, Island Conservation Society and CNRS Chizé. The objectives included producing reliable population estimates, defining habitat preferences, and investigating the foraging behaviour and movements at sea while identifying potential threats.

About 15,000 pairs of wedge-tailed shearwater and 30,000 pairs of tropical shearwater were estimated nesting on Aride, the latter possibly in decline. Both species selected steep and lowly vegetated areas; the former also selected boulder-like zones.

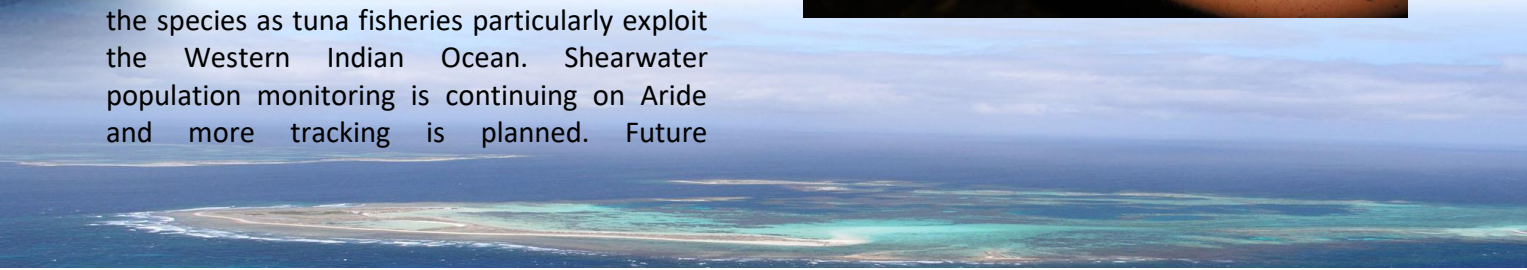
The TDR devices deployed during chick rearing showed that tropical shearwaters dived up to 16 m while wedge-tailed shearwaters did not show diving behaviour. During the non-breeding period both species were equipped with geolocators and the results showed they selected similar habitat features however exploited areas did not overlap. Tropical shearwaters travelled to the East coast of Africa and Madagascar, and North to the Arabian coasts, while wedge-tailed shearwaters travelled widely across the Indian Ocean. They both seemed to select areas with high CPUE (Catch Per Unit Effort), which suggests an association with schools of tuna.

Although both species forage upon the same preys, there was spatial segregation at sea in both foraging behaviour (diving depth) and inter-breeding areas. The association with tuna is important information for the conservation of the species as tuna fisheries particularly exploit the Western Indian Ocean. Shearwater population monitoring is continuing on Aride and more tracking is planned. Future

conservation efforts in the Western Indian Ocean should be focused on gathering more information on the interaction of seabirds and sub-surface predators.



Example of two post-breeding migration of tropical shearwater and one of Wedge-tailed shearwater (orange dots). Green dots = tropical shearwater male, trip duration 6.5 months; red dots = tropical shearwater female, trip duration 4.5 months.



New observation on the breeding of the crested tern (*Thalasseus bergii*) in Madagascar

Rabarisoa Rivo

The crested Tern *Thalasseus bergii* breeds in the tropical and temperate coastal zones of Namibia, South Africa, on the islands of the Indian Ocean up to Australia and the western Pacific Ocean. In the western Indian Ocean, the population is estimated at approximately 14000 breeding pairs (Le Corre and Bemanaja 2009). In Madagascar, as in other parts of its distribution, the species forages in shallow water, and breeds in dense colonies on coastal islands.



After breeding, the species disperses and rests on sandbanks, seashores and islets as well as estuaries and mangrove swamps (Langrand 1990, Safford and Hawkins 2013). From 18 to 25 June 2012, we conducted a field expedition in the Marine Protected Area of Ambodivahibe (North East Madagascar), which encompasses a large coastal zone and eight nearshore islets. Overall, we observed 8113 coastal and marine birds belonging to 28 species and 10 families. The most interesting finding was a large concentration of crested terns (6072 individuals), including a large breeding colony of 2836 nests on the islet of Bataiza (location: 12°22 ' 2.83", 49°31 ' 49.39" E). This small islet (1,54 ha) is located at 800m off the coast of Ambodivahibe. Most nests were occupied by incubating adults and others had chicks of various ages. We also found 10 dead birds (mostly chicks, but also 3 adults), possibly killed by black rats, which are abundant on the islet. This breeding colony is the second largest in Madagascar, after the colony of Nosy Foty

located in the archipelago of Nosy Hara (10840 breeding pairs) in the northwest of Madagascar (Le Corre and Bemanaja, 2009). The inclusion of these coastal islets in the Marine Protected Area of Ambodivahibe reduced poaching and was probably very beneficial for the species.

We thank WWF International Madagascar, Preservation Madagascar and Asity Madagascar for their collaboration. Our sincere thanks to all the team in particular Mr JAOMAZANDRY and Saïd and the local associations based in the site of Ambodivahibe for their friendly collaboration.

Reunion Island: LIFE+ PETRELS: a successful conservation projects

Jérôme Dubos

The aim of the European project LIFE+ Petrels (2014-2020) is to save two very rare and endemic species: the Mascarene and the Barau's petrel, by developing and implementing innovative strategies and conservation techniques. One of the main objectives was first to discover the breeding site of the very elusive Mascarene Petrels. We engaged an innovative tri-step method: we first deployed automated acoustic stations (Song Meters) to locate active breeding areas, then we visually explored each of these breeding areas at night with infra-red cameras to observe birds at their colony and to precisely locate their landing position on the cliffs, and then we abseiled down to these landing positions and found the nests.



Searching for Mascarene Petrels with an infrared camera.

The first amazing result of our project was the rapid discovery of two breeding colonies of Mascarene petrels. They are 20 km apart and,

surprisingly, they do not have the same breeding phenology and burrow density (0.16 burrow/m² vs 0.001 b/m²). We deployed automated camera traps and found that rats were present in both colonies. Unfortunately, in 2017, we found the breeding site too late in the season and no fledgling survived, probably predated by rats or cats. Thus, we started the next breeding season by controlling predators intensively during winter, using live traps, conibear traps and Timm's kill trap to control feral cats, and poison bait stations for rats.



The happy team celebrating the discovery of the first Mascarene petrel colony!

Thanks to our conservation actions, we monitor for this breeding season (2018), 16 burrows with breeding adults and we obtained a breeding success of 56% (compared to 0% in 2017).



An adult Mascarene petrel on its nest

After two years of fieldwork, we are now monitoring 33 burrows, ringed a total of 48 birds

in both colonies (compared to 53 grounded birds known since 1834) and tagged 22 individuals with geolocators (GLS) and one with Argos transmitters to study their at-sea distribution and behaviour.

Many exciting findings coming soon.... Follow us at www.petrels.re, Facebook: LIFE+ PETRELS



The very first chick found in the first breeding colony of Mascarene petrel.

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Cover page photo: Claire Greenwell

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Thanks to all of you!

Call for contributions: This is the fourth Newsletter of the Group. We plan to prepare the next issue for August or September 2018, so please send your contributions to one of the editors (see above) now!