

## 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.

### Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti* rediscovered after 113-year hiatus

After recent collaborative studies of museum specimens, Dr Pamela C. Rasmussen of the Smithsonian Institution and Dr Nigel J. Collar of BirdLife International showed that there had been no acceptable records of the Forest Owlet *Athene blewitti* since 1884, a subsequent concerted search has resulted in the species's rediscovery.

Equipped with videocameras, a painting by Larry McQueen depicting newly elucidated diagnostic plumage features, and more precise knowledge of the four genuine 19th century Forest Owlet sites, Rasmussen, of the National Museum of Natural History, Ben King, American Museum of Natural History, and David F. Abbott, Ashburn, Virginia, searched for 12 days in forest as near as possible to the known sites.

Finally, on 25 November 1997, in remnant low foothills forest near Shahada, Maharashtra, India, King spotted a Forest Owlet perched near the top of a bare tree in the sun around 08h30. The team videotaped and studied this surprisingly distinctive, fresh-plumaged bird for about half an hour, and the following morning, another Forest Owlet in worn plumage appeared and was equally co-operative. However, due to unsuccessful efforts to obtain tape-recordings of the birds and lack of time, no population estimates are yet available. Degraded but apparently suitable habitat persists in the foothills near Shahada, although the plains jungle from which all previous records originated is already completely gone there.

Surveys to ascertain the numbers and distribution of the Forest Owlet are urgently required, as is increased protec-

tion of the remaining known habitat. This case illustrates the vital and continuing role played in conservation by close study of museum specimens and their associated data, without which the field searches would have been misdirected.

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### Inter-island translocations of the Seychelles Magpie-robin *Copysychus sechellarum*

Seychelles Magpie-robin *Copysychus sechellarum* is the most critically threatened of the endemic bird species in the Seychelles and until recently was confined to 210 ha Fregate Island. A recovery programme, funded by the RSPB (BirdLife Partner in the UK), has been implemented since September 1990, at first by BirdLife International and by the RSPB since September 1996.

One of the aims of the recovery programme is to establish satellite populations of the Seychelles Magpie-robin on other predator-free islands. Since November 1994, breeding populations of Magpie-robins, have been successfully introduced to two islands.

Between 1994 and 1996, nine adult Magpie-robins were translocated to 29 ha Cousin Island. Seven of these birds survived to breed and by October 1997 had successfully fledged 15 chicks.

Following the success on Cousin, seven adult birds were translocated to neighbouring 26 ha Cousine Island in 1995 and 1996; and six survived to breed. Five chicks have fledged on Cousine since the

first successful breeding attempt in May 1997.

Unfortunately, attempts to reintroduce the Seychelles Magpie-robin to 68 ha Aride Island have not been successful. Reasons for this are unclear but disease caused by the pathogenic bacterium *Erysipelothrox rhusiopathae* and predation by introduced Barn Owls *Tyto alba* have been implicated.

The success of these translocations has played a critical role in the increase of the Magpie-robin population from 23 birds when the recovery programme started to 71 birds by 30 September 1997.

*Rob Lucking & Vicki Lucking, RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL, UK*

### **Chinese Crested Ibis *Nipponia nippon* numbers increase to over 100**

The number of Chinese Crested Ibis *Nipponia nippon* at the reserve in the Qinling Mountains, Shaanxi, has risen to more than 100 after 10 pairs raised 28 young this year. The species remains known from just a single locality in China. Until 1994, no more than 22 birds had been seen at one time.

*China Environment News*, no. 99, 15 October 1997.

### **Kakapo *Strigops habroptilus* population increase**

Following several years with no breeding success, four young Kakapo *Strigops habroptilus* have been hatched on Codfish Island, New Zealand, increasing the population to 54.

*Psitta Scene*, May 1997, 1.

### **Further Monocrotophos bird mortality in Argentina**

Following the mortality of an estimated 20,000 Swainson's Hawks *Buteo swainsonii* in La Pampa in 1995 and 1996 comes a report of further bird mortality in

Argentina. More than 62,000 birds (primarily doves and no Swainson's Hawks) have been recorded dead on one 60 hectare farm in Entre Rios province from the use of monocrotophos, a widely used organophosphate insecticide. Allegedly, local Agriculture Officials have been advising the illegal use of monocrotophos to avoid bird damage when planting cereals.

Monocrotophos is extremely toxic to birds and can kill through skin contact or through secondary poisoning through the consumption of pesticide contaminated food. The Swainson's Hawk deaths in 1996 were as a result of spraying monocrotophos to control grasshoppers, with 2,729 found at a single roosting site following a spraying.

An historical agreement brokered by the American Bird Conservancy (BirdLife Partner in the USA) in 1996, led to the withdrawal of monocrotophos from the core winter habitat of the Swainson's Hawk in Argentina and reduced mortality last season to 26 hawks. Unfortunately, farmers have continued to use this deadly pesticide and there have been three reported mortality incidents, involving dozens of Swainson's Hawks. These recent mortalities have prompted Novartis, the largest pesticide manufacturer in the world, to announce their withdrawal of the sale of all monocrotophos from Argentina by 1999. However, there are over a dozen other manufacturers of this pesticide and although monocrotophos is banned in many countries it is still produced and in use throughout the world. The American Bird Conservancy is pressing for the elimination of all use of monocrotophos in Argentina and has asked for assistance through BirdLife partners to have monocrotophos use stopped globally.

*Bird Calls*, The Newsletter of the American Bird Conservancy Policy Council. November 1997.

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## Antarctic penguins infected with IBDV poultry virus

The Infectious Bursal Disease Virus (IBDV) is a pathogen of domestic chickens. Antibodies to IBDV were found in 65.4% of Emperor Penguins *Aptenodytes forsteri* tested (sample of 52) and in 2.1% and 2.6% at two colonies of Adélie Penguins *Pygoscelis adeliae* (133 tested in 2 colonies) at Mawson. A third remote colony at Edmonton Point was found to be uninfected (17 chicks and 26 adults tested). A retrospective analysis of serum taken from Mawson in 1991 showed an infection level of 1.5% (136 birds tested). None of the penguins showed evidence of the clinical disease, though further investigation is recommended.

IBDV is relatively resistant to heat, desiccation and chemical agents. It is likely to survive in colonies between breeding seasons. It is spread by the faecal-oral route and is highly contagious and infectious. Mortality and morbidity rates in chickens can be high, especially in cases concerning a newly emerged virulent strain of the virus, which has rapidly spread throughout the northern hemisphere poultry industry.

It is speculated that the disease may be spread by the careless disposal of poultry waste allowing scavengers, such as South Polar Skuas *Catharacta macormicki*, access. It is also suggested that the virus could be further spread by visitors carrying it on footwear, clothing or equipment. This hypothesis is further supported by the absence of the virus from the remote colony at Edmonton Point.

It must be assumed that the virus may be pathogenic in Antarctic penguins and is likely to be spread by human activity. Visitors to Antarctica may therefore potentially be one of the greatest threats to its avian fauna.

*Penguin Conservation*, October 1997 and *Nature*, 15 May 1997.

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## New population estimate for Pink-footed Shearwater *Puffinus creatopus* on Mocha Island

Pink-footed Shearwater *Puffinus creatopus* is known only from three breeding islands. The majority of the population is found on Mocha Island, Chile, where a previous estimate was of 84,000 individuals. A survey in January 1997, by Roberto Schlatter, Daniella Guicking and Susanne Mickstein, gave a new estimate of no more than 25,000 pairs. The birds are harvested for consumption by local people and are also threatened by habitat degradation caused by introduced rodents and dogs used to extract the chicks from their burrows. In some areas of the island almost no shearwater activity was recorded.

The other populations are on Robinson Crusoe Island, estimated at a few thousand pairs, and Isla Santa Clara, estimated at 3,000 pairs. Threats on Robinson Crusoe Island include predation from feral cats and coatis and soil erosion by goats and rabbits; there are no known threats on Isla Santa Clara.

*BirdLife International Update* Dec 1997.

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Chile.

## New records of Sichuan Partridge *Arborophila rufipectus*

A survey of Sichuan Partridge *Arborophila rufipectus* was conducted in the Daliang Shan area of southern Sichuan in spring 1997 by scientists from the Sichuan Forestry Department and the World Pheasant Association. The team recorded 35 calling males and a female. The records extended the range of the species slightly to the south-west and its known altitudinal range to 2,235 m. Some calls which may

have been either the Sichuan Partridge or Spotted Laughingthrush *Garrulax ocellatus* were heard in northern Yunnan province. If follow up surveys there manage to locate the Sichuan Partridge in this area it will be the first record outside of Sichuan.

The Sichuan Partridge was recorded at low densities (mean of  $0.24 \pm 0.16 \text{ km}^2$ ) and were recorded mainly from primary forest, though some calls were thought to emanate from replanted secondary broad-leaf forest. No Sichuan Partridge were recorded in planted coniferous forest in the area. The team also recorded the five other restricted-range species which occur in the area including the little known Gold-fronted Fulvetta *Alcippe vari gaticeps*.

The area is under considerable logging pressure and habitat loss is the main threat to the Sichuan Partridge, which also suffers from illegal hunting and disturbance due to bamboo shoot collecting in the breeding season. A series of recommendations for forest management, including modification of current logging policy and the creation of a new reserve, are being presented to try to protect remaining populations of the Sichuan Partridge and the other restricted-range species.

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## BOOKS

### **The Lion and the Gazelle: the Mammals and Birds of Iran**

Humphreys, P.N. and Kahrom, E. (1995)  
London: I.B. Tauris, pp224, £29.95

This strange book is both a checklist and a history of the relationships between wildlife and the Iranian peoples – there are, for instance chapters on the histories of polo and falconry. The species accounts are oddly arranged and not very useful. For example the text for Lesser Kestrel *Falco naumanni* reads “Another gregarious bird, but quite common, colonising cliffs and hunting over fields and plains” while the only wader that is mentioned is the Crab Plover *Dromus ardeola* which breeds “sometimes in large colonies along the Persian Gulf.”

*Chris Mason*