



# ROUND ISLAND



MWF staff carrying planting material on Round Island

## Round Island's Keel-scaled Boa

The Round Island Nature Reserve, which covers an area of 219 ha, is one of the six islets off the north coast of Mauritius. Round Island is internationally renowned for its unique reptile fauna. Of the 8 species of reptiles known from Round Island, 6 are either endangered or potentially endangered because of their very restricted distributions. As a protective measure, translocations of some of these species to other rodent-free islands are being undertaken. The Keel-scaled Boa (*Casarea dussumerii*) is one of the rarest snakes in the world. In order to gain a greater understanding of the boa's general ecological behaviour, morphometrics, macro and microhabitat preferences, diet and abundance, the Round Island wardens conduct monthly night searches in the seven different habitat types found on Round Island. All adult snakes found are tagged with a Passive Integrated Tag, which enables them to be identified if recaptured and provides valuable information about their movements. It is estimated that there are roughly 1000 boas on Round Island. The juvenile snakes are bright orange in colour, whereas the adults are usually purple-black, brown, or dark grey.

After the completion of a World Bank GEF grant at the end of 2004 restoration work has continued to restore Round Island's palm & hardwood forest & secure the future of the island's endangered plants & animals. Three thousand plants are being planted on Round Island each year in order to restore the natural habitat & prevent erosion. The island is a refuge for a number of endangered Mauritian plant & animal species. The Round Island project is conducted in cooperation with the National Parks & Conservation Service, MWF & co-funded by The Mauritius Commercial Bank Ltd.



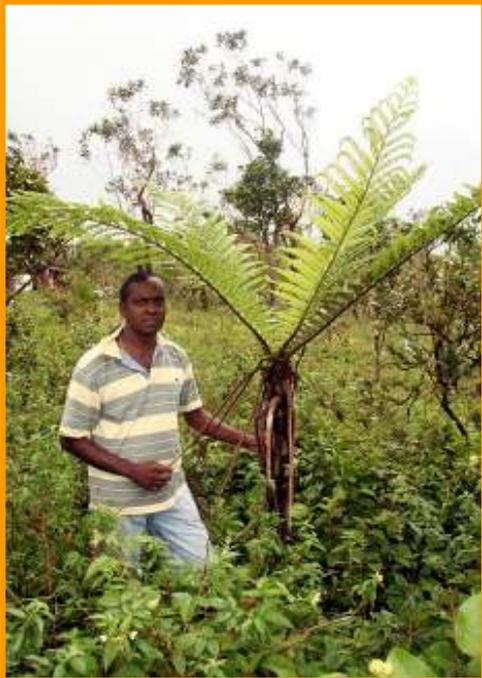
## PLANT NEWS



### PLANT NAME REVISION

A description revision has been made of the Fern family Cyatheaceae in the Mascarene Islands. Previously only two endemic tree ferns were known & now four taxa (species) of this fern family has been described including one new endemic species: *Cyathea grangaudiana*. The new varieties: *Cyathea borbonica* var *sevathiana* and *Cyathea borbonica* var *latifolia*, before known in one name: *Cyathea borbonica* and an endemic species *Cyathea excelsa* are found in Mauritius & Reunion. The name of the variety *Cyathea borbonica* var *sevathiana* has been chosen in honour of Jean Claude Sevathian, field botanist in the service of MWF.

## MWF BOTANIST APPOINTED AS NEW SSC SPECIALIST GROUP MEMBER



Jean-Claude Sevathian with the *Cyathea borbonica var sevathiana* (common name: Fandia)

MWF botanist Jean-Claude Sevathian has been invited to serve as a member of the IUCN SSC Indian Ocean Plant Specialist Group (IOPSG). As a member of the IOPSG Specialist Group, Jean-Claude Sevathian will also become a member of the SSC, the largest of the six volunteer commissions of IUCN -The World Conservation Union.

The SSC is a global network of scientists, field biologists & other professionals committed to the conservation of biodiversity. By combining the skills & insights represented by its broad membership, SSC is uniquely positioned to identify & promote actions necessary to stem the loss of the world's biological diversity through the restoration of threatened species to healthy population levels.

## RODRIGUES FRUIT BATS TO LONDON ZOO

On the 8<sup>th</sup> March 2007 ten adult male Rodrigues Fruit Bats (*Pteropus rodricensis*) were exported from Gerald Durrell Endemic Wildlife Sanctuary in Mauritius to the London Zoo. The animals were exported to augment the genetic diversity of the international studbook for the species. Ten more adult males will be sent to Philadelphia zoo in the USA in about two months time. The exportation of ten females to each of the above mentioned zoos has been delayed to the month of June 2007 as they have given birth and consequently, we have to wait for all young to be weaned. The bats are on the IUCN list of Critically Endangered species.

The Gerald Durrell Endemic Wildlife Sanctuary Rodrigues Fruit Bat population was set up in 1976. John Hartley and Gerald Durrell from, what was then known as Jersey Preservation Trust caught eight individuals from Rodrigues Island to set up a captive population. Since 1976 the offspring of this founder population have been sent to various zoos around the world. The size of our current breeding stock consists of 24 males, 25 females, and 7 juveniles

## HELICOPTERS, JEEPS, BOATS, CYCLONES & SKINKS

During the last week of January the first *Gongylomorphus* skinks were translocated 600m by boat from Ilot Vacoas to Ile aux Fouquets. The Ilot Vacoas skinks are a sub-species of Bojer's skink and are particularly rare. Only 400 or so individuals remain on the 1.06ha island and are at great risk from extinction. Once found throughout the southeast of Mauritius and associated islands, including Ile aux Aigrettes, these skinks disappeared following the introduction of musk shrews and wolf snakes. They were present on the neighbouring islands Ile de la Passe and Ile aux Fouquets until shrews arrived; last being recorded in the 1930s and 1970s on the respective islands. With these islands now free of shrews, the skinks can be re-established. To prevent any harmful impact upon the Ilot Vacoas population only 20 individuals were removed for translocation.

Directly after the January 2007 translocation the Reptile team headed out to Round Island to collect the much larger Telfair's skink for translocation to Gunners Quoin & Ile aux Aigrettes (see the August 2006 newsletter for details). Skinks were collected, weighed, measured, health screened and PIT tagged for post translocation identification. Then the skinks were transported, courtesy of the Government of Mauritius Helicopter Squadron, to their recipient islands. Two helicopter trips & one boat trip were made for the release of the 220 skinks who joined the other 39 released last December.

The National Coast Guard offered their assistance in collecting personnel from Gunners Quoin to return back to Round Island. However, the team were forced to use helicopter transport despite a well executed pick up and attempt to reach Round Island. The failed attempt was caused by 3-4m high seas stirred up by a severe tropical cyclone in the region. Further open-sea boating adventures were prevented by another three cyclones that passed by, the last of which hit Mauritius two hours after the last translocation to Ile aux Aigrettes. Damage caused by this cyclone was minimal and all translocated populations are healthy and thriving.

### 100 FODIES



MWF celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> Mauritius Fody (*Foudia rubra*) on Ile aux Aigrettes on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2007. The critically endangered Mauritius Fody is unique to Mauritius and, until recently, was only found in the National Park. There was an alarming decline in numbers from 260 pairs in 1974 to just 93 pairs in 2003. This decline prompted MWF to initiate a recovery program in 2003 to help save this endemic bird from extinction. Ile aux Aigrettes is today a predator free island and therefore a subpopulation of this bird can today be established under the best conditions. The passerine team has worked closely with the remaining wild birds, monitoring breeding attempts and rescuing any nests that were at risk from predation. The eggs and chicks from these nests were hand reared at the Gerald Durrell Endemic Wildlife Sanctuary (Black River) and along with captive-bred birds transferred to Ile aux Aigrettes. Between 2003 and 2006, 56 birds were released onto Ile aux Aigrettes. This has proven to be one of the most successful bird re-introductions. Today there is an established breeding population of 132 birds on Ile aux Aigrettes. Current studies are made today on Ile aux Aigrettes of the population of Mauritius Fodies in order to learn more about this bird and plan a long-term management strategy to safeguard it's future.

## Echo Parakeet, a Season With Baby-boom & Fatal Virus

Echo contaminated with the PBF disease



Great progress has been made in the population restoration of the Echo Parakeet (*Psittacula eques*) critically endangered species. The population has almost reached the point where its status will be downgraded from Critically Endangered to Endangered! Despite this fantastic news, the species is far from being in a truly safe position, especially as it now has the added issue of a fatal virus to contend with. As the breeding period approached, a number of birds were noted with typical signs of a fatal parrot specific virus called Psittacine Beak and Feather Disease (PBF). PBF is thought to originate in Australia, but it is widespread in many parts of the world now, possibly due to the captive parrot trade. The Echo Parakeet was one of the most intensively managed avian species in the world. Intensive management is commonly used in endangered species recovery programmes and basically involves taking every possible step to ensure the survival of as many offspring as possible. New protocols focused on strict hygiene were installed. There is still a lot of work to be done regarding our knowledge of PBF in Echo

Parakeets. It is likely that testing and research will be ongoing for several years.

Despite the uncertainties about the future of the birds in view of PBF, 2006/07 was a highly successful season. The best ever in fact, in terms of the number of chicks fledging in the wild! 72 chicks in total ! It was a season of "firsts" also, for the first time in the history of the Echo programme, 8 females managed to fledge 3 chicks each. In the past they mostly have only fledged one or two chicks. We also had four healthy chicks fledge from one nest. This caused much excitement as it probably the first time this has occurred for hundreds of years. The Echo Parakeet population is currently estimated at 343 birds in the wild.



1+1+1+1= 4 Echo Parakeet chicks

### Mauritian Students Discovering Their Natural Heritage on Ile aux Aigrettes

Through the different youth centres the Ministry of Youth and Sports made it possible for more than 500 young students to come and visit Ile aux Aigrettes during the Easter holidays. The cooperation between MWF & the Ministry of Youth and Sports meets the goal of MWF to raise awareness among young Mauritian about the importance of the wildlife conservation in Mauritius. During the holidays many schools had also organised outings to visit Ile aux Aigrettes so more than 1000 Mauritian children discovered the many rare native plants & animals & for most this was the first time ever.

## PINK PIGEON.....



**5** subpopulations of Pink Pigeons (*Nesoenas mayeri*) exist today in Mauritius with a total of 380 birds. During the last five years the population has seen very little growth. Each sub-population is vulnerable to fluctuations triggered by factors such as disease, predation & big cyclonic events. The planned establishment of 2 additional sub-populations, at the Lower Gorges in the National Park & Ferney Valley will provide further security to our pigeons & hopefully move us even closer to the ultimate goal of 600 free-living pigeons. The birds often travel from one sub-population to another even some birds travel from Ile aux Aigrettes to the Black River Gorges which is a distance of approximately 40 Km!

## NEW STUDY ON THE EFFECT OF FOREIGN SPECIES

Through an M.Sc. completed in 2006 by J. F. Linnebjerg in collaboration with the University of Aarhus, Denmark & MWF a study was made to understand the effect of the non-native introduced Red-whiskered Bulbul (Conde) on the native Mauritian flora & fauna. Many species introduced either accidentally or intentionally to areas outside their natural ranges establish self-perpetuating populations (i.e. they become 'naturalised'). In the worst case, invasive species suppress or eliminate native species, thereby causing a loss of biodiversity. Island species are especially prone to extinction & are vulnerable to events such as the introduction of species. The Red-whiskered Bulbul, native to Southeast Asia, has become the most abundant bird since its introduction to Mauritius in the 1890s. To determine what impacts the Red-whiskered Bulbul has on native biodiversity in Mauritius the differences in the density of the Red-whiskered Bulbul in different habitat types were examined, ranging from restored forest to highly degraded forest. The diet of the Red-whiskered Bulbul and seed germination response of two highly invasive plant species *Ligustrum robustum* (Privet) and *Clidemia hirta* (Tabac boeuf) were also studied.

The findings of this study indicate that fleshy-fruited invasive plant species form a major part of the bulbuls' diet & that the seeds of introduced plants such as Privet and Tabac-boeuf receive a germination advantage in passing through the gut of the bulbul. The attachment to exotic fruiting trees could explain the rapid range expansion in Mauritius where the forest is highly degraded. This suggests that the Red-whiskered Bulbul, as a single species, has probably had a strong effect on the native island community of Mauritius.

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E-mail: [raffray@mauritian-wildlife.org](mailto:raffray@mauritian-wildlife.org)  
[www.mauritian-wildlife.org](http://www.mauritian-wildlife.org)

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