



Aldabra's landbird breeding season comes to an end



Aldabra Drongo chick in a nest © H Richards

As the southeast monsoon arrives at Aldabra the landbird breeding season is coming to an end, with birds seen moulting out of their breeding plumage and being less vocal. The Aldabra team have spent the last six months observing landbird breeding activity on the atoll by monitoring nests found on Picard. Our aim with this monitoring is to assess the breeding success of these birds and identify possible causes of nesting failure. Nests were located for all of Aldabra's endemic landbird species and sub-species, except the Madagascar Sacred Ibis.

Of all the nests monitored, a total of 96 reached incubation stage (with one or more eggs laid) and 31% of these were successful (one or more chicks fledged from the nest). This figure is higher than the 2011/2012 breeding season (24%), but less successful in general compared to the 2000/2001 breeding season when 44% of nests were recorded to be successful. However, the number of nests monitored for each landbird species varied between these three seasons which can influence overall success rates



A Madagascar Nighthawk and chicks © H Richards

The Aldabra Drongo (*Dicurus aldabranus*) and Madagascar Nighthawk (*Caprimulgus madagascariensis*) were relatively successful in 2014/2015 with both species fledging chicks from more than 50% of the nests found. Madagascar White-eyes (*Zosterops maderaspatana*), Madagascar Turtle doves (*Streptopelia picturata*) and Aldabra Fodies (*Foudia aldabrana*) had a disappointing breeding season, with most or all nests unsuccessful. This is fairly consistent with previous seasons' data for these species.

It can be difficult to clearly determine causes of nest failure, but predation by rats, birds and geckos are all possibilities. Weather conditions also played a role, with nests found on the ground or failed following strong winds and heavy rain. December and January were comparatively drier than previous seasons which reduced food availability. When rain did come it fell in a few very heavy bouts, with weeks of little rainfall in between. This irregular pattern adversely affected vegetation health and insect availability with knock on effects on landbird breeding.

This monitoring will continue in subsequent breeding seasons to better quantify the nesting success of different landbird species, to improve information on factors that are causing nest failure.



Record turnout for SIF symposium on Mahé



PS Alain de Commarmond opening the Mahé symposium © SIF

After the Vallée de Mai symposium on 20th April, a larger research symposium was held by SIF on Mahé on 23rd April. This symposium presented research and conservation work from both Seychelles' World Heritage Sites, the Vallée de Mai and Aldabra Atoll, and was a chance to share with the wider scientific community and the general public the advances in research that are being made by SIF, and the importance of continuing protection for these sites.

The symposium was opened by the Principal Secretary for Environment, Energy and Climate Change, Mr Alain de Commarmond, who in his opening remarks shared his personal connections to these two World Heritage Sites and his excitement at learning more about some of the work that had been conducted by SIF in recent years. Two SIF staff members and recent graduates from the BSc Environmental Science course at the University of Seychelles, Vicky Barbe and Annabelle Constance, led the symposium. The results of both of their theses were also on display at the symposium, and Annabelle gave a presentation on her BSc dissertation on Coco de Mer leaf growth. It was excellent to have these young Seychellois graduates leading this symposium and they will hopefully serve as an inspiration to other young aspiring conservationists.

A range of SIF research projects were presented at the symposium with titles including: 'Coco de Mer: translating research into management', 'How Coco de Mer solves the paradox of producing huge seeds despite poor soils', 'Ring-necked Parakeet eradication: Why, how and where are we now?', 'The new Aldabra marine monitoring programme: what can it tell us?', 'The story of the world's largest successful introduced bird eradication: Assumption', and 'Using genetics as a conservation tool: Are Madagascar and Aldabra Fodies hybridising?'. There was great engagement with the audience with lively question panel sessions after each group of presentations. The panels were an excellent opportunity for the general public to ask questions on issues that matter to them, such as Coco de Mer poaching, as well as to question further how these issues will be tackled by SIF.



The SIF team at the symposium © SIF

The symposium had a fantastic turnout of over 130 people, including local NGOs, government departments, SIF board members, SIF staff, researchers, conservationists, teachers, university and school students and other interested individuals. This is the highest attendance to date of any SIF symposium or presentation and we hope reflects the public's growing interest in Seychelles' two World Heritage Sites and the environment in general. It was rewarding to see that a large proportion of the audience was comprised of secondary school and university students. We hope that by seeing some of the young Seychellois SIF staff present their work at the symposium that these students may be inspired to follow them into a similar field.



First symposium held at the Vallée de Mai marks World Heritage Day



The Vallée de Mai symposium © SIF

To commemorate World Heritage Day on the 18th March, SIF held a symposium at the Vallée de Mai for the first time. This symposium was the ideal opportunity to share the progress and achievements that have been made in recent years, and to highlight the vulnerability and need for continued protection and conservation of this UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The Minister for Environment, Energy and Climate Change, Didier Dogley, demonstrated his support for SIF and the Vallée de Mai by officially opening the symposium. He emphasised the actions being taken by the Seychelles government in collaboration with partners on Praslin to tackle Coco de Mer poaching. Over 50 partners, supporters, SIF staff and friends of Vallée de Mai attended the one day symposium to learn more about the scientific research and conservation work being undertaken at the Vallée de Mai.

Presentations were given on the value of the Vallée de Mai as a World Heritage Site, the sixth breeding season of the Seychelles Black Parrot, and Vallée de Mai's keystone species – the Coco de Mer. Unfortunately the Vallée de Mai also faces several threats such as poaching of Coco de Mer, invasive species, and fire. Efforts being made by SIF to mitigate these threats were discussed at the symposium as well as the role of SIF's education and awareness programme.



Minister Dogley opening the symposium © SIF

SIF also took the opportunity to recognise some of the long-term staff at the Vallée de Mai with a long service award, congratulations and thank you to those staff that have made the Vallée de Mai so successful. A huge thank you also to all of our partners and collaborators, particularly on Praslin, who have supported SIF and made this work possible.

Celebrating Earth Day on Curieuse Island



and to compare landbird breeding success across different years.

Status of Aldabra's introduced birds at end of third eradication season



Takamaka team member Stephanie Marie mist netting © SIF

Work resumed in November 2014 for the third season of the introduced bird eradication at Takamaka on Grande Terre, Aldabra. The 'Takamaka season' coincides with the landbird breeding period which is the best time for detecting and targeting introduced Madagascar Fodies, and distinguishing them from endemic Aldabra Fodies.

After the first two seasons were very successful in targetting most of the introduced fody population, the main priority of the third season was to implement a fine-scale survey to estimate the number of remaining Madagascar Fodies.

The Takamaka team was headed by Terence Mahoune who led the team for the third season, Invasive Species Technical Officers (ISTOs) Frankie Gamble and Stephanie Marie both returning for a second season on the project, and three new ISTOs, Katherine Raines and Jack West both of whom had previous experience in invasive alien bird management, and Marcus Dubel a new SIF staff member who previously worked on Cousin Island.

The 3-month survey started in November 2014, with point counts completed in a grid covering an area of approx. 8 km², which included the known area of the invasion plus a substantial margin around the edges of the invaded area. By February 2015, the survey was completed and only two Madagascar Fodies had been encountered.

The small number of Madagascar Fodies recorded indicates that the previous seasons' eradication efforts have been highly effective. Even more promising, one of the two detected fodies was culled in January, and the other, now legendary, fody "Rasputin" was last seen in December 2014. It is possible that Rasputin has died of natural causes but this will have to be confirmed next season. It is also possible that there are a few female Madagascar Fodies remaining in the Takamaka area, which may not have been picked up by the survey, as the females are more difficult to detect and distinguish from Aldabra Fody females and juveniles.

Ultimately though, the three intensive seasons of this emergency eradication have been very successful, with almost all of the invasive fodies culled. The Takamaka field hut was packed up at the end of the season for the third time in April and will be re-opened next season, when less intensive monitoring trips and follow-up observations are planned. All is looking promising for the eradication of this introduced species from Aldabra, and for Aldabra to soon re-claim its status of being free of introduced birds.

Aldabra Banded Snail doing well



The re-discovered Aldabra Banded Snail © C Onezia

Following the re-discovery of the thought to be extinct Aldabra Banded Snail (*Rhachistia aldabrae*) in August 2014, the Aldabra team again returned to Malabar Island to gather more information on the abundance, range and ecology of this beautiful endemic snail.

The initial discovery recorded seven individuals; all were found in aestivation (dormant state) on the endemic Bwa Mamzel

A huge thank you to all those that attended, our supporters and partners who made the research possible, the presenters, and of course those behind the scenes, together they all made the day a fantastic success. For those that could not attend, abstracts from all the presentations given at this symposium will be released at a later date in a special symposium proceedings issue of the newsletter.

Assumption Madagascar Fody eradication update



SIF staff Terence Mahoune surveying Assumption for Madagascar Fodies © J van de Crommenacker

Following the success of the Red-whiskered Bulbul eradication from the island of Assumption and the Seychelles, which was announced in February, the Madagascar Fody eradication from the same island appears to be hot on its heels.

The Madagascar Fody is the second species to be tackled in this major eradication effort on Assumption in a bid to protect Aldabra from the threat of the introduced bird species on this nearby island. More than 3000 fodies have been culled by mist-netting and shooting over 3 years of eradication efforts. Numbers plummeted in the last year, with only a handful of birds remaining by mid-2014 and the remaining birds painstakingly tackled one by one as they became more difficult to target.

After shooting a male fody in January, the team of four scoured the island and saw no trace of another fody for 6 weeks. The team members were redeployed on other projects in late February to give both them and any remaining birds a short break and to allow any fodies to resume their patterns after the disturbances. A 3-week follow-up visit to Assumption by a small team of experienced staff was carried out in April to once again survey and cover the island, check hotspots and search for any signs of remaining fodies. Very encouragingly, not a single fody was seen in this trip although the whole island was covered on foot.



Assumption landscape showing a large sink-hole, a previously very popular haunt of the Madagascar Fody © J Linnebjerg

It is still too early to declare eradication success for this species, which is much less conspicuous than the Red-whiskered Bulbul and therefore more difficult to confirm its absence from this 11 km² island. However, early signs that this double eradication attempt has succeeded are promising. At least two more monitoring visits to Assumption will be done in the next year from Aldabra, during the next north-west season, to try to confirm the eradication, or to identify and target any remaining fodies. In the meantime, the project has reached the waiting phase, and for the time being we are all crossing fingers that no birds have been missed.

Ring-necked Parakeet programme reaches final stages – the team still needs your help



The RNP team giving a presentation in one of the schools © SIF

Work continues on the Ring-necked Parakeet (Kato Ver) eradication



The Friends of Vallée de Mai students at the GVI base © GVI

To commemorate Earth Day this year SIF organised activities with the Seychelles National Park Authority and GVI Seychelles on Curieuse Island for 20 members of the Friends of Vallée de Mai clubs on Praslin.

To make the most of the visit the children were split into different groups. One group stayed at the GVI Seychelles research base to learn more about how sustainable living practices had been implemented into the daily operation. The GVI staff gave the children a tour highlighting several sustainable measures that had been taken such as rainwater harvesting, the installation of solar panels for electricity, a small kitchen garden and recycling of some materials. The children were encouraged to share this information with family and friends and inspire them to take similar actions where possible as it can help in reducing their monthly expenses as well as protecting the environment.



Learning about the solar panel system with GVI Base Manager Daniel Davies © SIF

This tour was followed by some fun interactive games and activities that had been organised by the GVI staff and volunteers. The children got to make animal themed sand sculptures, enjoy colouring activities and take part in a treasure hunt.

The second group of students visited the SNPA rangers' station at Baie Laraie where they planted some native seedlings with staff from Raffles hotel. These seedlings are part of a wider plan to reforest Curieuse with native vegetation to prevent soil erosion and restore native habitat.

Many thanks to our partners who helped facilitate this event, we hope to come back next year!

Creation of Coco de Mer 'task force' to fight poaching



Members of the task force meeting at the Vallée de Mai © SIF

Poaching of Coco de Mer nuts remains the most pressing threat to the long-term persistence of the Coco de Mer and the Praslin palm forest. In February the Minister for Environment, Energy and Climate Change chaired the first meeting of a newly established Coco de Mer 'task force' at the Vallée de Mai. All interested parties concerned with Coco de Mer protection on Praslin were invited to attend and become part of this task force. Those members met again this month to discuss the way forward in tackling the issue of Coco de Mer poaching.

The meeting was chaired by the Principal Secretary for the Department of Environment, Mr Alain de Commarmond. This new task force presents a new opportunity for many stakeholders to unite in combatting this issue, partners present included the Department of Environment, Seychelles Police Force, Fond Ferdinand and Seychelles National Parks Authority as well as private land owners.

The parties discussed how to tackle the increasing problem of Coco de Mer poaching and reviewed the new draft legislation proposed for the Coco de Mer. They also discussed ways that the Police Force can help to ensure that arrest of poachers leads to prosecution, which will help in the legal enforcement against poaching. Given the extent and gravity of the poaching problem it is encouraging to see so many organisations acting together, and SIF remains committed to collaborating with as many partners as possible to find a resolution.

Allophylus aldabricus). In October 2014 a follow up visit recorded a total of 31 snails, including adults, sub-adults and juveniles. All were again dormant, and the majority were found on *Allophylus aldabricus* trees. An area of approximately 50 m² was searched, focused around the point of the initial re-discovery.

On the visit this month a total of 38 Aldabra Banded Snails were recorded, in different life stages and once again strongly associated with the Bwa Mamzel tree. A similar search area was covered to the previous visit, there is similar habitat around this area that is yet to be surveyed so it is hoped that more of the snails will be located.



One of the active snails found on this visit © C Onezia

During the latest visit there was great excitement to finally observe the Aldabra Banded Snail active in its natural environment. Early in the morning four snails were seen moving around a Bwa Mamzel tree and as the sun rose and the temperature increased they became inactive. To see this eye-catching snail in action please check out the video on our Facebook and Youtube pages - <https://youtu.be/FXKxKuiixd8>. The snails were monitored over two days and almost all individuals moved at some point during this period, with faeces and fresh tracks seen near some individuals. Another interesting observation was that the snails must be tolerant to salty conditions, as three individuals were found on a large Bwa Mamzel tree within 4 m of the beach where they would have been exposed to sea spray.

Further visits to the area are planned to obtain more information about this population of endemic snails which will assist in informing management decisions to aid the protection of the species.

As the birds become increasingly difficult to locate, we have intensified our public awareness campaign to reach a wider number of the people on Mahé. This has included educational talks at local schools, a presentation at the recent SIF symposium and many more posters being put up in known parakeet areas. Two members of the team have also been interviewed about the project on two local radio stations. These activities result in more information being passed on to the team from the general public about the location of the remaining birds. The information procured is of vital importance for the last and elusive birds to be targeted so any possible leads are gratefully received.



Team members Laurent and Annabelle being interviewed on local station SBC © SIF

If you have any information on recent sightings of these birds the team can be contacted on the 'kato ver line': **2523623**. The diminishing number of parakeets has made the remaining birds very wary and cautious so please do not attempt to catch or approach them but instead call the team. There is a high risk that unsuccessful attempts to catch could make the final few birds even more difficult to target. We very much hope to be able to announce the eradication of this bird from Seychelles in the not too distant future, and the assistance of the public on Mahé is integral to this success.

All change for the Aldabra team



Some of the staff on a final lagoon trip at Aldabra © SIF

It was with much sadness that we said goodbye to several senior members of the Aldabra team this month. Heather Richards (Aldabra Scientific Coordinator), Joel Souyave (Island Manager), Philip Haupt (GEF Project Coordinator) Daig Romain (Field Research Assistant) and Catherina Onezia (Senior Ranger) all departed from Aldabra in April and we would like to heartily thank them all for their hard work and dedication. They will be much missed!

We were happy to also welcome new Aldabra Scientific Coordinator, April Burt, to the atoll. April has been working in Seychelles for several years on conservation and research programmes and brings a wealth of experience to the role. We asked April to share with us her first impressions of arriving at Aldabra:

Generous donation from British High Commission



Wilna Accouche receives the donated items from deputy high commissioner Dave Jones © SIF

Science Programme Officer, Wilna Accouche, received a generous donation on behalf of SIF from the British High Commission this month. Deputy High Commissioner Dave Jones presented Wilna with several pairs of binoculars and head torches for use by our dedicated field staff in conservation work at the two World Heritage Sites. We would like to extend our gratitude to the British High Commission for this thoughtful donation and for directly assisting SIF's research and conservation programmes. Thank you!



Ring-necked Parakeet team member Nyara using the donated binoculars for field observations © SIF





The position of Aldabra Scientific Coordinator is unarguably one of the most sought positions in conservation worldwide. A combination of a huge variety of study subjects from snails to whales, in a setting that is unrivalled by any imagining of paradise that you may have. I first heard of Aldabra Atoll over 9 years ago whilst studying a module of my undergraduate degree 'Conservation and Biodiversity', little did I ever imagine that I would one day work there. But here I sit looking out over settlement beach watching the tide rush in and the blacktip reef sharks swimming in the shallows.

The trip here was surreal to say the least; an early morning flight in a small plane from the very familiar Mahé airport across a very unfamiliar stretch of ocean, deposited on Assumption Island with nothing but an airstrip and a few staff houses. Followed by a journey by boat across the sea to Aldabra, and the sea was calm as we were flanked by boobies and frigatebirds showing off their flying skills. A distant speck on the horizon appeared and then another but as far from each other as the eye could see, this was my first glimpse of Aldabra Atoll. I was not prepared for the sheer size of it and to put it in my perspective; the last island I worked on was 27 hectares and Aldabra is 35,000 hectares!

The Aldabra staff (and blacktips, robber crabs, rails and of course the tortoises) gave me the warmest welcome and my first week has flown by whilst learning the ropes from the wonderful Heather Richards. There is so much to mention but the marine habitat of Aldabra is beyond words, incomparable to anything I have seen and so far I have only just glimpsed it. I am excited for the adventure that has now begun and will continue to pinch myself just to check I'm not still sat in my undergraduate class daydreaming.

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Don't forget to like our Facebook page! The page has regular news and updates on research and events at both World Heritage Sites. We would invite all friends, supporters, partners, colleagues, and anyone else who has an interest in staying up to date with the management and protection of the UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the Seychelles, or in Seychelles' biodiversity and conservation in general to become a fan of our page. For those who have a Facebook account already please use this link https://www.facebook.com/pages/Seychelles-Islands-Foundation-SIF/1414466072110654?hc_location=stream and 'Like' our page. For those that are not on Facebook then perhaps you can receive updates through a friend or family members account, or maybe now is the time to join Facebook for yourself! We look forward to welcoming you onto this page!

Articles contributed by: *Rowana Walton, Nancy Bunbury, April Burt, Heather Richards, Terence Mahoune, Maria Briocche, Chris Tagg.*