

# A New Sanctuary in the Seychelles

By Malcolm Penny

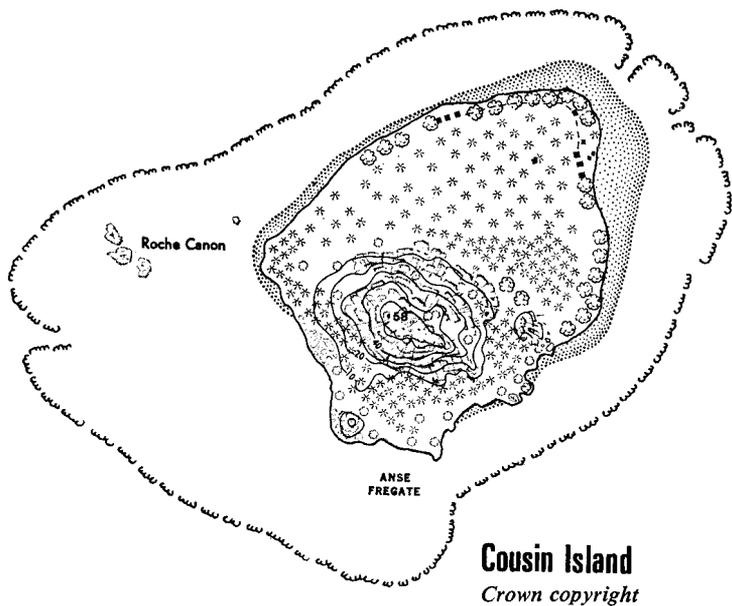
For years conservationists have urged that Cousin Island in the Seychelles should be made a wildlife sanctuary, so it is welcome news that the International Council for Bird Preservation, aided by the British National Appeal of the World Wildlife Fund, has acquired an option to buy the island if it can raise the money in time. A research station will be set up, with a full-time warden to study the whole of this interesting archipelago in the Indian Ocean.\* The Seychelles are important for the large numbers of endemic birds there. In the early eighteenth century, when colonists first settled in the islands, about a dozen species occurred on most of them. But with increasing human settlements the birds decreased, some became extinct, and now most of the endemic ones are to be found on only one or two islands. In this article Malcolm Penny, a member of the 1964-65 Bristol University Seychelles Expedition, describes the island and the more interesting birds. The photographs of Cousin opposite are by him.

**A** SMALL island of 67 acres, two miles from Praslin, Cousin has been for many years a private estate. Much of it is now overgrown, but it shows signs of extensive cultivation in the past. About half the island is taken up by the rocky hill in the centre, 60 feet high and sloping steeply to the sea at the western end, where the coastal "plateau" is narrow or non-existent. At the more sheltered north-eastern end a wide plateau supports many coconut palms, among which is a dense low scrub consisting mostly of "wild spinach" and pawpaw trees. The ground is stony, but, judging from the size of the trees, seems to have deep soil underneath. Around the base of the hill the ground is marshy, in places supporting fruit trees and bananas that are now for the most part untended. To the south the marsh is covered by thickets of small trees, with a dense canopy of creeper, among which are signs of old drainage channels, but the area is quite uncultivated. The hill slopes are covered with low scrub, but the top is bare and exposed. A rocky knoll to the east provides shelter for a few taller trees which contain colonies of seabirds.

The shore is fringed with *Casuarina* trees, especially round the eastern plateau, where there are some half-dozen labourers' stone cottages and two sizeable wooden bungalows. The other buildings on the island consist of a small copra drier and store near the cottages, and a derelict house at Anse Frigate, the rough-weather landing-place.

The Bristol Seychelles Expedition was in the islands from October 1964 to December 1965, working principally on the land birds, several species of which are in danger of extinction. Various papers have been published, or are in preparation, on the biology and conservation prospects for these species. The Expedition strongly supported the plan to buy Cousin Island, first put forward several years ago, and establish the island as a sanctuary and research station for the Seychelles, with a warden.

\*Donations to the Fund to buy Cousin can be sent to ICBP, British Museum (Natural History), London S.W.7 or to FPS, a constituent member of ICBP.



The island had depended in the past upon its copra production, and a few fruits and vegetables for the local market; some pigs and chickens were run over the plateau to provide meat for the staff. In June 1965, on our third visit to the island, we noticed that the number of pigs had increased enormously, and that much of the scrub on the eastern plateau had been cleared, mostly by their activities. Since this coincided with a new policy and a new manager for the island, we feared that it would be developed as a pig farm, with disastrous results for the birds; this urged us to press for renewed efforts to buy the island for conservation.

Another crop, a seasonal one, has been the fledglings of the wedgetailed shearwater *Puffinus pacificus chlororhynchus*, known to the locals as "foquet", which were collected and salted, as "mutton birds" are in other parts of the world. We were told that about 4,000 were taken each year, and that there has been no marked reduction in the number available.

The estate was run by a manager and a dozen Seychellois labourers and their families, who have had little adverse effect on the birds apart from shearwater chicks. This is due chiefly to the attitude of Mr Franz Jumeau, who owned Cousin until his death a few years ago, and to his widow, who has continued her husband's interest and concern for the island's birds. Barn owls, which have done so much damage elsewhere in Seychelles, were shot on arrival at Cousin, and this is reflected in the birds, particularly the large population of the fairy tern (Blackman 1965).

### Endemic Land Birds

**Seychelles Fody** *Foudia sechellarum*: the Cousin population numbers 500 by our count. The species also exists on Frigate and Cousine, though

Map reproduced from Directorate of Overseas map D.O.S. 204 1:10,000 Seychelles: Praslin, Sheet 2. 1st edition 1967 by permission the Controller H.M. Stationery Office.

not in such density. About a third of the birds on Cousin have one or more white wing-feathers, usually primary converts, in the otherwise brown plumage. This condition is rare on Cousine and absent on Frigate. Blackman has a manuscript in preparation on this and other characters pointing to divergence in the three populations of this bird.

**Brush Warbler** *Nesillas (Bebrornis) sechellensis*. Cousin is now the only home of this bird, which is extinct on Marianne. They breed in dense cover, especially over the marshy area in the south-west of the island. The population – 50 birds by our count – is probably stable in the present condition of the island. Breeding birds are markedly territorial.

**Turtle dove** *Streptopelia picturata rostrata*: this endemic subspecies has been swamped in other islands by interbreeding with an introduced form *S.p. picturata* from Madagascar. On Cousin, however, the endemic characters are retained to a greater extent, and it should be possible to breed back the endemic phenotype from Cousin specimens in captivity.

**Sunbird** *Nectarinia dussumieri*: not so common on Cousin as elsewhere, but still numerous in the scrub. There has been a minor controversy about the variation between islands in the colour of the wing flashes of this species. On Cousin they were orange in birds which we examined, but they are said to be yellow on Praslin. We found that Praslin birds varied widely in this character.

### Non-endemic Land Birds

**Madagascar Fody** *Foudia madagascariensis*: introduced species, breeding but too small numbers to compete with *F. sechellarum* (Crook 1960).

**Barred Ground Dove** *Geopelia striata*: breeds on Cousin and is exceedingly common. Its burbling call is the dominant sound inland on a still day.

**Indian hill mynah** *Acridotheres tristis*: common on Mahé, occurs on Cousin only as a storm-blown visitor, and does not breed.

**Cape barn owl** *Tyto alba affinis*: said to be an infrequent visitor, but does not breed to our knowledge.

### Sea Birds

The following sea birds breed on Cousin to our knowledge:

White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaëthon l. lepturus*; Bridled tern *Sterna anaethetia antarctica*, a new breeding record for Cousin (Dawson 1966); common noddy *Anous stolidus pilaetus*, a new breeding record for Cousin; lesser noddy *Anous t. tenuirostris*; fairy tern *Anous alba monte*; a denser population than on any other island in Seychelles; wedge-tailed shearwater.

### References

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**CAPTURING RHINOS IN RHODESIA.**

**Plate 12 opposite, above: White rhino darted but still moving.**

**Plate 13 opposite, below: Black rhino darted and walking quietly to the lorry.**

**Plate 14 above: Black rhino being rolled on to the sleigh for loading into the lorry.**

*Rupert Fothergill*

*Photographs Plates 12-16, Department of Wildlife Conservation, Salisbury.*



**Plate 15 above: White rhino about to be hauled into the lorry, its head carefully cushioned.**

**Plate 16 left: White rhino in the boma and ready for release.**

