

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 email them to Rob.Williams@birdlife.org.uk.

Eradication of rats and feral cats from Pitcairn Islands

During 1997 a specialist island restoration company, Wildlife Management International Limited, from New Zealand was contracted by the British Government and WWF (UK) to remove brown rats *Rattus exulans* and feral *Felis catus* cats from all the islands in the Pitcairn group except Henderson. Rats were eliminated from Oeno and probably Ducie, although a follow up visit has not been possible to confirm the latter. All the feral cats were removed from the main Pitcairn Island and all but one breeding pair of domestic cats were neutered.

The results have been spectacular with much higher breeding success of seabirds on Oeno and a significant increase in the vulnerable endemic Pitcairn Reed-warbler *Acrocephalus vaughani* on Pitcairn. Additionally both Herald Petrel *Pterodroma heraldica* and Murphy's Petrel *P. ultima* have started to breed again on Pitcairn. Unfortunately the eradication of rats on Pitcairn has not been successful, despite a second attempt in 1998, and a few rats have begun to reappear. The islanders, who have appreciated the advantages of having few (if any) rats, are continuing the effort with an island-wide baiting programme.

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800 Oriental White Stork *Ciconia boyciana* found in Tianjin, China

A survey on 8–9 March 1999 at Beidagang Reservoir, Tianjin recorded an approxi-

mate count of 800 Oriental White Stork *Ciconia boyciana*. This is the highest ever count for the province of this endangered species for which the world population has been estimated to be only 2,500 (Rose and Scott, 1994). The birds were found by a team from the Tainjin Wetland and Waterbird Conservation Project funded by the BP/BirdLife Conservation Programme and the International Crane Foundation.

Rose, P.M. and Scott, D.A. (1994)
Waterfowl population estimates. Slimbridge, UK: International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB Spec. Publ. 29).
Zhang Zhengwang, College of Life Science, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China.

Decline in Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarius* in western Kazakstan

The globally threatened Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarius* has undergone a marked decrease in range and numbers north of the Caspian Sea since the mid-1970s. There is also evidence of a shift in breeding habitat from steppe to *ashiks* (areas of grassland among sand dunes) in the central Volga-Ural Sands. None of the nests located in this habitat succeeded, all being predated by foxes *Vulpes* sp. It is suggested that this shift in nesting habitat is a result of unfavourable conditions in the usual breeding areas. The Sands are less affected by severe droughts than the surrounding semidesert/steppe areas; in years of severe drought vegetation dies off almost completely on the semidesert/steppe but the superficially similar vegetation survives in the Sands. A decline in the number of migrant Sociable

Plovers moving through the area has also been noted in the last 15 years and the migration appears to have shifted from a broad northward movement to 2–3 different routes mainly to the north-east.

The decline in numbers is suggested to coincide with an intensification of a xero-thermal period; the probability of a severe drought in the area used to be 5–8% but has risen to 20% in the last 40 years. Desert vegetation communities tend to move northward in drought years and steppe associations southward in wet years; the increasing incidence of drought-adapted plants has brought about a severe deterioration of the Sociable Plovers' breeding areas. Other marginal breeding areas such as riverside meadows have been subject to increasing grazing pressure and trampling of eggs by stock and controlled flooding has been found to be a problem in such areas. Agricultural intensification in the 1960s undoubtedly affected the species but the current declines are being noticed in areas where no intensification has occurred and it seems likely that the decline is associated with the increasing aridity of the climate.

*Shevchenko, V.L. (1998) The Sociable Plover *Vanellus gregarius* north of the Caspian Sea. Wader Study Group Bull. 87: 48–50.*

Caerulean Paradise-flycatcher *Eutrichomyias rowleyi* observed for the first time in 20 years

The critically threatened Caerulean Paradise-flycatcher *Eutrichomyias rowleyi* is endemic to the island of Sangihe, Indonesia and was previously known from the type specimen and a single bird observed in 1978. It had not been seen recently despite several searches for the species. A team from Action Sampiri – Sangihe and Talaud Conservation Project found the bird on 3 October 1998. A total of 22 individuals at five localities were recorded. The total area of suitable habitat for the species remaining may be less than 100

hectares. The Action Sampiri work is funded by the BP/BirdLife Conservation Programme.

Action Sampiri Newsletter number 1 – January 1999.

Largest population of Scaly-sided Merganser *Mergus squamatus* found in China

The world's largest known population of Scaly-sided Merganser *Mergus squamatus* has been found on Xiaobei lake near Ning'an in southeastern Heilongjiang Province, China where up to 76 birds were observed on 25 September 1997. The 389 hectare lake is located in the Zhangguangcai Ling mountains. The discovery is reported in the Chinese Journal of Zoology.

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Madagascar joins Ramsar

On 25 September 1998 Madagascar became the 113th contracting party to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. Two sites have been named as the country's first Wetlands of International Importance. One of these sites, Complexe des Lacs de Manambolomaty, which includes lakes Soamalipo, Befotaka, Ankerika and Antsamaka, holds 10% of the population of the critically endangered endemic Madagascar Fish-eagle *Haliaeetus vociferoides*. Lake Antsamaka is also an important moult site for the endangered Madagascar Teal *Anas bernieri*.

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Meller's Duck *Anas melleri* recognised

A DNA study suggests that Meller's Duck *Anas melleri* deserves species level recognition; it has previously been considered

a form of Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*. Meller's Duck is found on the eastern slope of the central highlands of Madagascar and has an estimated population of 2,000–5,000 birds. It is declining and its main stronghold, Lac Alaotra, has been subject to continuing degradation leading to the extinction of two other birds species, the Madagascar Pochard *Aythya innotata* and Delacour's Grebe *Tachybaptus rufolavatus*; the lake now faces partial drainage. The recognition of this declining species highlights the need for better protection of Madagascar's wetlands.

Young, H.G. and Rhymer, J.M. (1998) *Biodiversity and Conservation* 7: 1313–1323.

Study shows long-term effects of selective logging in Uganda

A study comparing forest that had been selectively logged 23 years ago and unlogged forest in the Kibale National Park, western Uganda has found that the avifauna of the logged area had still not fully recovered after this time with seven of the 48 species of understorey specialists having failed to recolonise. Although the logged forest had a greater species diversity and richness this was mainly due to the higher numbers of forest edge and generalist species.

Dranzoa, C. (1998) *The avifauna 23 years after logging in Kibale National Park, Uganda. Biodiversity and Conservation* 7: 777–797.

Uneven sex ratio in the critically threatened Taita Thrush *Turdus helleri*

A study of the critically threatened Taita Thrush *Turdus helleri* has found an uneven sex ratio in a forest fragment in southeast Kenya. The species is monomorphic and sexing was undertaken by CHD gene analysis, although the wing length was also found to be a good indicator of sex for the species. Birds were cap-

tured and sexed at three sites, at one of these a significantly uneven sex ratio in favour of males was recorded. This site was the most disturbed of the three and it is suggested that the bias may be the result of increased predation on ground nests and attending females, though other mechanisms such as bias in primary sex ratios or different competitive ability between males and females could give the same result. The species is already threatened by habitat destruction and fragmentation and the implications of a highly biased sex ratio are cause for even greater concern.

Lens, L., Galbusera, P., Brooks, T., Waiyaki, E. and Shrenck, T. (1998) *Highly skewed sex ratios in the critically endangered Taita Thrush as revealed by CHD genes. Biodiversity and Conservation* 7: 869–873.

Cape Verde Warbler *Acrocephalus brevipennis* rediscovered on São Nicolau

The vulnerable Cape Verde Warbler *Acrocephalus brevipennis* has been rediscovered on the island of São Nicolau in the Cape Verdes, this being the first record there since 1924. The discovery was made following the finding of a skin taken there in 1970 in a collection in Lisbon, Portugal. The species historically occurred on three islands but has not been recorded on Brava since 1969 and has declined drastically on Santiago.

World Birdwatch (1998) 20(3): 6.

New species of firefinch from Nigeria

A new species, the Rock Firefinch *Lagnosticta sanguinodorialis* has been described from the Jos plateau, northern Nigeria. The species was found during a study of the Jos Plateau Indigobird *Vidua maryae* which mimicks the song of the firefinch.

Oryx, (1999) 33(1): 11.

Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus* deaths in North Pacific Fishery

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) reports the incidental take of two Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus* in the Bering Sea. The species is classified as Endangered with an estimated world population of 1,000 birds. Two individuals were killed in late September 1998 by the hook-and-line groundfish fishery in the Bering Sea; one of the birds was recovered and identified from its ring to be an eight years old bird from a Japanese breeding colony. The species is protected under the United States' Endangered Species Act with an incidental take of four birds in the 1997–1998 period being permitted. If this limit is exceeded all operations causing such take must cease, pend-

ing consultation with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Galah 30: 8.

Highest Bulgarian count of White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*

A sighting of 780 White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* at Vaya Lake, an Important Bird Area, on 9 February 1999 is the highest ever count for Bulgaria. The sighting was made by a Swiss bird-watching group on a tour organised by BSPB/BirdLife Bulgaria.

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Erratum

Special Issue: International Galliformes Symposium (Volume 8, Number 4, December 1998)

As a result of an unfortunate technical error, the copyright line at the top of the opening page of each paper in the above contained the wrong year and volume number (Volume 9, 1999). It should read as follows:

Bird Conservation International (1998) 8:000–000, © BirdLife International 1998

We apologise for this error and for the inconvenience caused to both contributors and readers.