

# *idyllic endemics* SEYCHELLES



Seychelles is world renowned for its enticing tropical beaches and, among birders, for its endemics and sea-bird colonies. Seychelles comprises 115 islands according to some – or 155 according to the Constitution, depending on the definition of an island – scattered across 1 374 000 square kilometres of the western Indian Ocean. Once sandwiched between Africa and India as part of Gondwanaland, Seychelles split off from Africa some 127 million years ago and from India about 65 million years ago. The 40 central islands are granitic: not only are they the only granitic oceanic islands in the world, they are also the oldest islands in the world. **Phil Hockey** and **Adrian Skerrett** went exploring. ▷



**Above** Robber crabs, weighing more than four kilograms, are the world's largest hermit crabs. They are entirely terrestrial.

**Opposite** The Aldabra Rail is the last flightless bird in the western tropical Indian Ocean.



In 1959, the world population of Seychelles Warbler was 26 birds, confined to one mangrove swamp on Cousin. The population now numbers about 3 000, on Cousin, Cousine and Aride islands.

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The granitic islands were, as recently as 10 000 years ago, a single land mass covering about 300 000 square kilometres. Today, their area totals 235 square kilometres and the main island of Mahé accounts for well over half this area. The remaining 220 square kilometres of land area in Seychelles comprises 75 'outer', coralline islands. Among these, Aldabra (154 square kilometres) is the largest raised coral atoll in the world and is also a World Heritage Site.

The granitic islands are generally hot and humid, with two monsoon periods a year – south-easterly monsoons which occur from May to October and north-westerly monsoons for the remainder of the year. The transition period between the monsoon seasons is the hottest and most humid.

Two hundred and forty-two bird species have been recorded in Seychelles, of which 65 breed and 12 (all of them landbirds) are universally recognised as endemic. Proposed splits (Aldabra Rail, Seychelles Black Parrot and Aldabra Fody) may elevate this number to 15. Introduced predators and habitat transformation have taken their toll and the majority of the endemics are included in the Red Data Book, where three of them are classified as Critically Endangered. Of all the endemics, however, only the Seychelles White-eye and the Seychelles Scops-Owl are difficult to find. Birders targeting the endemics of the granitics need only visit three islands: Mahé, La Digue and either Aride or Cousin. Aride also has 10 breeding seabird species (Cousin has seven).

### Mahé Island

Mahé is the largest island in the group and contains the capital, Victoria. The mudflats at Providence, south of Victoria, are good for Crab Plover, Terek Sandpiper and a diversity of other waders. Seychelles Kestrels and Seychelles Swiftlets can regularly be seen flying above the town, and a trip to the nearby botanical gardens should ensure Seychelles Blue-Pigeon, Seychelles Bulbul and Seychelles Sunbird (as well as a large colony of fruit bats). The road from Victoria to Port Glaud traverses the Morne Seychellois National Park and offers the best chance of finding the Seychelles Scops-Owl – a species



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declared extinct in 1958, but now suspected of having a population of 80 to 160 pairs. This bird is best located at night by its call – a deep, sawing *crr-crr-crr*, heard most between October and December. The best area to search is around Mission. In view of this species' rarity (very few nests have ever been found), birders should make every effort to avoid disturbing the owls. While in the National Park, keep an eye out for Seychelles Kestrels and White-tailed Tropicbirds flying overhead.

Until recently, the Seychelles White-eye was thought doomed to extinction, but following the discovery of a healthy population on Conception Island, its future looks slightly rosier. However, access to Conception is difficult, and the best option remains to try and locate the birds on Mahé. There are small surviving populations at La Misere (on the road from Plaisance to

Grand' Anse) and Cascade (east coast, just north of the airport). As with the owl, the birds should not be disturbed and all sightings should be reported. The white-eye also breeds on Frégate, subsequent to a successful translocation by the Ministry of Environment and the Island Conservation Society in 2001.

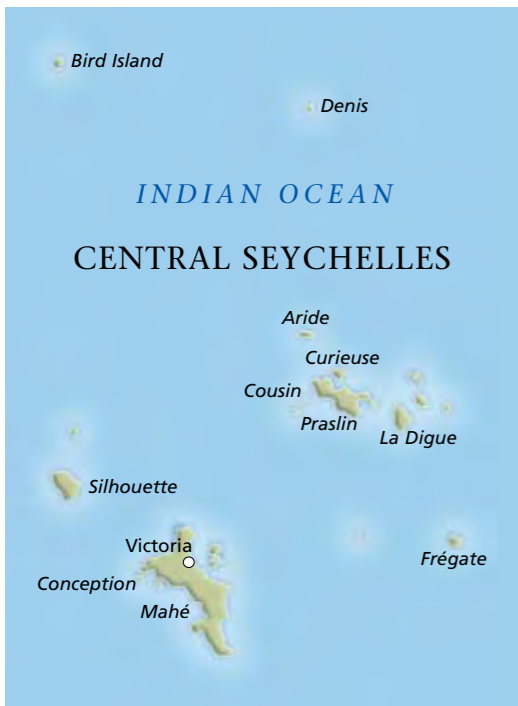
### Praslin

The more common endemics are all available on Praslin, but the target bird here is the Seychelles Black Parrot, now usually treated as a distinct species from the vasa parrots of Madagascar and the Comores. The core of the species' range is the Vallée de Mai National Park (a World Heritage Site): here the birds feed extensively on the fruits of an endemic palm *Verschaffeltia splendida*, which grows along the river valleys. However, early in the morning many parrots leave the Vallée de Mai and

*Red-footed Boobies are common in all the waters around the Seychelles and breed on many of the outer islands.*

#### RECORDS

The Seychelles Bird Records Committee is interested in all sightings, even those of the more common birds. Contact Adrian Skerrett, P O Box 336, Seychelles. E-mail [adrian@maheship.sc](mailto:adrian@maheship.sc). The Committee's most recent report was published in the Africa Bird Club Bulletin 2006, Vol. 13 (2): 170–177. Accepted records are also published quarterly in the local journal *Birdwatch* and on the Committee's website [www.stokecoll.ac.uk/sbrcl](http://www.stokecoll.ac.uk/sbrcl)



head towards the coast, where they may be seen between Grand' Anse and L'Amité, at Anse Boudin and at Pointe Cabris in the south. Although they feed on a variety of fruits, a favourite is the introduced 'bilimbi' *Averrhoa bilimbi*. The fruits of this tree resemble small, pale cucumbers and, when parrots have been feeding, many discards can be found below the trees. If you can find trees with such discards, early morning is the ideal time to see these birds in action. The best way of seeing parrots at Vallée de Mai itself is to watch from the road below (west of) the main entrance to the nature trail. Position yourself overlooking one of the river valleys. While on Praslin, do not miss the opportunity to visit nearby Aride or Cousin islands, where most of the remainder of the endemic landbirds can be found.

### Cousin Island

Cousin Island is a Special Nature Reserve that was purchased by the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (RSNC)

in 1968 and held in trust for BirdLife International (then the ICBP). In 2002, agreement was reached to transfer ownership directly to BirdLife International. The island is now managed by Nature Seychelles (formerly BirdLife Seychelles) and is accessed by small boat from Praslin. It is open, mornings only, from Monday to Thursday. Nature Seychelles can be contacted on Mahé on tel. 22 5097 or the warden may be contacted on tel. 23 3090.

Because of its importance as a conservation site, the island is carefully managed and groups of visitors are guided, rather than allowed to wander at will. The three key birds here are Seychelles Magpie-Robin, Seychelles Warbler and Seychelles Fody. Both the magpie-robin and the warbler have, in the past, hovered on the brink of extinction. All are locally common on the island and are usually visible from the main path. In addition, White-tailed Tropicbird, Brown and Lesser noddies, and Bridled and Fairy terns all breed on Cousin and are easily seen. Audubon's and Wedge-tailed shearwaters also breed here, but mainly in areas inaccessible to the public.

### La Digue

La Digue is the only island where the spectacular Seychelles Paradise-Flycatcher can be seen. Although it is a rare bird (fewer than 200 individuals remain), it is fairly easy to find. It is dependent on mature coastal broad-leaved woodland, and to locate this habitat, walk south from the

**Left** *Seychelles Bulbuls* are common on all the larger islands, and are conspicuous, noisy and aggressive.

**Opposite, top** *The White-tailed Tropicbird* is one of the few seabirds that can be seen reliably on Mahé.

**Opposite, bottom left** *The Seychelles Scops-Owl* was discovered in the late 19th century, but was declared extinct in 1958. Rediscovered in 1960, the population is now thought to number about 130–150 pairs.

**Opposite, bottom right** *The botanical gardens in Victoria, Mahé, is a good place to see Seychelles Blue-Pigeon.*



ROSS WANLESS



TREVOR HARDAKER (2)



MARTIN HARVEY



PETER STEVN (2)

**Above** The Seychelles Paradise-Flycatcher is endemic to the picturesque island of La Digue.

**Right** The Seychelles Magpie-Robin is a conservation success story, rescued from the brink of extinction but now thriving after re-introduction to several islands.

**Opposite, top** The Fairy Tern breeds throughout the Seychelles, is easily seen and is very confiding.

**Opposite, bottom** Black-naped Terns breed on the outer islands but are occasionally reported around the granitic islands.

inter-island schooner jetty (or take an ox-drawn cart if you are feeling lazy): within a kilometre of the jetty there are patches of woodland on the left-hand side of the road that contain these flycatchers. If you visit the La Digue Veuve Reserve ('veuve' is the local name for the flycatcher), which lies south of the road from La Réunion to Chateau St Cloud, you are guaranteed to see the bird (and probably be bitten by a few mosquitoes). If you have a bit of extra time, walk down to the coast at Anse Union – the beaches are beautiful.

### Aride Island

Aride, which is far less crowded than Cousin, is the best seabird island and home to five endemic landbirds. It has been protected since 1973 when it was purchased by Christopher Cadbury on behalf of RSWT and it has had legal status as a Special Reserve since 1979. Management was transferred to the Island Conservation Society in 2004. Aride is home to 10 breeding seabird species, including the world's largest colony of Lesser Noddies and Audubon's Shearwaters. Red-tailed Tropicbird and Roseate Tern breed here and nowhere else in the granitic islands. Other breeding species include White-tailed Tropicbird, Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Brown Noddy and Sooty, Bridled and Fairy terns. Large numbers of Greater and Lesser frigatebirds roost ashore. Five endemics breed: Seychelles Warbler, Seychelles

Fody, Seychelles Blue-Pigeon, Seychelles Magpie-Robin and Seychelles Sunbird.

Aride is accessible by boat from Praslin. Opening days vary, but usually include Sunday, Wednesday and Thursday. Access from July to September, when the south-east winds peak, can sometimes be difficult and the island may close during this period. For more details, contact the warden on tel. 32 1600.

### Bird Island

The key attraction of Bird Island is the huge colony of Sooty Terns, but Brown Noddies are also abundant. As it is the most northerly island, it is the best from which to see unusual migrants, especially from October to December.

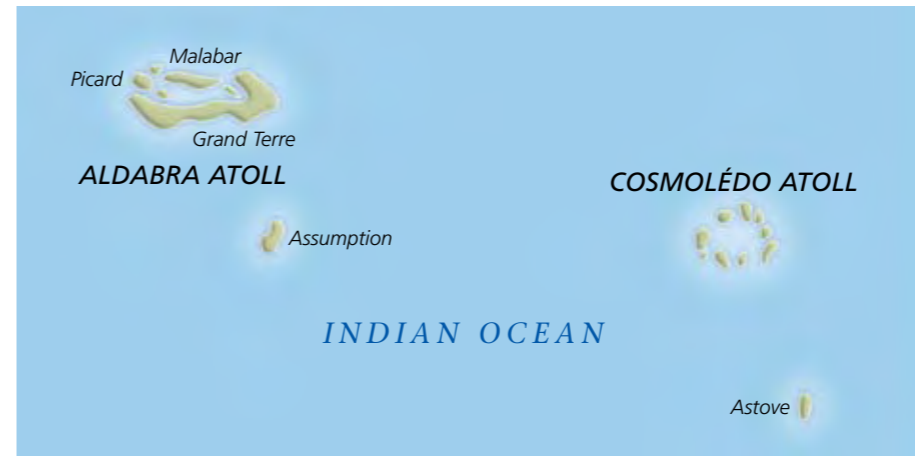
Bird Island is accessed by air from Mahé. Day trips are not possible as there is only one flight per day, and the aircraft does not remain at the island for very long. There is an office on Mahé at Kingsgate House, Victoria for reservations and information (tel. 22 4925). The hotel on the island can be contacted on tel. 32 3322.

### The Aldabras

Relative to the granitic Seychelles, the Aldabras, lying more than 1 000 kilometres from Mahé, are difficult to access except from a cruise ship or substantial yacht. Advance permission to visit must be obtained from Seychelles Islands Foundation, Hermitage, Victoria, Mahé (tel. 32 4883).



BRIAN WORSLEY



Aldabra itself is a World Heritage Site and a tantalising birding destination that unfortunately remains a dream for most people. The public is allowed land access only to Picard Island, which houses the research station, and may visit one of the frigatebird colonies by sea accompanied by the warden or a ranger. However, all the specials can be seen on Picard. The taxonomic status of some of these birds is uncertain, although the landbirds have a very high level of subspecific endemism. Recent texts have recognised three endemic species: Aldabra Rail, Aldabra Drongo and Aldabra Fody. All can be seen close to the research station (the rail having recently been successfully reintroduced to Picard). Question marks still hang over the true taxonomic status of the ibis, kestrel, nightjar, dove and white-eye, so try to see these if you are there, just in case! Other species fairly easily seen close to the landing beach include Red-footed Booby, frigatebirds, Black-naped Tern, Crab Plover, Souimanga Sunbird and Comoro Blue-Pigeon. Giant tortoises and huge robber crabs are also common around the research station.

The other likely landfall for visitors to this area is Astove Island, a much smaller atoll containing a truly beautiful lagoon. Much of Astove comprises abandoned coconut plantations, but it is relatively easy to locate the key birds, Souimanga Sunbird and Madagascar White-eye, by looking in fairly open areas close to the beach. Be careful around the high-water mark because there is a very high density of turtle nests. □

### off you go

Transport and accommodation on the islands are logistically easy but financially demanding. Hotels are very expensive, as are restaurants, but self-catering accommodation is available and there are travel guides that explain how to keep costs down (public transport is mercifully cheap and its coverage on Mahé and Praslin is adequate to get you to the important sites). The quickest and easiest way to get between the main islands is to fly, but the key islands of Aride, Cousin and La Digue are accessed by boat from Praslin. Unfortunately, privately owned Frégate Island, which houses several endemics, including the blue-pigeon, fody and magpie-robin, is closed to day visitors. If you are planning an overnight stay on Frégate, start polishing your credit card!



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