

## Aldabra Rails – a runaway success

A year ago in *Africa – Birds & Birding* (vol.4, no.4), Fitznews reported plans to translocate a group of Aldabra Rails *Dryolimnas [cuvieri] aldabranus* to an island in the Aldabra Atoll complex that had been declared cat-free. We are pleased to report that the operation has been a resounding success.

Aldabra Atoll is a large, raised coral platform in the western Indian Ocean. Politically part of the Seychelles, it shares a great biological affinity with Madagascar. The atoll consists of four large islands rimming an extensive shallow lagoon. In 1982 it was declared a World Heritage Site in recognition of its unique beauty and conservation status.

The bird fauna of Aldabra is relatively intact and, unlike any other large islands in the western Indian Ocean, it has no alien bird species. The Indian Ocean islands were once renowned for flightless birds like the Dodo, Solitaire and Elephant Bird, and Aldabra is home to the last surviving flightless species: the Aldabra Rail. It closely resembles the White-throated Rail *Dryolimnas [cuvieri] cuvieri* of Madagascar, which still can fly.

Historically, Aldabra Rails once inhabited nearby Astove, Assumption and Cosmoledo islands as well as all islands within Aldabra Atoll. The advent of human settlements on these remote islands spelt trouble, and Aldabra was not spared. Feral populations of domestic cats



*The flightless Aldabra Rail – an island survivor.*

became widespread at the beginning of the 20th century. The flightless rail populations were decimated and ultimately they survived on only two islands on Aldabra Atoll: Malabar and Polymnie. In an attempt to bolster the long-term survival of this species, a re-introduction programme to Picard Island (now free of cats) was launched last year.

A positive spin-off of the translocation project is that it will benefit both tourists and conservation. The islands' management plan calls for restricting the number of tourists to Picard, but this has not been easy to enforce given the desire of many visitors to see the rail. Also, Picard is the only area where visitors may explore without a ranger being present. The establishment of a population of rails on

Picard will allow birders to see this highly prized endemic without placing undue pressure on other islands in the group.

The easy part of the translocation came first – catching and moving the birds. Aldabra Rails have no fear of humans, and if you sit still they will come really close, perhaps even pecking at toes to check if you are edible! They are also incurably inquisitive, to the point of wandering into traps without bait, out of curiosity. Ross Wanless, the student leading the project, quickly realised that fresh crab was the ideal bait with which to lure them into traps. Before long, nine pairs of rails were captured on Malabar Island. It was important that only birds from one island be translocated because, being

flightless, there is a good chance that the birds on Malabar differ from those on Polymnie. It would be poor form to mix these potentially distinct stocks. This issue will become part of a genetic study on the rails.

Rails were taken to Picard Island where they were metal- and colour-banded, acclimatised in enclosures and then released. Picard is approximately 10 square kilometres in extent and covered mostly in trackless, impenetrable scrub. Despite this, eight pairs were relocated on Picard after release. Their dispersal, pair-bonding and breeding behaviour were closely monitored. Astoundingly, all the pairs bred successfully, fledging more chicks, and faster, than a control group on Malabar. After eight months the population on Picard is at least 30 birds, with no known adult mortalities to date. This is a very encouraging result, and a second season of monitoring is planned for the summer of 2000/2001. This translocation is the first step towards conserving a charismatic and tenacious island survivor. □

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