The UK's wildlife overseas: a stocktake of nature in our Overseas Territories

Beyond the rolling hills, dappled woodland and rugged coastlines of the British countryside, the land and seas the UK is responsible for extend far beyond what we tend to think of as the British Isles. Landscapes which include areas of tropical forests, coral reefs, volcanoes, ice caps and one of the largest maritime zones in the world can all be found in the 14 UK Overseas Territories (OTs) spread around the world. The OTs are mostly small islands, with a huge range of habitats, from Caribbean beaches to rugged volcanic cliffs in the southern ocean, and include two World Heritage Sites of exceptional natural beauty. Their inhabitants are British nationals, and the UK Government is responsible for helping to protect their incredible wildlife. In the past decade, *BB* has been showcasing the key bird species of the UK OTs, and outlining the threats they face, in a series of articles in the journal.

In 2012, with such unique environments within its jurisdiction, and with ever-increasing pressures on biodiversity around the globe, the UK Government announced a strategic priority to ensure that the OTs 'abide by the same basic standards of good governance as in the UK'. Yet there has never been a collective baseline understanding of the scope of biodiversity that the UK is responsible for in its OTs. To address this, in 2014 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office funded research, led by the RSPB's Centre for Conservation Science, to create a database of all known species across the OTs. This took over two years to complete and the results were published in *Biodiversity and Conservation* in 2016 (Churchyard *et al.* 2016).

Globally significant biodiversity

The 'stocktake of nature in our Overseas Territories' project attempted to bring together all known records from the last 300 years, to document all known biodiversity in the OTs. The results confirmed that the OTs could be considered the UK's natural crown jewels, yet much of their unique wildlife is poorly known and it is likely that many species remain to be discovered. Notwithstanding the incomplete data and limited knowledge for many OTs and taxonomic groups, the high conservation value of the OTs is clear: over 32,000 native species have been recorded, of which 1,557 are endemic.

The stocktake project also highlighted where gaps in our knowledge remain. It has been estimated that there are a further 70,000 species awaiting discovery, including an estimated 1,800 currently undocumented endemic species. While mammalian, avian, reptile and amphibian species are well studied, much more work is required to fully understand groups such as arachnids and marine invertebrates. Understanding where the knowledge gaps lie is the crucial first step in addressing our lack of understanding of biodiversity in the OTs.

- **Over 32,000 native species have been recorded in the UK OTs**
- **1,557 endemic species are currently known in the UK OTs**
- **Only 9% of endemic species in the UK OTs have had their conservation status assessed**
- **13% of the native species which have been assessed in the UK OTs are threatened with global extinction**
- **A third of the world's albatrosses and a quarter of the world's penguins are found in the OTs**
- **There are 22 endemic bird species found in the UK OTs, 86% of which are Globally Threatened**

Threatened species

Of the native species recorded in the OTs, 5,304 (17%) had undergone assessment against IUCN Red List criteria by mid 2015. Of these, 129 were classified as Critically Endangered, 190 as Endangered and 375 as Vulnerable, meaning that 694 (13% of those assessed) are currently regarded as at risk of global extinction. Of these threatened

species, 111 are found nowhere else in the world. But for many of these species, which must be regarded as high conservation priorities, we lack even the most basic information (distribution, population size, number of populations, population trends, threats) to be able to track their current conservation status and identify the actions necessary to safeguard them in the future.

Alistair Homer

180. Montserrat Oriole *Icterus oberi*, July 2014.

Ambitious projects are currently under way to undertake Red List assessments for the endemic invertebrates of St Helena and the endemic reptiles of the Caribbean. The project in St Helena aims to assess the Red List status of all 415 of the endemic terrestrial invertebrates on the island over the next few years. The Spiky Yellow Woodlouse *Pseudolaureola atlantica* was one of 18 of these invertebrates assessed for the first time in 2015; known to occur at only a handful of isolated sites, this species has been listed as Critically Endangered. In 2016, 65% of the 52 endemic reptiles and amphibians found in the Caribbean OTs have had their conservation status assessed, with 24 species being assessed for the first time. Over 40% of the endemic reptiles and amphibians found in the Caribbean OTs are Globally Threatened.

Fighting back from the brink

The stocktake revealed that, of the 1,557 endemic species that we know of in the OTs, 22 are endemic birds, 19 of which are classified as Globally Threatened. When the stocktake was published in 2015, 11 of the 22 were assessed as Vulnerable, four as Endangered and four as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. Until recently, the most threatened OT bird species included the St Helena Plover *Charadrius sanctaehelenae* and the Montserrat Oriole *Icterus oberi*, but thanks to some extraordinary conservation efforts both of these endemics were downlisted from Critically Endangered to Vulnerable in 2016, meaning that in practice the potential for extinction in the near future has been greatly reduced. Such progress has been achieved through significant recovery and monitoring efforts by the St Helena National Trust on St Helena, the Department of Environment and the Montserrat National Trust on Montserrat, and the RSPB.

Saving the St Helena Plover

The St Helena Plover, or Wirebird, reached its highest population in over a decade in 2016, with over 500 adult birds. Owing to successful control of invasive non-native species, improved habitat management, and effective mitigation efforts to counter any negative consequences of an airport construction project, the population has increased steadily

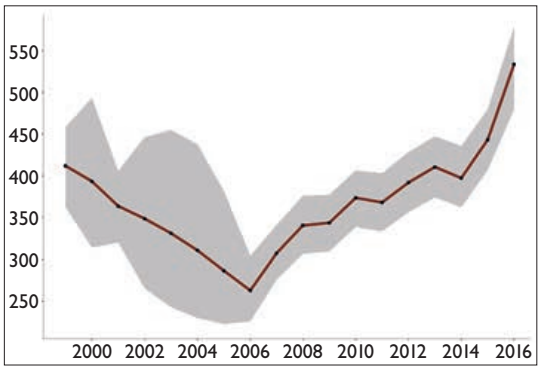

Fig. 1. Counts of adult St Helena Plovers *Charadrius sanctaehelenae* (with 95% confidence intervals) since 1999.

since 2006 (fig. 1). Although the population is increasing, the plover remains Vulnerable. You can read more in the *BB* article on St Helena (Prater 2012).

Volcanic threat: Montserrat Oriole

The Montserrat Oriole population suffered a major decline owing to intense volcanic activity between 1995 and 2003, during which two-thirds of the suitable forest habitat was completely destroyed. A reduction in volcanic activity since 2010 and improved survey efforts since 2011 indicate that the Montserrat Oriole population is slowly increasing (fig. 2). It is likely that the population size of the Montserrat Oriole will always fluctuate, because of the strong influence of rainfall on productivity and the vagaries of an active volcano, but as long as the existing forest can be fully protected the probability of extinction is fairly low over the next decade. Read more in the *BB* article on Montserrat (Oppel *et al.* 2015).

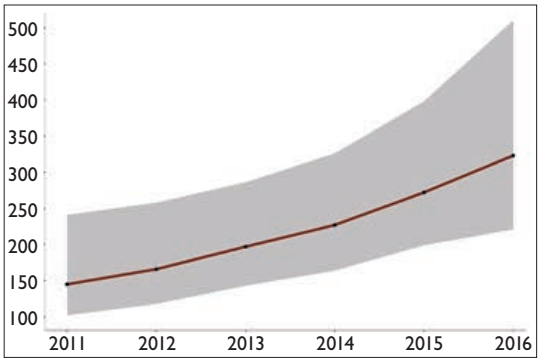

Fig. 2. The Montserrat Oriole *Icterus oberi* has increased steadily since 2011 in the Centre Hills of Montserrat.

Considering the criteria on the IUCN Red List, and the threats facing these two species, it is highly likely that they will always remain Vulnerable to extinction, owing to limited suitable habitat and the continued impact or threat of invasive non-native species on both islands.

Saving Britain's remaining Critically Endangered birds

The UK still has two remaining Critically Endangered birds in its OTs, the Tristan Albatross *Diomedea dabbenena* and the Gough Finch *Rowettia goughensis*, both found on Gough Island, part of the Tristan da Cunha group in the south Atlantic. Gough Island is a World Heritage Site and is widely considered to be one of the most important seabird islands on the planet. Sadly, non-native invasive mice were introduced in the 1800s, and these mice predate hundreds of thousands of seabird chicks each and every year. Through the Gough Island Restoration Programme, the RSPB and Tristan da Cunha Government are now raising funds for a project to eradicate the mice and give the seabirds a fighting chance of survival. Read more in the *BB* article on Tristan and Gough (Ryan 2008).

The biodiversity of the UK OTs is of growing public interest and the stocktake project has highlighted its high conservation importance. To date, the lack of current knowledge and conservation status assessments has impeded conservation efforts. Yet the recovery of both the St Helena Plover and the Montserrat Oriole highlights what can be achieved when basic knowledge of the threatened organisms is good. In a world under growing pressure to adapt to a dramatically changing climate and ever-increasing human development, knowledge of biodiversity is a crucial prerequisite to our ability to protect and preserve the vast interconnected biodiversity on the Overseas Territories, now and in the future.

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