

PREVENTING EXTINCTIONS

Azores Bullfinch
Pyrrhula murina



Azores Bullfinch (© Simon Cook/www.rarebirdyearbook.com)

Background

Azores Bullfinch is endemic to the Azores, Portugal, where it is confined to native forest in the east of the island of São Miguel. It was locally abundant in the nineteenth century, but underwent a steep decline and is now restricted to a very small range (102 km²) because of widespread clearance of native forest for forestry plantations and agriculture. The spread of alien invasive plant species, which have largely overrun the remaining patches of natural vegetation, suppress the natural fruit, seed and bud food supply of the species. Analysis of ringed birds between 2006 and 2008 gave a population estimate of 1,608 individuals.

Actions being implemented

- 1. Habitat management** is underway to improve conditions for the species. This includes: (a) creating fruit tree orchards at lower altitudes to improve food availability in the end of the winter; (b) clearing alien invasive plant species; and (c) planting native species in the core area and buffer zones. In 2009 the total area of suitable habitat free from exotic plants was extended to over 230 ha, and work in these areas is planned to continue in order to avoid the re-invasion of exotic plants and act on new threats to the SPA.
- 2. Raising public awareness** through production of a website, CD-ROM, brochures and school kits, and through collaboration with the regional Ministry of Tourism on nature trails and tourist information.
- 3. Evaluating the economic benefits** of the project and analysing the ecosystem services offered by the protected area. This showed that the project provides the equivalent of full-time employment for 25 people per year, and adds €335,000 per year to the regional GDP.
- 4. Establishing an interactive Environmental Interpretation Centre** with displays about the species, native laurel forest and the threats both face.
- 5. Research and monitoring** of the population size, distribution and habitat quality are being carried out. Although annual surveys have taken place since 2002, the first complete census took place in 2008, involving 48 volunteers surveying all suitable habitat in a single day. A 'visual recapture' scheme collating sightings of colour-ringed individuals was continued throughout 2008 and 2009 and has in establishing a population estimate, new priority areas, and further management work to be included in the revision of the management plan by 2010. Preliminary studies have been conducted in order to evaluate the influence of rodent nest predation on reproductive success, and 230 ha of native forest was monitored to ensure it remained free of invasive plants.

6. The São Miguel Natural Park, including Pico de Vara SPA, was classified in July 2008. A new project ('LIFE Sustainable Laurel Forest') was initiated in 2009 to help manage the area, aiming to increase the amount of suitable habitat for the species by restoring raised bogs and the laurel forest. A management plan for the Natural Park is due to be completed by 2010.



Removal of invasive plants in Azores Bullfinch habitat, Sao Miguel, Azores, Portugal (© Joaquim Teodósio). Invasive species overrun the remaining patches of natural vegetation, suppressing the natural fruit, seed and bud food supply of the species.

As a result of these actions

The population size and suitable range have been increasing in recent years, and both are now thought to be stable. Accurate assessment of the species range has already led to the species being downlisted from Critically Endangered to Endangered on the IUCN Red List, and should the situation continue to improve the species may be downlisted again in the future – a clear example of successful conservation action.

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