

PREVENTING EXTINCTIONS

Fiji Petrel *Pseudobulweria macgillivrayi*



Fiji Petrel (© Hadoram Shirihai)



Background

Fiji Petrel is one of the world's rarest and least-studied seabirds. It is endemic to the island of Gau in Fiji's Lomaiviti archipelago. Formerly known from a single museum specimen collected in 1855, the species' continued existence was only confirmed in 1984 when a bird was caught by Dr Dick Watling of MareqetiViti (NatureFiji). Since that time there have been fifteen further confirmed or credible records from the island, all but one involving single birds found grounded in villages, and in 2009, two pelagic chumming expeditions off Gau resulted in eleven observations of Fiji Petrels over 22 days at sea.

It is presumed that Fiji Petrels nest in earth burrows or natural cavities in the forested interior of the island, possibly alongside Collared Petrel *Pterodroma brevipes*.

The greatest current threat facing the species is thought to be introduced cats and rats, which predate nesting birds. Clearly more serious is the recent establishment of a feral pig population resulting from village pigs running wild, as pigs have been implicated in the demise of numerous seabird colonies around the world.

Despite its elusive nature, this mysterious seabird is a source of considerable pride for the Fijian people, and the species was for many years used as the emblem of the national airline (Air Fiji) as well as being depicted on the country's first \$50 banknote. The new 2012 currency will see a much larger picture of the Fiji Petrel on the \$20 banknote.

Actions being implemented

- 1. The implementation of the Fiji Petrel Recovery Plan:** ongoing. MareqetiViti has implemented a Fiji Petrel project since its establishment in mid 2007, and currently employs three full time staff and many part time field assistants on the island, all but one of them from Gau Island.
- 2. Foot searches:** Tremendous effort has gone into foot searches for nesting burrows within the 70km² of forest habitat. Searching for a nocturnal species - with fewer than 50 pairs left - that breeds underground and at an unknown time of year has been a huge challenge.
- 3. Community outreach:** The project has been working with local communities on the island to, a) gather information on threats to Fiji Petrel; b) search for nests; c) initiate feral pig control, and; d) to care for and release birds which sporadically land at night in villages.

- 4. Refining techniques:** MareqetiViti fostered a spirit of enterprise amongst local people and international experts to refine methods to find Fiji Petrel nests; most importantly, the use of the Collared Petrel as a surrogate to train islanders in petrel handling and measurement, burrow conservation monitoring and management techniques (especially cat, rat and pig control). This has led to: spotlighting techniques to land petrels; radio-telemetry to follow birds to burrows; burrow examination using a burrow-scope; improved nocturnal listening to detect Fiji Petrels.
- 5. Fielding of two specially New Zealand-trained petrel burrow detector dogs:** 'Bob' and 'Tar' were trained in New Zealand by specialist Steve Sawyer of EcoWorks. Fiji Petrel Field Manager, Eleazar O'Conner went to New Zealand for training with Steve, and MareqetiViti's second dog handler, Poasa Qalo was trained in Fiji with the Fiji Police Force Dog Unit. Steve brought the dogs to Gau and will return at six monthly intervals for reinforcement training. The dogs with their handlers have been working full time on Gau since July 2011 and have to date located two Collared petrel nests.

Momentum is gathering to find Fiji Petrel nest sites which will then enable tangible conservation management measures.



Most records of the Fiji Petrel are of grounded birds, probably disorientated by village lights (© Dick Watling/www.rarebirdyearbook.com).



Eleazar O'Conner, Fiji Petrel Officer and Poasa Qalo with their detector dogs – Bob and Tar, on the summit of Gau.
Photo: Paul Scofield/NFMV



Upland forested hills of Gau where the Fiji Petrel is believed to nest.
Photo: Paul Scofield/NFMV



Poasa Qalo with Collared Petrel chick during a monitoring visit to the community managed nesting burrow
Photo: Dick Watling/NFMV

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