

Universities invest in Seychelles Warbler research

Title Nature Seychelles (BirdLife Partner) has received a total of £40,000 to renovate the Cousin Island Field Station. The Seychelles Warbler Research Group comprising of the Universities of East Anglia and Sheffield in the UK, and the University of Groningen (the Netherlands) have invested in the station for the implementation of ongoing Seychelles warbler *Acrocephalus sechellensis* research as well as to enlarge research capacity for other species. The funds will be used to repair the facility, upgrade equipment and materials for researchers, students and volunteers and generally make for a better working environment. The Field Station was set up by BirdLife International in 1971. It has served hundreds of students and researchers since. "Cousin Island Special Reserve is a perfect model for doing scientific research. We have invested in it because it's a natural laboratory where you can do controlled research in a contained, yet very natural, wild environment", said Dr. David Richardson of the University of East Anglia who coordinates the Warbler Group. Seychelles warblers have been the subjects of intensive ongoing research by the group since 1988 and Richardson has been coming out to the Seychelles since 1997. "We have monitored the birds for many generations," Richardson says. Continuous monitoring and research has covered many aspects of the species biology. Research has shown for example how important the extended family is to Seychelles warblers just as it is to humans. Seychelles warblers often participate in what is called 'cooperative breeding' where young warblers, especially females, and grandparents help in raising offspring. Other research has looked at female infidelity in the warbler and its reasons, and there is ongoing work on genetic variability. The Warbler Group has given scientific and public talks locally and throughout the world and has published papers in leading journals on many aspects of the warblers' biology. Richardson delivered a talk on how science and conservation works hand in hand using the warbler as an example at Nature Seychelles on July 14. The Seychelles warbler story begins in the 1960's when the total world population of 26 individuals lived in a patch of mangroves on Cousin and the species was heading towards extinction. The cause of the decline was loss of habitat - Cousin was then a coconut plantation - and the introduction of rats. To save the bird, International Council for Bird Preservation (now Birdlife International) purchased Cousin for conservation. Management of the island was directed towards regenerating the indigenous vegetation and keeping Cousin rat free. This led to a spectacular recovery of warbler numbers on the island and by 1982 Cousin had reached carrying capacity. After Cousin, new populations were established on Aride and Cousine to increase the bird's population and range and improve its chances for survival. The 2001 action plan for the warbler aimed at getting populations on five islands with over 5,000 birds. Nature Seychelles undertook the fourth translocation to Denis in 2004 and the population is flourishing there. A fifth island will be added to the list by the end of the year.