Pioneering wildlife audit reveals 1500 exclusively 'British' species overseas

Title
One of the world?s smallest lizards, a ?spiky? yellow woodlouse, a blue iguana, a flightless moth, a seabird thought to be extinct for three centuries and a predatory shrimp confined to just two rockpools, are just some of the amazing 1547 species unique to the islands of the UK?s Overseas Territories, which extend from the sub-Antarctic to the tropics.

The amazing haul of native and unique species, which have been highlighted during an RSPB wildlife ?stocktake? of the UK Overseas Territories, show these Territories contain at least 1500 endemic species: those species found nowhere else on earth. Compared with the 90 endemic species in the UK, the report shows that the UK?s Overseas Territories hold more than 94% of known unique British species. Staggeringly, the scientists compiling the figures have calculated there could be another 2100 endemic species awaiting discovery by science, as there are still many gaps in the understanding of the wildlife of the Territories.

Some of the species and habitats present on the UK?s Overseas Territories are found nowhere else on earth. Information from the better-understood wildlife groups, such as birds, reveals the severe conservation pressures faced by the wildlife on these islands, including habitat destruction, climate change and attacks from non-native species. The purpose of the report by BirdLife's UK Partner, which was funded by the UK Government's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, was to obtain a broad overview of the wildlife known to occur on each of the island Territories, including unique, native and non-native species. A further step will now be to assess the risk of extinction for these species.

Mark Simmonds MP is the UK Minister responsible for the UK Overseas Territories. In a foreword to the report, he said, ?Some of the species and habitats present on the UK?s Overseas Territories are found nowhere else on earth. This Government is proud of such rich and unique natural heritage and recognises that many of these environmental assets would be irreplaceable if lost.?

Dr Tim Stowe is the RSPB?s International Director. Commenting on the report, he said, ?Our report shows that not only are the UK?s Overseas Territories wildlife jewels, but also they hold some of most globally important UK wildlife. This report reminds us that these species are solely the UK?s responsibility, and we need to ensure that the investment in conservation in the territories rises to a level that is proportionate to their world importance.?

Worryingly, only 9% of the species known to be unique to the UK Overseas Territories have ever had their conservation status assessed. The RSPB?s Jonathan Hall said, ?Because there has been no assessment of the majority of these unique British species, we have no idea how they are faring: they could be thriving, or hurtling off a cliff. We simply don?t know, but we urgently need to find out." The RSPB is reminding Defra, which has wildlife conservation responsibility for the Territories, to establish a scientific plan to assess the status of the 91% of the Territories' unique species whose fortunes are unknown.

Rarest
Most of the rarest known British species occur in the UK Overseas Territories, including: Wilkin?s Bunting *Neospiza wilkinsi*, the rarest bird, with around 80 pairs, on Tristan da Cunha (S Atlantic); the Arlihau, the rarest known plant, of which only six individuals are known on Pitcairn Island (Pacific); the Ascension Island (mid Atlantic) predatory shrimp, the rarest marine invertebrate, confined to two rock pools; and the spiky yellow woodlouse, the rarest land-loving invertebrate, with only around 90 individuals on St Helena (mid Atlantic).

The report, the UK?s wildlife overseas, looked at the 11 UK territories that are oceanic islands or island groups.