

Beck's pulls in at the petrel station

Title A BirdLife International survey in southern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, has encountered the largest single aggregation of Critically Endangered Beck's Petrel *Pseudobulweria becki*, ever recorded. Upwards of 100 birds were estimated to be present at one location, with a single count recording 58 birds. For a seabird species lost to science for 79 years until its rediscovery in 2007 these vital new data offer a glimmer of hope. "There was huge excitement from everyone involved as the first bird banked past our small boat. That turned into amazement as we counted more and more across the horizon", said Jez Bird, the project leader from BirdLife International. "These findings give us momentum, and some important clues to take the conservation of Beck's Petrel forward." Until recently, Beck's Petrel was only known from two specimens: a female taken at sea east of New Ireland, Papua New Guinea in 1928, and a male taken in the Solomon Islands in 1929. Its rediscovery in July and August 2007, was made when an expedition encountered the species on seven days and at at-least four localities off New Ireland. Beck's Petrel is listed as Critically Endangered by BirdLife on behalf of the IUCN Red List because it is thought to have a global population of fewer than 250 mature individuals that is believed to be declining. The principal aim of this recent survey was to gather clues as to the likely whereabouts of the species' breeding grounds which are yet to be located. Petrels as a group face numerous threats, both at sea and when they come to land to breed. Arguably the most significant comes from introduced mammalian predators which predate adults and chicks in their nesting burrows. "Identifying exactly where Beck's Petrel is breeding is an essential precursor to assessing impacts that threats are having on the species, and implementing targeted conservation actions to address them", said Jez Bird. One important feature of the survey is that it didn't use "chum" to attract the birds. The earlier rediscovery of Beck's Petrel and subsequent sightings have used this mix of fish discards and fish oil to concentrate birds from the surrounding area. It's an extremely effective attractant but as a result it can yield a biased impression of a species' true abundance in an area. "To see so many Beck's Petrels without the stimulus of chum is unprecedented", noted Jez. "Typically these birds are solitary at sea and are encountered far offshore. A gathering like this, so close to land, while not definitive, strongly indicates that they are breeding nearby". As well as actively searching for the birds, the survey involved numerous consultations with local coastal communities. Petrels were and are frequently harvested in the Pacific, and fear of their eerie night-time calls often lead villages to establish taboo areas in the forest where entry is prohibited. Intriguingly no-one locally knew Beck's Petrel when presented with pictures and there was no knowledge of any nesting areas locally. This, and the apparent abundance of certain petrel predators like wild pigs in coastal and foothill forest suggests they are most likely to be breeding in montane areas, consistent with what is already known of similar species. The concentration of birds encountered in this survey was seen at the mouth of a large bay, sitting directly below New Ireland's highest

peak (at over 2,000 m), Mt Agil. The bay offers the shortest straight line distance to the summit. A focus of future work will be to spot-light at night for birds returning to nesting burrows on the mountain, a technique that has proven effective in surveying threatened petrels elsewhere. ?This is fantastic news for this Critically Endangered species. Hopefully further surveys will be able to build on these results and confirm the location and size of breeding colonies, which will enable us to begin targeted conservation action?, said Andy Symes, BirdLife?s Global Species Programme Officer. This survey, kindly supported by the Mohammed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund and the Global Greengrants Fund have responded to those priorities, implementing key research actions for this Critically Endangered species as part of the BirdLife [Preventing Extinctions Programme](#). It represents BirdLife?s first project in Papua New Guinea, working alongside local conservation organisation Ailan Awareness. If you would like to make a donation that will help BirdLife International prevent extinctions [please follow this link](#). To find out more about how you or your company can become a BirdLife Species Champion please email species.champions@birdlife.org.
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