Title

The 20th confirmed grounding of a Critically Endangered Fiji Petrel occurred on the 13th of November 2012 when a bird was grounded by a fluorescent light in the school compound at Nukuloa primary school, Gau Island, Fiji. Petrel groundings in villages occur only rarely as a result, it is believed, of their being dazzled by lights. The petrel's grounding was heard by two young school boys who quickly took it to Eli (Eleazar) O'Connor, the Fiji NatureFiji-MareqetiViti (NFMV) petrel project manager on Gau. Because very little is known of the species, grounded Fiji petrels provide important information on the biology of the bird which contribute to its conservation.

The 20th Fiji Petrel was perhaps the most important of all the groundings, as it provided two highly significant bits of information. First, it proved to be the first unequivocal fledgling Fiji Petrel, one that had just left the burrow and was on its first flight. This gives us a confirmed timing for the breeding season of this species, enabling us to concentrate our searches at a time when we know the bird is present on the island. Until now this was a subject of endless discussion and hypothesis. But Eli discovered something else of equal importance – he became the first person in the world to hear and record the call of the Fiji Petrel. After careful examination, measurement, banding and photography, Eli placed the petrel in a carton in a secluded spot to rest it before its release. As he commonly does after a stressful day, Eli picked up his guitar and strummed some chords. To his amazement, he was immediately answered by the Fiji Petrel in its carton. Not believing what he heard, he tried it again, and sure enough there was an answer. And a very strange call it is too! He was able to use the project recording equipment and the first call of the Fiji Petrel is now available for the scientists of the world – a great achievement. Asked to describe the call, Eli could only think of "tuning an old radio" or not unlike R2-D2 of StarWars fame! Certainly nothing like the Collared Petrel calls we commonly hear in the season on Gau.

Fledgling Fiji Petrel released into an artificial nest box to make its own flight away (Photo: Eli O'Connor)

The recording of the call is a breakthrough for the project as it can now be used in the project's outdoor petrel call playback sound system which has been set up on the hills of Gau above Nukuloa to attract petrels to nest in artificial nest boxes in an area made safe from predators. This technique has been implemented successfully in Australia and New Zealand to conserve several endangered petrel populations by attracting them to areas free of predators and NFMV is trialling it on Gau to attract the Fiji Petrel, the Collared Petrel and the Polynesian Storm Petrel (the latter having been seen offshore Gau). All three are globally threatened species. High

resolution photographs and measurements of the Fiji petrel were taken by Eli to confirm the age of the bird and hence the breeding season of the species. Which is vital for searches using NFMV's specially New Zealand trained petrel sniffer dogs. After the species was processed and revealed its call, it was given a band and safely released into an artificial nest box previously set-up on one of the peaks on Gau on the 14th of November 2012. It then departed safely under the cover of darkness. We hope it will return to that nest box.