

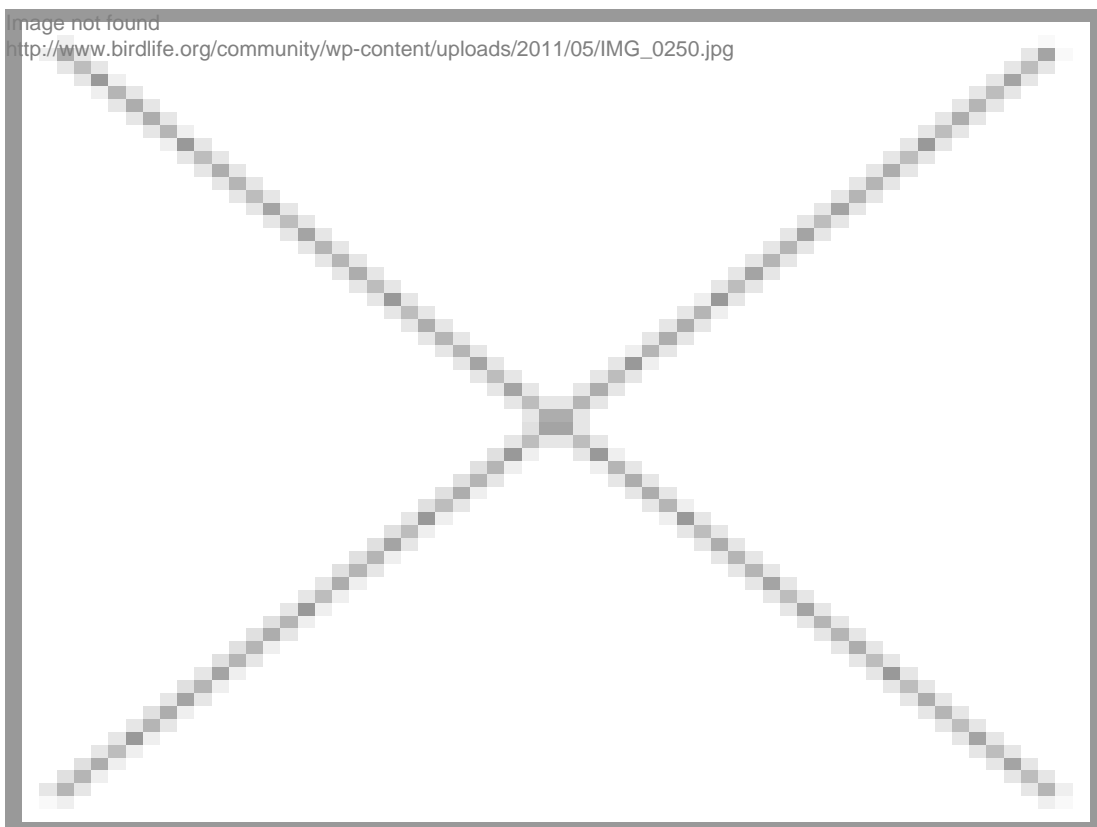
Keeping islands rat-free for pacific birds and people ? with Elenoa Seniloli

Title ?Lying in my tent at night, I could hear rat-traps snapping shut all around me?, said Elenoa Seniloli - Conservation Officer BirdLife International Fiji Programme. Many Pacific islands are alive with rats which are thriving on seabird eggs and chicks, driving many species towards extinction. BirdLife in the Pacific is undertaking a ground-breaking programme with local communities to rid the islands of these invasive predators for the benefit of birds, biodiversity and people. The Pacific region spreads over more than 38 million square kilometres of ocean ? an area three times larger than mainland China or the United States of America. Less than 2% of this vast region is dry land; land holding a rather sobering biodiversity record. It has more threatened bird species per unit of land area than any other region in the world. An important reason for this is that Pacific birds have evolved on tiny islands in isolation from predators, and therefore have few defences against them. Invasive predators - such as rats and cats - have been spread widely across the Pacific by man and are one of the greatest drivers of biodiversity loss. Globally, they have been implicated in almost half of all bird extinctions in the past five centuries. ?Particularly susceptible are ground-nesting seabirds; their eggs and chicks are easy pickings for a hungry rat?, said Ms Seniloli. Species such as Lesser Frigatebird *Fregata ariel*, Black Noddy *Anous minutus* and Brown Booby *Sula leucogaster* face a barrage of attacks at their breeding colonies. Tackling this threat, the BirdLife Pacific Partnership is involved in an expanding and successful programme of invasive species eradications to save the islands for seabirds, wildlife and local people.



Pacific rats predate bird eggs in huge numbers.

The first step is to identify the most vital islands for seabirds - Important Bird Areas (IBAs) ? and to assess the threats posed by invasive species. IBAs are sites selected from international criteria defined by BirdLife and represent the world?s most important locations for birds. This list of Pacific IBAs serves to prioritise the eradication action which follows. This action started in 2006 on the small Fijian island of Vatuira, an IBA for several seabird species including 28,000 breeding pairs of Black Noddies *Anous minutus*. By working in partnership with the Nagilogilo Clan of Vatuira, BirdLife staff successfully eradicated Pacific Rats by adapting techniques developed in New Zealand. Poison baits ? safe to all species except rats on Vatuira ? were laid down during two visits in July 2006. Remarkably, the rats found most of the baits in the first night alone, and, just 18 months later, the island was officially declared free from rats. ?The results were quick to see, with ground-nesting seabirds - such as Bridled Tern *Sterna anaethetus* and Black-naped Tern *Sterna sumatrana* - raising chicks on Vatuira for the first time?, Ms Seniloli said. It is now hoped that these species, and others, will establish significant populations on the island. The benefits to local people were immediate. ?No longer do they sleep in fear of rats eating their food ? or worse still, their toes - at night?. The Nagilogilo Clan are now exploring low impact ecotourism opportunities on Vatuira, and BirdLife staff have trained community members in rat eradication, seabird identification and methods for preventing the re-establishment of rats and other introduced species. Local guides are now educating visitors about the importance of stopping rats from returning and how the islands have benefitted from the eradication work.



Loading a helicopter with baits to remove rats from islands in Fiji. (Credit: Steve Cranwell)

Following on from the early success on Vatuira, BirdLife staff have already replicated their eradication work on a total of 16 islands across Fiji, French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Palau. Working with BirdLife Partners - Société d'Ornithologie de Polynésie MANU, Société Calédonienne d'Ornithologie, the Palau Conservation Society and the BirdLife Fiji Programme - this joint conservation action has successfully eradicated rats from 12 islands, creating 255 ha of predator-free island habitat, while protecting breeding colonies for 15 species of seabird and many other native life forms including uncommon and threatened landbirds, reptiles, invertebrates and plants. With the vast majority of seabird colonies across the region under attack from at least one invasive species, BirdLife's eradication work continues to expand and preparations are underway to restore an additional 16 important seabird islands, through; the removal of rodents, feral goats, cats and rabbits, which, will result in secure habitat for up to 30 seabird species in the same four countries (Fiji, French Polynesia, New Caledonia and Palau) and are being managed by the respective BirdLife Partners. Additional islands are also being assessed for seabirds, introduced predators and restoration need in the Cook Islands, working with our BirdLife Partner, the Te Ipukarea Society. The eradications and surveys are proposed to take place in 2011. In addition, these BirdLife Partners will continue to monitor seabird and biological responses to the removal of predators. They will work with local communities and government agencies towards the long-term security of restored seabird islands, notably through the establishment of effective island biosecurity and quarantine controls. BirdLife's invasive species eradication work in the Pacific is a hugely important contribution to seabird and biodiversity conservation in the region; it is an example of how conservation intervention really works. The BirdLife Seabird Island Restoration programme is chiefly supported by the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, the Darwin Initiative and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund. Numerous other donors, governments and regional invasive species experts and agencies have also provided invaluable assistance in making the island restoration programme possible.