

Searching for Pacific Petrels

Title

Until recently, Beck's Petrel *Pseudobulweria becki* 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.

After a long gap of nearly 80 years it was only definitively re-recorded when, in July and August 2007, 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 which is believed to be declining.

The greatest problem for conservationists is that its breeding grounds have never been located (nor even searched for) so very little is known about the ecology of or threats to this species. The BirdLife International Pacific Secretariat, supported by the Mohammed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund and the Global Greengrants Fund is launching a new project under its Preventing Extinctions Programme seeking to unravel this mystery.

This project will raise awareness and gain local knowledge of the Beck's Petrel on New Ireland to focus the first terrestrial searches for breeding sites. "The road to recovery for threatened petrels in the Pacific is a long one", said Jez Bird, the project co-ordinator. "We're excited to be taking the first steps down that road with our project partners Ailan Awareness." Ailan Awareness have been working in community conservation on New Ireland for many years and are ideally placed to support this project. "Pacific peoples have a long association with petrels through mythology born out of their unearthly habits, and directly through harvesting. Tapping into this local knowledge is key to the success of this work", added Jez.

The at-sea searches that rediscovered this species in 2007, and subsequent observations by birdwatchers, strongly suggest that the mountainous forests of New Ireland in Papua New Guinea could be of major importance for the species. Inference from other Globally Threatened Pacific petrels – like Vanutu, Tahiti, and Magenta Petrel - suggests that Beck's probably nests on the ground or in burrows on densely forested montane slopes. Specifically, the most likely areas - and therefore the highest priorities for targeted searches - are the remote Mt Gilaut and the Hans Meyer Range in southern New Ireland.

The petrels are a challenging group to study on land, not just because of the terrain these birds inhabit but because they generally only return to land after dark. Petrels occasionally crash-land in villages attracted by lights at night. This affinity for lights provides an opportunity for researchers who are able to attract birds to spotlights with the help of playback of their eerie nocturnal calls.

“Because petrels make such unusual calls at night, often likened to babies crying, local people frequently declare taboo areas out of reverence to spirits. We hope to inform future searches by learning about any taboo areas or sites where harvesting still takes place”, explained Jez.

A number of pioneering projects, especially in New Zealand and Fiji – By the BirdLife Fiji Programme and NatureFiji-MareqtiViti have developed innovative approaches to petrel conservation and the role of local communities in delivering successful results. “We’re hoping to fast-track this process with new projects on Beck’s Petrel and Collared Petrel”, said Mark O’Brien, BirdLife’s Senior Technical Advisor.

“We now have a sound understanding of what works, but a great deal of support is still needed to continue making conservation gains for these threatened species”. Click to find out more about the [BirdLife Preventing Extinctions Programme](#) and how you can help.

Subscribe to The BirdLife Pacific [Quarterly E-Newsletter](#)