Suwarrow Blog 14 - Breeding season peaks as a moonlit feline stowaway appears

Title

The latest blog from wildlife filmmaker Nick Hayward as he joins a team from BirdLife and Te Ipukarea Society (BirdLife in the Cook Islands) eradicating rats from Suwarrow – a seabird mecca in the South Pacific. Today the crew are gathering seabird survey results, watching out for ominous rainclouds and wondering at the provenance of the newest resident to emerge from the shadows.

"Anchorage has been baited. We have been waiting for a forecast of clear weather but it seems that a pattern of isolated showers has settled in. The perfect forecast is just not going to come. With the Vaka (traditional boat) on its way we now have to take a gamble that the big showers will miss us as they have been doing since Saturday. The Vaka's return is to be delayed to fit in the second application for Anchorage, leaving only a tiny weather window. This will also mean 10 extra people on the island. With our clean fresh drinking water all gone we are starting to use up the available resources. Luckily there are large amounts of stored water which needs to be boiled before drinking. Motu Tou is also still awaiting its second bait application. The weather has certainly been the biggest obstacle to this project. We are watching each batch of storm clouds with trepidation hoping they will miss us. Fingers crossed that our luck holds. While we have been waiting for the clear weather the seabird survey has been in full swing. Virtually the whole eastern seaboard has been surveyed as this contains most of the Motu. Greater and Lesser Frigatebirds are at the peak of their breeding and virtually all are on eggs. Red-tailed Tropicbirds are also breeding in abundance, a few with large chicks. The Tropicbirds have a very engaging mating display. Forming into small gaggles they take turn to hover above the crowd, flapping their wings frantically then diving downwards. The gaggle has a little circuit starting at one end of the Motu and finishing at the other as they call enthusiastically. It was a bit disappointing to not see any breeding Sooty Tern. With reports of over 100,000 breeding on Suwarrow, it would have been a magnificent wildlife spectacle. It may be too early in the season. The White Tern are in the mood for breeding, however, and are laying their eggs in the wooded Motu on bare branches with no nest. Our first two yachts to arrive are now anchored out in the lagoon. Last night we had another visitor with the appearance of the infamous Suwarrow cat lurking in the shadows.

The cat first appeared in the roof of former resident and author Tom Neale's old house. There is a cryptic sign with an arrow pointing to the roof that reads: "Do not disturb moon". We now think this might refer to the cat whose name would then be Moon. Harry first saw the cat last year on a Wednesday so he calls it Wednesday. Moon is more apt as it lurks in the moonlight. The cat, whatever it's name, is probably the reason for the low density of rats on Anchorage".
Nick Hayward – Suwarrow Atoll, Cook Islands.

*** You can follow Nick's posts by subscribing to emails at http://birdlife-pacific.wildiaries.com/ or through BirdLife's Facebook and Twitter pages. **The BirdLife Invasive Alien Species Programme urgently needs your support to tackle more sites and save more species. To support our work and make a donation today, please go to www.justgiving.com/BirdLife-invasive-species where every penny counts. Thank you.**
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The expedition to remove rats from Suwarrow National Park is a joint project between BirdLife International, Te Ipukarea Society (BirdLife Partner in the Cook Islands) and the Cook Island National Environment Service. The project is being kindly supported by the European Community, David and Lucile Packard Foundation, SPREP, GEF and Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, and forms part of the BirdLife Invasive Alien Species Programme which is tackling this greatest of threats to wildlife around the world. BirdLife wishes to thank the efforts of many who are supporting the programme including Pacific Invasive Initiative, Pacific Invasive Learning Network, New Zealand Department of Conservation the University of the South Pacific, Landcare Research New Zealand, Island Conservation, Wildiaries and Nick Hayward.