

Suwarrow Blog Ten ? The enemy emerges and coconut-crushing ?robber crabs? entertain

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 take a well-earned break and spy their furry quarry. *"We have all now seen our protagonist: the Pacific Rat. We travelled across the lagoon to begin the track cutting on Motu Tou and there they were scurrying about in broad daylight. By nightfall they were out in full force, but they are not alone on Motu Tou. They share the little landform with a large number of coconut crabs. These crabs use their powerful pincers to rip open coconuts and can grow up to be lobster-sized. There come in two colours, blue and red; the reds are in the minority. The crabs are messy eaters; dropping flakes of coconut meat the rats dash in to pick up. It's like a scene from 'War of the Worlds'; small little mammals rushing around the large mechanical-like crabs. The crabs move at a slow pace, too slow to threaten the rats. Among themselves they fight with vigour over the coconuts. The outcome is always the same - the largest crab gets the prize and drags the coconut away to feast in peace.*

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 The crabs fight with vigour over the coconuts.

We camped a night on Motu Tou among the coconut crushers. I placed my trailcam out to film the rats but discovered it had disappeared in the morning. Searching frantically, we found it had been abandoned under a tree. The footage revealed no rats - only the camera being dragged away by an errant coconut crab. They certainly live up to their moniker of 'robber crabs'. Very close to Motu Tou are small motu. Above these two reef islets we could see some Red-tailed Tropicbirds and frigatebirds. We only spied a couple of Red-footed Boobies breeding on Motu Tou. The expectation is that once the rats are removed the number of breeding seabirds will increase.

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 A Red-tailed Tropicbird on Suwarrow.

Our first trip across the lagoon we saw large flocks of feeding boobies, with frigatebirds soaring above. As we approached Motu Tou, large coral outcrops threatened our navigation. Thankfully, Suwarrow's lagoon is luckily crystal clear, so it's easy to see and avoid them. Our transport over the lagoon is on the caretakers' dinghy with the 25 horse power motor straining under the weight of the team and our equipment. Today, it's Sunday on Anchorage and we began the day with a church service. Ian presented the sermon and everybody contributed with a reading from the bible, prayers and a hymn accompanied by the guitar. After the service we all proceeded to the beach to raise the Cook Island flag to the words of the Cook Island national anthem. The flag will stay flying till the national park closes in November. Sunday's rest has been invaluable; half the team were falling asleep on the boat ride home following Saturday's massive efforts. It's hard work cutting tracks - we are only half way through Motu Tou. There's plenty of tough chopping left as we are behind schedule due to the late departure of the Southern Cross. Steve has trapped his first rat on Anchorage today, a big Pacific Rat. Seeing them up close, strikes home the importance of completing our mission successfully". Nick Hayward – Motu Tou, Suwarrow Atoll, Cook Islands. 5th May 2013. 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.** [JG_donate_visa_button](#)

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The expedition to remove rats from Suwarrow National Park is a joint http://www.birdlife.org/community/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/JG_donate_visa_button.gif 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.