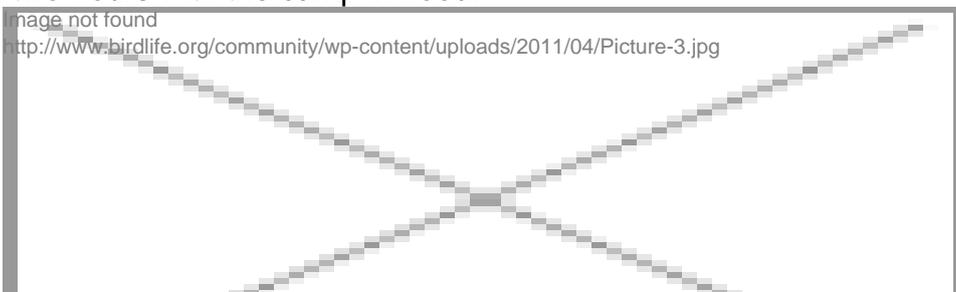
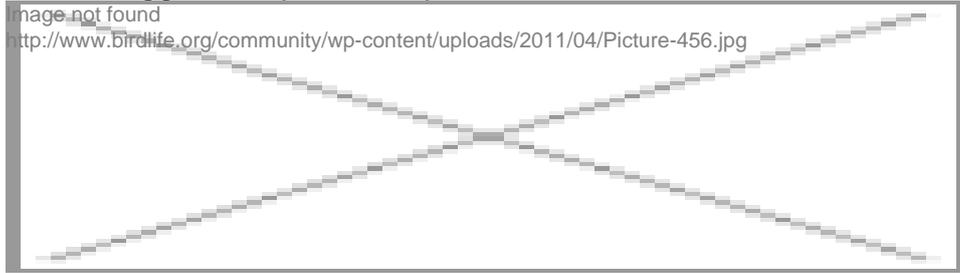


When we were up we were up...

Title Three staff in the BirdLife Pacific Secretariat recently returned from a two week trip to Kadavu, Fiji in search of the Collared Petrel. Jez Bird (Pacific marine Important Bird Area Coordinator) here recounts some of the adventures he had with Mark O'Brien (Senior Technical Advisor) and Mere Tabudravu (Conservation Assistant) during early April 2011. Petrels in the tropical Pacific are amongst the most poorly known and highly threatened species in the region. These charismatic and long-lived seabirds present a real challenge to conservationists, returning to land after dark and yielding only tantalising glimpses at sea their habits and distributions remain something of a mystery. This becomes a real concern when we factor in that these species prefer to nest at altitude on steep-sided, forested islands where they and their eggs/chicks are typically prey to invasive mammals like rats, cats and pigs. Fiji is a well known tourist Mecca but how many seabirds make the annual pilgrimage here to breed is less certain and recent surveys have thrown up a number of seabird surprises. The enigmatic **Fiji Petrel** (Critically Endangered) remains a phantom, **seen at sea in recent years** but proving elusive to conservationists working with **NatueFiji-MareqetiViti** to track down their breeding grounds on the island of Gau. So, with many unknowns left to tackle it was with some excitement that we headed to Nabukelevu (Mt Washington), a peak at the south-west tip of Kadavu, Fiji's fourth largest island. BirdLife has been working at this site, an Important Bird Area, in conjunction with the **Nabukelevu Site Support Group** composed of volunteer members from local communities at the foot of the mountain. It's home to all **four of Kadavu's endemic birds** - these gems have amazingly evolved in site of Fiji's largest island somehow managing to keep themselves separate and never bridging the gap. Nabukelevu is also the source of the only record of **White-throated Storm-petrel** (Endangered) in Fiji from 1876. Nevertheless, our sense of anticipation wondering whether we were about to uncover new jewels in Fiji's crown soon turned to dread as the team battled up an 800 m mudslide carrying the kitchen sink to the top of the mountain. We all eat a lot during fieldwork, right? Wrong! I over-catered. And who new 800 m up could feel so far? Next time someone tells you to carry your backpack, a briefcase full of equipment and a 20 litre tub of Jacob's cream crackers up a hill just say no. Put to shame by Joe Drau and Anare Bosse of the Site Support Group we eventually reached the summit and established camp for four nights **spot-lighting petrels** after dark. Or so we thought. Someone had other ideas as on dusk the heavens opened, and rarely closed for the next four days. The first evening attempting to attract any petrels unfortunate enough to have ventured out on 7th April was aborted after two hours with the camp in flood.



A waterlogged camp at the top of Nabukelevu



While we were aiming to attract petrels to our night-light on day 1 we only managed to coax in moths - but what crackers!

Day 2 dawned clear and bright; and then I awoke from my dream. In fact we were shrouded in mist and struggled to see our hands in front of our faces for much of the day. Confined to our tents the weather deteriorated further until the camp was buffeted by strong winds, lashing rain and frequent bursts of lightning. Finally though, at around 9pm things began to improve and we managed to set up our fluorescent tube and begin playback. Standing beside Mark at 10.15pm I heard the unmistakable moan of a **Collared Petrel** beyond us in the dark. Mark on the other hand didn't, and this tantalising encounter was followed by silence until we finally both heard the same moan and low purring of a bird flying overhead. In all, twenty separate calls were heard during the evening probably relating to 2-3 individuals including a bird buzzing us in the spotlight on several passes overhead. Click to listen to [Collared Petrel](#) call (Courtesy of Dick Watling). The relief was palpable, the conservation status of Collared Petrel is being reviewed by BirdLife on behalf of the IUCN Red List in 2011 and the threats to this species globally (especially from invasive species) are a real concern. NatureFiji-MareqetiViti have been researching the species on Gau as part of their ongoing programme of work directed at Fiji Petrel, and work is continuing to clarify the taxonomic relationships and status of [different populations](#). Ours is the **first confirmed record** of the species from Kadavu and follows anecdotal reports of petrel chicks brought into villages by dogs. To have an additional confirmed population in Fiji to begin work with to gain a better understanding of their status and the threats they are facing represents a great opportunity and one that we will work towards with Nabukelevu Site Support Group. On day 3 we finally managed to dry out, but as Mark went from bad to better my health took a nose dive. As he switched the lights on in the evening I lay in a cold sweat in my tent. This lasted all of half an hour until I was roused by the cry "Oh wow! We've got one Jez?". As I scrambled to layer up Mark was busily extracting a Collared Petrel from the mist net we'd erected. This whole trip had been designed as a pilot project and knowing that it's possible to catch birds paves the way for beginning to understand their ecology and demographics. It was a thrill to see Joe and Anare's reaction too - suddenly BirdLife's regional focus on tackling invasive species fell into place and the prospects for working further with the community are growing. The "war whoops" we'd been uttering at the night to attract in petrels became congratulatory whoops and shaken hands.

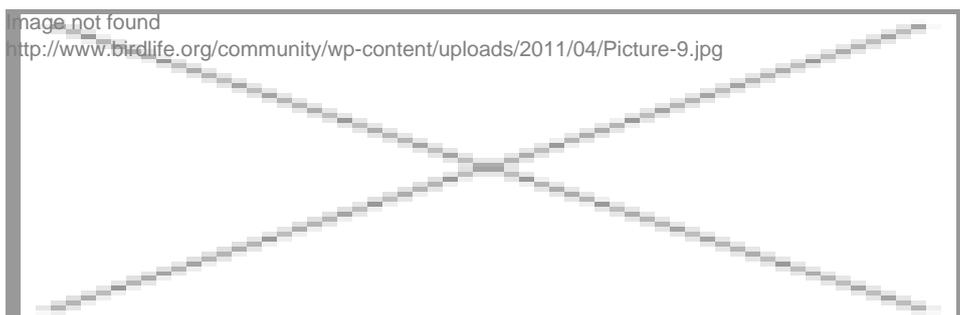


A bird in the hand!



Joe Drau, Nabukelevu Site Support Group Chairman was integral to the whole operation.

Our final attempt to attract birds on 10th April was a complete washout but while tents, clothes and sleeping bags were dampened, spirits were not. The trip was a success paving the way for upscaling our involvement in Collared Petrel in the future. We estimated 10-15 Collared Petrels had been encountered during this flying visit, indicative we believe, of a significant population inhabiting the site. **Next steps** are to secure funding to increase spot-lighting efforts to build up a marked population from which numbers at the site can be estimated and any other rarer species can be detected, radio-tag birds on Nabukelevu to help locate nesting burrows and then study breeding success and threats, particularly the impact of invasive species. We're hoping to build relationships between the BirdLife Fiji Programme and NatureFiji-MareqetiViti to share knowledge between staff, and to work within local communities to raise awareness about this unique site. After a week of ups and downs our take home message was that another step has been taken down a long road towards improving the conservation status of many rare and threatened petrels in Fiji and the wider region.



Rain hampered efforts throughout the week but when the clouds parted briefly the views of Kadavu were memorable.

Acknowledgements - *the BirdLife Pacific Secretariat and BirdLife Fiji Programme would like to thank members of Nabukelevu Site Support Group for their continuing engagement in environmental action and education within the IBA, and also to the Crowder Messersmith Conservation Fund - Audubon Naturalist Society, the Craig S. Harrison Conservation Fund - Pacific Seabird Group, and the BirdLife International Global Seabird Programme for generously supporting this venture.*