seychelles islands foundation

Newsletter

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Ring-necked parakeet monitoring update

The ring-necked parakeet eradication team continues to monitor Mahé for any sightings of wild ring-necked parakeets or kato ver (*Psittacula krameri*). Over the last four weeks, the team has visited many different locations, contacted nearly 50 people and reached out to the public through various media outlets. The team has followed up on a total of nine public reports and is happy to state that so far no ring-necked parakeets have been sighted or heard in the areas visited.

Jessica and Jennifer in the field © SIF

Jessica and Julio have been in the field every day searching previous ring-necked parakeet habitat for any remaining birds. The main places visited were the west, south and south-east coast of Mahé. Placed at strategic viewpoints and in previous known flight lines, the team monitors at dawn from 6am to 10am and in the evening between 3pm and 6.30pm. During these observation sessions, Jessica and Julio also readily engage with surrounding community inquiring about any recent sightings of ring-necked parakeets.

In addition, the team reached out to general public for information. A nation-wide public campaign on the project was undertaken via several media outlets including TV adverts and interviews, radio adverts, information posters placed at several key community locations and on SIF's social media networks. Nine reports have been made by the public and have been followed-up by the team with a visit to the reported locations. No ring-necked parakeets have been sighted in these areas.

Julio searching for any sign of a ring-necked parakeet © SIF

The last known wild ring-necked parakeet on Mahé was culled by the eradication team in August 2017 (see August 2017 newsletter). These surveys are crucial to evaluate the eradication of wild ring-necked parakeets in Seychelles which began in 2013. SIF is offering a bounty award to all who can help with sighting of the bird. The bounty awards for a **parakeet sighting which is confirmed by the eradication team is SCR 1000**, and **SCR 5000 for a confirmed sighting which then leads to a cull by the team**.

The team would like to extend their appreciation to everyone who has reached out, cooperated and assisted with the monitoring. If you have

any information on recent sightings of ring-necked parakeets please contact the team on **2523623**. It is important that you do not attempt to catch or approach any remaining ring-necked parakeets. Kindly take note of what the bird is doing and the date, time and place, and then call SIF. In addition it will also assist us if you can confirm the last time you have seen a ring-necked parakeet in your area.

Understanding scientific nomenclature: The coco de mer and Aldabra lily

Many people know plants only by their common or 'vernacular' names, but their two-part scientific, or Latin names, often have interesting stories behind them.

Coco de mer nuts © SIF

Lodoicea maldivica (as in Maldives) is the scientific name of the well-known coco de mer, which is endemic to the islands of Praslin and Curieuse. So how did it come to have a species name that belies its true origin? The misleading name originated long ago, when Seychelles' islands were still uninhabited. In centuries past, many coco de mer nuts that had become hollow and dry after the germination process ended up in the sea where they were carried away eastwards by prevailing sea currents. In this way some drifted to the Maldives and washed up on beaches. When the species was first formally described in 1791 it was placed in the same genus as the coconut we eat, *Cocos*, with the species name *maldivica* in recognition of its presumed origins. As the distinctiveness of the plant became better known it was placed in a new genus all on its own to reflect this, *Lodoicea* (still related to coconuts). Of course it was eventually realised that the coco de mer grows only in Seychelles, however under the International Code of Nomenclature for plants (the set of rules and guidelines dealing with formal botanical names), the first publication of a name for a taxon is preserved, so *L. maldivica,* however strange, is here to stay.

The Aldabra lily © Adam Mitchell

Common names can be misleading too, as a well-known plant of Aldabra demonstrates. The Aldabra lily (zannanan moro in Creole) is a distinctive succulent with long, thick fleshy leaves. It produces a tall flower spike that for a brief period is covered in fiery red cylindrical flowers, making it highly conspicuous in the landscape. It was first described as *Lomatophyllum aldabrense*, placing it in the lily family Liliaceae, which once contained a wide variety of plants not limited to what most people might consider the typical lilies. The species name reflected its distribution, then thought to be limited to the Aldabra island group (including Assomption and Astove), and it became known as the 'Aldabra lily'. However, more recent work by plant taxonomists showed that the species was more closely allied with a group of succulents known as 'aloes'. It was moved out of the lily family and its scientific name was changed to *Aloe aldabrensis*. Furthermore the species has also been found to exist on Mayotte

so is therefore not endemic to the Aldabra Group after all. Neither is it is lily, as its English name suggests, or a type of pineapple, as the Creole name implies! Nevertheless, while scientific names sometimes change in respect to research developments, common names have no obligation to be scientifically accurate, so like so many common names that stick, it may be that we're keeping the 'Aldabra lily'…

International Year of the Reef *Coral News*: A look into the past

Champignon islet © Anna Koester

Aldabra's lagoon is well known for its characteristic champignon islets – these limestone formations that were shaped by the tidal currents actually originate from reef building hard corals. Just as with the rest of Aldabra's characteristic limestone geology, these champignon islets provide an interesting look into the past of the atoll. Some 20 million years ago, the atoll was formed by corals growing as a ring around a volcano. Since then Aldabra has been submerged and re-emerged multiple times due to changes in sea level, but whenever submerged, coral reefs continued to grow. Aldabra's last emergence was about 125.000 years ago and the legacy of ancient coral reefs is still very visible. Fossilized giant clams and the beautiful patterns of coral skeletons can be observed all around and provide a fascinating look into the past. Check back in next month for another special coral feature about Aldabra's lagoon and its present beauty!

SIF Vacancies

We have several vacancies at the head office on Mahé, in the Vallée de Mai and at Aldabra which need to be filled urgently. The deadline for applications is the 31st August. Details can be found on our website at http://www.sif.sc/jobs or contact HR on 432 17 35 if you are interested in any of the following positions:

Mahé

- Senior Accountant/Financial Controller
- Accounts Technician
- IT and Database Development Officer

Aldabra:

- Tourism Coordinator
- Shopkeeper

Vallée de Mai:

- Visitor Centre Service Coordinator
- Visitor Attendant
- Security Officer
- Fieldworker

Vallée de Mai news

Black parrot national census reveals good news

The results are in for the Praslin black parrot population estimate. After four months of challenging and interesting field work, the black parrot census team conducted an analysis of the data this month. The Seychelles black parrot population on Praslin was estimated to be 1382 (1096–1742) individuals. This is significantly higher than the previous estimate done in 2010-2011 which estimated a range of 520-900 individuals. However this difference does not necessarily mean that the population has increased because the new estimate is not comparable to the one done in 2010-2011; black parrot behaviour, and especially vocalisations, differs substantially between breeding and non-breeding seasons. This year's survey was done after the breeding season, and therefore the census was more effective at identifying the birds, since none of them were occupied with parental care, like incubation. The results from this year will now serve as a baseline for future studies. The results bode well for the species; the relatively high estimated population size shows that the black parrot population is established within the given habitats on the island of Praslin.

Black parrots observed during the census © SIF

Although the primary goal of the census was to estimate the number of black parrots on Praslin, the survey team also included three other species and population estimates have been done for these as well. The three other species were the Seychelles blue pigeon, estimated at 7360 (5498–9854), Seychelles bulbul, at 37,616 (28,380–49,858) and Indian mynas, at 6671 (5448–8169). These numbers are comparable to the 2011 estimates and allow comparison of population size over time. The invasive Indian myna was found to increase two-fold and to have encroached inland since the last survey seven and a half years ago.

The team enjoyed exploring Praslin during the census © SIF

Despite the black parrot population showing seemingly stable numbers it remains vulnerable to invasive species, diseases or major catastrophic events. Rigorous monitoring will be continued by the SIF team to enable us to manage threats to the species. To give breeding black parrots the best chance of success invasive species control methods, trialled by the Inva'Ziles over the last year, will be implemented in the Vallée de Mai. This will involve a mixture of wide scale rat trapping ahead of the breeding season and concentrated trapping around active nesting cavities during the season. Our Vallée de Mai research team remains committed to protecting Seychelles' national bird.

Terence takes advantage of a good observation point © SIF

Inva'Ziles project concludes in the Vallée de Mai

It is with much satisfaction for the team that the Inva'Ziles project was successfully closed

– though the impact of the project is just beginning! Over the last year Inva'Ziles has trialled and then honed many new and novel methods for controlling invasive alien species, the lessons learned and methods developed are being integrated into the existing work of the Vallée de Mai research team. Over the last 14 months much has been achieved, with a significant reduction in the presence of guava and coco-plum in the firebreak around the boundary of Vallée de Mai; the success of reducing rat density around black parrot nests and the trialling of some slightly odd methods to control yellow crazy ants. Much of the work undertaken is new to the Vallée de Mai and in some cases, even to Seychelles.

Applying grease on cling wrap around a tree © SIF

Using a combination of Vallée de Mai staff and the children of various eco-groups, the removal of new seedlings of coco-plum and guava will continue; staff will monitor and continue to ensure the yellow crazy ant bait stations are working; wide-scale rat trapping in the Vallée de Mai will commence before the black parrot nesting season; and additional research into new methods for controlling other problem invasive alien plant species will also be undertaken. The next few months and years will be an exciting time for SIF as the fruits of this labour will begin to show. Invasive alien species are one of the most significant threats to biodiversity, and being at the forefront of managing these threats is paramount to the preservation of such special sites like the Vallée de Mai.

Research and Inva'Ziles teams removing philodendron © SIF

For the staff of the Inva'Ziles project it has been an incredible experience and privilege to work in such a fantastic location with SIF and they are very sad to leave. The Seychelles hosts a great diversity of fauna and flora and the research and work SIF is undertaking, such as the Inva'Ziles project, is fundamental to ensuring this amazing archipelago remains for future generations to enjoy.

A rat caught on a camera trap © SIF

Raffles Hotel plants palms!

The Vallée de Mai education and outreach team has a very good working relationship with several environmentally minded hotels on Praslin; Raffles Hotel is one such establishment. The team periodically gives educational presentations to the hotel staff and guests. After conducting a

presentation on the Seychelles black parrot at Raffles Hotel recently, Ms Salwa Razzouk, the hotel manager expressed an interest in making the resort compound more black parrot friendly. Having learned about this endangered bird, and desirous of helping to protect it, she suggested introducing some plants that parrots feed on to the area.

Ms Razzouk, Mr Dugasse and Ms Brioche planting a latannyen fey © SIF

Subsequently SIF and Raffles collaborated to conduct tree planting at the hotel on the 4th July. Endemic palms were planted in the resort compound; the palms selected were four different species: latannyen lat, latannyen fey, latannyen milpat and palmiste. Ms Razzouk, the Raffles assistant director of engineering Mr Ralph Dugasse and Ms Maria Brioche the SIF education and outreach officer had the pleasure of planting a latannyen fey palm together. The remaining plants were planted by the resort field staff and SIF field worker. All of those involved were thrilled to be able to help transform Raffles into a site which attracts more black parrots.

The satisfied group after the planting © SIF

SIF is hoping to conduct many more planting activities at the resort, the next of which will be held on the 23rd August, this time joined by the enthusiastic participants of the August holiday camp!

aldabra atoll

Aldabra station gets spruced up

Seychelles' climate is characterised by the two wind seasons – the North-West monsoon and South-East monsoon. The two seasons are marked by different weather (wind speed and direction, amount of rainfall, air and water temperature) but are also very different for staff members who reside at Aldabra. The North-West (October to April) is a time when the sea is generally very calm therefore allowing the safe passage of staff, tourists and visiting researchers to and from the atoll. The atoll also receives a lot of rainfall at this time, which supports a higher number of staff. During the South-East (May to September), all of that changes, wind slams the atoll from the south-east and the seas become very rough.

With the change in the season comes a change in focus on the atoll. The research team continues with long-term monitoring, report

Renovations with a view! © SIF

writing, and focusing on targeted projects, as well as preparing for the upcoming busy North-West. However with no visiting researchers or other visitors, the logistics team is able to dedicate time towards maintenance. The isolation which has allowed the atoll to thrive also makes simple tasks like fixing toilets, roofs and floors incredibly difficult. Supplies are mainly sent to Aldabra during the North-West, so all renovations and maintenance must be carefully planned out well before the last transport of the North-West (usually in April).

The new spruced up research block © SIF

This year maintenance has been done on boat engines including a complete makeover of Lee Cat (one of the most commonly used boats for the outward reef) and the desalinator. All toilets in the accommodation block have been replaced, house renovations have been completed, and the research block deck has had a facelift. The six person logistics team tackling these jobs include: a mechanic/engineer, logistics assistant, shopkeeper/ranger, and two skippers led by the island manager. The work is incredibly important for the Aldabra station, as well as keeping everyone comfortable at the station, boats are the lifeline of the atoll and the desalinator is used if something goes wrong with the stored rainwater. The maintenance work carried out during the South-East is what ensures the research station to continue to operate, so thank you to everyone who helps keep the station running!

There she blows - the whales are back!

It's that time of the year again when humpback whales pass Aldabra as they migrate thousands of kilometres northwards from their home in the Antarctic in search of warmer waters. The first was seen as it surfaced to catch a breath on 11th July, and we've now seen over 20. There is still time for more groups to be seen as the season usually ends in September/October. In 2017, which was one of the most well-documented seasons for humpback whale sightings, the first whale was seen 14th July, so this year, it seems they are right on time.

Humpback leaping from the water © SIF

Once you know what you are looking for they can be easy to spot and identify. Often you will see a cloud of misty spray 'blow' as they surface (this clears any residual water that may be around their 'blow hole'). Once they have taken in a deep breath, they are identifiable by their uniquely shaped dorsal fin and tail that breaks the water surface. If you're lucky enough to be in the water as they pass by their long white pectoral fins and iconic shape gives them away.

Most of the time they just pass through, but occasionally we are extra lucky and get a real treat; either seeing a calf following its parent or an individual leaping effortlessly out of the water - sometimes showing as much as two thirds of their body before they land on their side. For individuals that can be as long as 16 metres and weigh as much as 30 metric tonnes, this is something truly amazing and can make even the most seasoned whale spotter stop and stare. We very much hope that this season Aldabra will not witness a beaching as happened last year.

Tail breaking the water surface © SIF

La Gigi clean-up

The outside coastline of Aldabra is not the only place that is being affected by marine pollution. In July, the staff on Aldabra noticed plastic and other items washed ashore on the trail that runs next to the channel on Picard. This means that with the help of high tides and strong winds man-made waste is making its way into the lagoon through the channels. The first clean-up of this area was organised in July, with more waste collected in the vegetation on either side of the trail than on the beach. Items collected included many plastic bottles, flip flops, ropes, small pieces of plastic, lighters, tooth brushes and a big plastic tarp. In total 61 kg of waste was collected in a very small area.

If large amounts of man-made waste continue to enter the lagoon it could potentially impact the nesting sites of sea birds on the islets and in the mangroves. During the last frigatebird census (January/ February 2018), the team came across a red footed booby that had died after getting its foot entangled in fishing line. The frigatebird breeding colonies are found in the mangroves within the lagoon, and these areas are also shared with breeding and roosting red footed boobies. The beaches within the lagoon are also the main area for nesting hawksbill turtles. Marine debris in the lagoon will also impact terrestrial environments when it makes its way onto shore, Aldabra's iconic tortoises have been observed eating plastic.

Waste becomes trapped in coastal vegetation © SIF

The SIF team on Aldabra are trying their best to collect as much marine debris as possible, however the large amount of accumulated waste in inaccessible areas reminds us how important the Aldabra Clean-Up Project will be in tackling this problem. We hope that this will serve as a reminder to all of our supporters to continue to manage your waste properly and to strive to reduce the amount of non-biodegradable waste produced. If you would like to support the Aldabra Clean-Up Project directly you can do so https://queens.hubbub.net/p/AldabraProject/.

Waste washes up on the sides of the channel © SIF

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