

Seychelles

NATION



DOMESTIC

Island Conservation Society celebrates World Migratory Bird Day 2021 | 11 May 2021



Broad-billed Roller at Farquhar: birds migrate from Madagascar to Africa and occasionally take a stopover in the outer islands (Annabelle Cupidon)

World Migratory Bird Day celebrated on May 8 is dedicated to raising awareness of migratory birds and the need for international cooperation to conserve them.

Every year, billions of migratory birds undertake remarkable journeys between their breeding and non-breeding sites. Triggered by the seasonal variations in daylight and temperature, they set off on their epic journeys, including across the featureless expanse of the Indian Ocean. Birds use magnetite-based receptors above their nostrils to detect the Earth's magnetic field as a compass for navigation or the sun and the stars, retaining maps in their minds to repeat the feat in subsequent seasons.

More than three-quarters of the 278 bird species recorded in Seychelles are migrants that do not breed here. They come from as far afield as the Arctic and the Antarctic, some as wind-blown vagrants and some pinpointing small islands in the middle of the Indian Ocean in consecutive years. They migrate to maximise their chances of survival, driven by the availability of food. The outer islands of Seychelles in particular attract a remarkable number of species. Thanks to the presence of Island Conservation Society (ICS) at several islands, we are learning more about them each year.

Small islands pull in migrants seeking refuge. The shallow lagoons of the outer islands are rich feeding grounds for seabirds and shorebirds. Land birds appear in trees, where they hunt for insects from perches adjacent the short grass of island airstrips. More than a thousand Crab Plovers (Kavalye) may be seen at St François, one of the greatest non-breeding concentrations of the species. The Whimbrel (Korbizo) is also common and very obvious, because of its size and its long curved bill. Then there are huge numbers of Turnstones (Bezros) with their harlequin plumage, patiently probing the mud alongside Bar-tailed Godwits (Barge rousse), the world record holder for non-stop flight. Some godwits migrate from Alaska to New Zealand: eight days non-stop and more than 11,000 kilometres! By comparison, St François is a short hop for birds using the Eurasian land bridge.

Since ICS opened its centre at Alphonse, several species have been recorded for the first time in Seychelles. A Sociable Lapwing (Vano Sosyab) which spent a season feeding in the short grass adjacent the runway was a first record for the entire southern hemisphere. Tiny warblers sometimes turn up, including the first Chiffchaff (Timerl Sifsaf) for Seychelles at Alphonse and the first Eurasian Reed Warbler (Timerl Lanmar Lerop) at St François.

Since the opening of the ICS centre at Farquhar, there have been more discoveries. Colourful Broad-billed Rollers (Rolye Malgas) seen several times. This is perhaps not so surprising for a species that breeds in Madagascar just 200km distant, from where they migrate to Africa annually. More surprising was the sighting by conservation officers Matthew Morgan and Annabelle Cupidon of two Senegal Lapwing (Vano Senegal) happily feeding at the coconut plantation, the first record for the Indian Ocean.

Even many of the breeding species of Seychelles are migrants, such as the Sooty Tern (Golet), which spends most of the year on the wing, never even alighting on the surface of the ocean, travelling as far as Australia before returning perhaps to Farquhar or Cosmoledo or some other Seychelles colony. Yellow Bitterns (Makak Zonn) that breed in the granitic islands probably arrived here as migrants from Asia and indeed the species has been recorded by ICS as visiting Desroches.

Mysteries remain. How do you explain the Buff-breasted Sandpiper (Bekaso Pwatin Rouye) that breeds mainly in Arctic Canada and migrates to Argentina, turning up at Alphonse? No one knows for sure, but in some species, birds may get their compass direction confused and begin their migration 180° the wrong way. If this happens close to the North Pole maybe by the time the error is corrected, the bird is already heading south on the wrong side of the globe, possibly more or less in line with Seychelles. There is still a great deal that we don't know. What we know for certain is that non-breeding sites are as vital for birds as breeding sites. The outer islands are remarkable refuges for these maestros of migration and ICS is at the forefront of new discoveries.

Adrian Skerrett



Amur Falcon at Desroches: birds migrate from northeast Asia to Africa, a few passing through Seychelles each year (Adrian Skerrett)



Whimbrel: A migrant from the Arctic that passes the northern winter in Seychelles, with the largest recorded numbers at St François Atoll (Adrian Skerrett)



Senegal Lapwing: The first sighting of this species for the whole of the Indian Ocean was by ICS conservation officers at Farquhar (Matthew Morgan)