

New bird species' identity confirmed - 04.02.2013

Tony Jupiter, Aurélie Duhec & Richard Jeanne

Experts have confirmed the identity of two new species of birds discovered last year by Island Conservation Society (ICS) staff on the outer islands.

The first of these new species was found by Tony Jupiter at the IDC (Islands Development Company) village on Desroches on March 10, 2012. While walking through the village, Tony spotted a rather lost looking water bird. At first, Tony thought this might be an Allen's Gallinule (or Poulble Allen in Creole). This is a rare visitor to Seychelles although Tony had previously seen one when working at Aldabra. Another possibility was thought to be a Moorhen or Pouldo. The Pouldo is a common bird in the granitic islands to be found on every marsh or freshwater pool, often betraying its presence from within thick vegetation with an explosive squawk. Ringed birds from Cousine have been known to turn up on Praslin and the species has within the last few years crossed open ocean to reach Bird Island where it now breeds. So it seemed a distinct possibility one might turn up in the outer islands one day. Photographs were sent to SBRC (Seychelles Birds Record Committee) who identified the bird as neither Pouldo nor Poulble Allen. Remarkably, it was a Lesser Moorhen, an African species never previously recorded in Seychelles.

The Lesser Moorhen is found throughout sub-Saharan Africa wherever there is suitable wetland habitat. Birds move with the seasons but do not normally venture over sea water and are completely absent from Madagascar. However, young birds are more prone to wander than adults and the bird found on Desroches was in juvenile plumage. Remarkably, this is not just a first record for Seychelles but the world's most easterly record for this species.



Lesser Moorhen at Desroches (Tony Jupiter)

To the south of Desroches, ICS operates another conservation centre at Alphonse. Here, on October 29, 2012, Conservation Officer Aurélie Duhec was on an early morning routine turtle patrol. While counting birds roosting at Point Dot, she spotted an unusual wader in among the more familiar ones, Sanderling (Bekaso Blan). She checked the book "Birds of Seychelles" and decided it must be either a Great Knot (Gran Bekaso), recorded just a few times in Seychelles or perhaps a Red Knot (Bekaso Sann) which has never been recorded -- both are indeed very similar when non in breeding-plumage. Again, photographs were sent to SBRC, who confirmed this was indeed another first record for Seychelles, a Red Knot.

Red Knot breeds very far from Seychelles, from Arctic North America to the shores of Siberia. However, like many other more familiar visitors to Seychelles, it travels huge distances to escape the northern winter, reaching as far south as the coast of Africa. Its English name comes from the red plumage of its face and chest during the breeding season, but at other times the plumage is more anonymous.



Red Knot at Alphonse (Aurélie Duhec)

This is the first time a species new to Seychelles has been discovered at Desroches, though other extreme rarities have been found from time to time. However, Alphonse has achieved this distinction several times since 2007 when ICS first based full time staff on the island.