

First Breeding Record of Tropical Shearwater in Amirantes



Posted by James Russell of University of Auckland in Explorers Journal on October 26, 2015

Just before leaving the Seychelles I had the opportunity to visit Desroches, a sandy coral atoll cay in the outer islands – very different to the inner granitic islands. Desroches is managed by Island Development Company (IDC) and contains a 5-star hotel and a conservation center and team from the Island Conservation Society (ICS). The hotel has just changed ownership and so the opportunity to explore new island conservation initiatives had arisen. We take a 50 minute flight from Mahé and before long sight the sparkling atolls of the Amirantes group below us as we touch down on the runway.



Approaching Desroches (Photo by James Russell)

Desroches was first discovered in the 1770s but not properly colonised until the 1870s. Scientists did not arrive until even later in 1882 and one of the first pieces of work from the legendary David Stoddart was published in Coral Atoll Research Bulletin in 1970, while the island was still a part of British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) and copra plantation. In 2007 a new major hotel was developed reflecting the changing economic opportunities in the Seychelles. We are met by the ICS conservation officer Pep Nogues Vera who has been on the island for nearly 2 years and has only one week left before he moves to Alphonse further south. Pep eagerly shows us around explaining the current status of conservation on the island.



The surrounding sandy cay beach of Desroches (Photo by James Russell)

As dusk falls we are keen to visit the wedge-tailed shearwater (*Puffinus pacificus*) colony, which like on St Anne were only found recently. As we count occupied burrows a different call emanates from one of the burrows – a tropical shearwater (*Puffinus bailloni*)! I frantically try to call the bird to the entrance to its burrow so we can confirm with a picture, and sure enough, Pep captures the bird perfectly incubating its egg. Gérard Rocamora confirms this is the first breeding record of tropical shearwaters not just for the island, but for the entire Amirantes group! For the twitchers, tropical shearwaters were previously considered synonymous with Audubon's shearwaters (*Puffinus lherminieri*), but have recently been split creating the new species.



First confirmation of tropical shearwater breeding in the Amirantes (Photo by Pep Nogues Vera)

The following morning we process a dozen black rats (*Rattus rattus*) also captured the night before, measuring their size and reproductive condition, and taking genetic samples. That the shearwaters have established in the presence of rats is surprising, but they have probably benefited from local control of rats around the hotel complex at the western end of the island. At only 324 hectares eradication of rats from Desroches is logical, and would be a great initiative for the new hotel owners to take in order to grow tourism and restoration on the island. Until then, ongoing control of rats around both the eastern and western points of the island would guarantee the longevity of these shearwater colonies, one of the few native bird species on the island. A great find to finish my visit to the Seychelles and just in time for the World Seabird Conference. Thanks to IDC and ICS for the opportunity to visit the island.