

# A DAY THE LIFE OF...

*Gail Fordham*

## Life on the outer islands

The islands of the Seychelles archipelago are scattered over one million km<sup>2</sup> of the Indian Ocean. In this week's A Day in the life of..., we speak to 28-year-old conservationist Gail Fordham about her experience living and working on Alphonse, one of the most remote islands of the Seychelles, some 400 km south-west of Mahé.

by A. Edmond

**Gail, where are you from and how did you end up in Seychelles?**

I am originally from the UK and I am currently working as conservation officer for the Alphonse group. I came to work here as I felt like it was a great opportunity to be involved in the conservation management of these protected areas. We have so much incredible wildlife and for me in terms of my career. It was an opportunity to oversee and monitor endangered species and be able to provide environmental advice to other partners of the island and to do some special research projects as well. I have been working here for two years and three months, but I have actually been on the island without going home for 18 months. The pandemic has altered my travel plans so I have been here a little bit longer than anticipated.

**Seychellois are not truly aware of what it means to live on the outer islands or even get the chance to experience it. Can you describe it?**

To actually live and work here, you have to give up a certain amount of freedom. For example, you can't just make a phone call, you can't cook yourself a meal and you can't just get in your car and decide that you're going to drive off somewhere. But at the same time there are many opportunities and wonderful adventures. There is time to feel closer to nature, and wonderful friendships you can make that would be unlike any other. This is

because moving somewhere so remote removes people out of their comfort zone and I find that you can meet some really interesting people in the outer islands. I suppose the work time balance can be challenging because your colleagues are your friends and also become your family, so you have to be able to draw the line between your work and your personal life, and you have to be very self-motivated.

**What are your favourite things about Alphonse Island?**

Alphonse Island itself is dissected into two parts by the runway; on one half you have the hotel and the other half of the island is mostly coconut plantation. The end of the runway is such a beautiful spot to go see the sunset.

We have a colony of wedge tailed shearwaters, you can go down to the beach every evening and watch them flying in, dive in the sea to catch fish and squid, and then fly back to the forest during the night time to feed their chicks. That's something really special, anyone who works on Alphonse Island, no matter what their job is, can go down and experience this amazing wildlife.

Personally, my favourite place is St. François, which is the largest island in the Alphonse group and it's totally untouched. There are no invasive species, such as rats or cats, it has had no human habitation for so many years and it is one of the most stunning places to visit.

**How would you describe a typical day on the island?**

In reality, daily life on the outer is-



'My favourite place is St. François Island' said Gail

lands can be very routine. For me, a typical day might involve checking seabirds' nests to check the status of their breeding or collecting data on the beaches on coastal erosion. If we're having bad weather, then I would normally spend the day in the office managing our various databases. But of course, everybody on the island has a completely different type of job, I work in conservation but we have many

**Do you not get bored living on an isolated island far from family and friends? Don't you feel like you're missing out on a lot of things back home?**

Definitely, there are days where you just want to escape, because you're sacrificing time with your loved ones. This feeling comes and goes, and it's just one of those things that is a part of the life of ev-



Alphonse ICS team carrying out fisheries research fieldwork

other roles, we have a hotel on the island so we have gardeners and chefs, there are all sorts of different people here. Nevertheless, we are all brought together by the daily schedule of meals at the staff canteen. This is quite a nice time for the island's residents especially tea time at 4pm; it is a moment when everyone gets together and catches up on the day's events.

everyone living here whether they are Seychellois or foreigners, everybody is still spending a great deal of time away from their family and we're all in the same boat. Spending a lot of time away from the convenience of the modern world gives you a greater appreciation for some things, like a decent internet connection and being able to go to the supermarket and choose what you want to eat;



Gail Tagging Hawksbill turtle

these are things I will never take for granted again.

At the same time, there are so many experiences to be gained from the outer islands, things that you couldn't even dream of if you lived in the city or if you didn't have the opportunity to come out here, so any moment shared with friends in such a beautiful ecosystem like this one are memories for life. I recommend anyone who has ever considered applying for a post out here to just go for it. This kind of life is not for everyone but your never know until you try it.

**Does spending more time on the island, far from the urban world, make you feel more in tune with nature and have stronger sense of well-being?**

I feel lucky to have been able to spend so much time outdoors over the last year, given how many people throughout the world have been stuck inside with lockdowns. One of the best ways that we bring all the community together on Alphonse is through sports days, where everyone participates in something from a triathlon to an egg-and-spoon race or even a timed coconut de-husking. Football or volleyball are regularly played and many enjoy jogging or kayaking to keep fit.

Just the fact of being here on the island we're always conscious of the weather and the sea conditions, because it kind of affects everybody's work here. Being in tune with the elements and getting to experience the most stunning world landscapes gives you an amazing sense of well-being and the wildlife you

can encounter here is like nothing else. Alphonse has actually been identified as a hotspot for unusual migratory birds; there is always something exciting to see. Whether you're somebody who gets to go diving for their job or you work indoors all day, you can still go outside during your free time and get to experience nature. It is those unexpected encounters with wildlife that makes it worthwhile, where your breath is just taken away, nothing else can replace that.

**Do you have any advice for our readers, particularly for aspiring conservationists?**

The outer islands are such an incredible place to experience conservation. You can be more interested in marine conservation but at the same time you can also be involved with terrestrial conservation and different methodologies as well; it is the ideal place to learn about different elements of conservation before you start to specialise. So I'd encourage anyone who is thinking about a career in conservation to try to get a hold of a post on the outer islands.

We actually have quite a few interesting projects that we're running here that people might find interesting. For example, there's the citizen science programme to involve all the visitors on the island with photo identification of reef manta rays to understand their population dynamics. We are also running a project looking into the movement of the giant trevally which is one of the most recreationally targeted fish species.



Collecting data on the health of the coral reefs



ICS team