

EDEN Project

WORDS BY ANTHONY HAM

Once the land of the dodo, before human settlers wiped them out, Mauritius has become a conservation success story, with abundant wildlife living in reserves beyond its paradise beaches and honeymoon resorts

The story of wild Mauritius is one of paradise very nearly lost.

When European sailors first arrived on the island late in the 16th century, they came upon an Indian Ocean idyll, a land devoid of people, clothed in dense forests and rich in wildlife. There to greet them as they made landfall was not a tribe of troublesome indigenous inhabitants but a plump, flightless and rather tasty bird so tame as to waddle up to the sailors to investigate. Within a mere three decades, this bird – the dodo, as it would become known – was extinct. Thereafter, Mauritius was marked as the place of the dodo, the starting point and most enduring symbol for all extinctions to follow.

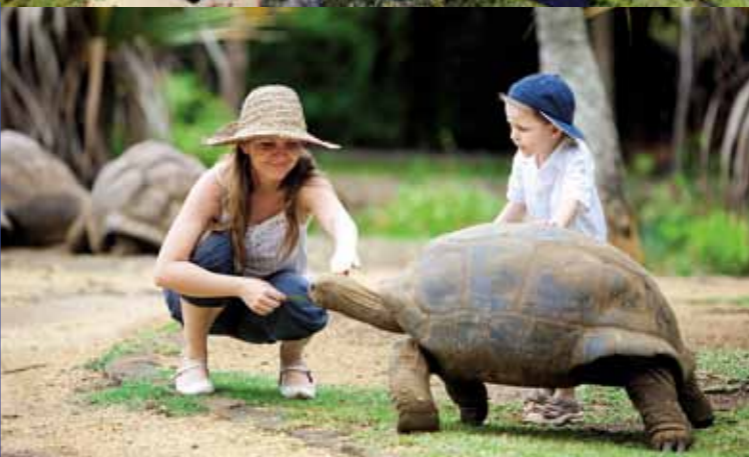
Even so, for centuries, Mauritius remained a veritable Galapagos of abundance, even down to the giant tortoises that once plodded across the island. In 1691, the French settler François Leguat wrote of Rodrigues, an island 600km north-west of Mauritius, that ‘there are so many tortoises on this island, sometimes there are groups of two or three thousand, so that one can take more than a hundred steps on their shells without touching the ground.’

Centuries later, when Mark Twain visited the island, he would quote an islander saying: ‘Mauritius was made first, and then heaven, and that heaven was copied after Mauritius’.

But by then it was a very human version of paradise, one in which forests had disappeared under the weight of human settlement and the island’s last remaining species had dwindled until very few were left.

BY THE 1970s AND 1980s, the steady decline of Mauritian bird species reached its nadir. In 1974, just four Mauritius kestrels survived in the wild. A decade later, there were a mere 12 pink pigeons and only between eight and 12 echo parakeets.

In such precision lay a tragic reality – when it is possible to count an endangered species’ last remaining individuals accurately, it is unlikely to be long for this world. Mauritius ➤



Mauritian Wildlife Foundation

THE CONSERVATION BODY RESPONSIBLE FOR RESTORING THE ISLAND’S PRECIOUS HABITATS

Founded in 1984 at the height of the modern Mauritius’ extinction crisis, the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (MWF; www.mauritian-wildlife.org) oversees many of the programmes that have become such an important part of Mauritius’ conservation story. It oversaw the formation of the Grand Montagne Nature Reserve on Rodrigues and is solely responsible for the research and implementation of conservation measures taking place on Île aux Aigrettes. So successful has the restoration of the latter ecosystem proved to be that there is little room left for population growth for some species. As a consequence, the MWF has well-advanced plans to introduce the pink pigeon, as well as the echo parakeet, into the Vallée de Ferney, a privately run reserve that will one day rival Black River Gorges National Park and Île aux Aigrettes as an epicentre of Mauritian conservation.

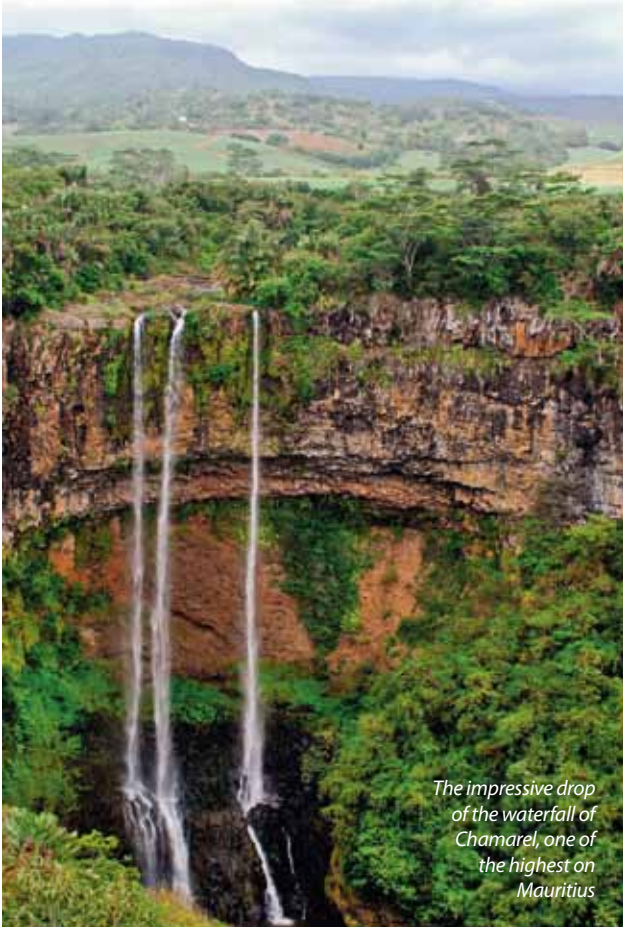
With most of the signature species on a positive trajectory, MWF is working to restore habitats by replacing foreign with native plant species – the Rodrigues MWF office in particular has a large nursery of endangered native plant species. MWF is also looking to grow the islands’ ecotourism potential, both on the main island and on Rodrigues, and other outlying islands. And MWF officers are present at the visitor centres of Black River Gorges National Park. They accept visitors wishing for day-long volunteer programmes, and their website is excellent.



Clockwise from top: the turquoise waters and dense coastal forests of Île aux Cerfs; a breeding programme for giant tortoises from the Seychelles has restored populations on Mauritius; long-tailed macaques are common in the Black Gorges National Park; diving is popular in the summer months

TOP 5 SIGNATURE SPECIES

The Mauritian specialities to put on your check list



The impressive drop of the waterfall of Chamarel, one of the highest on Mauritius

was once again, symbolically at least, the land of the dodo.

Then, everything changed. Thanks to a series of emergency conservation measures, instead of becoming extinct, every one of these species survived. One academic study in 2007 found that Mauritius had saved more bird species from the brink of extinction (five) than had any other country.

The ground zero of this remarkable tale of conservation success is Île aux Aigrettes, a low-lying isle off Mauritius' southeastern coast which lies within sight of the sleepy regional centre of Mahebourg.

In 1985, the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation took out a lease on Île aux Aigrettes, turned it into a 26-hectare nature reserve and cleared the island of feral cats, rats and most non-native plant species. Then, using the remnants of a 400-year-old ebony forest as their starting point, they set about repopulating the island with native plants. These in turn provided predator-free habitat for those bird species under the greatest threat.

To step ashore today on Île aux Aigrettes, an 800m motorboat ride from Point Jerome, south of Mahébourg, is akin to stepping back to the dawn of the human presence on Mauritius, to the scenes that greeted those first European sailors and settlers more than four centuries ago. There may be no dodos, but more than 20 giant Aldabra or Seychelles tortoises now inhabit the island, among the few semi-wild populations of the Indian Ocean's last giant tortoise species. Also present in numbers are some of the most endangered bird species on the planet, including 50 of the remaining 400 pink pigeons, around 35 olive whiteeyes out of just 100 pairs left in existence and 150 Mauritian fodys (out of 400).

Back on the mainland, close to Vieux Grand Port where Dutch sailors first landed in 1598, Lion Mountain is prime ➤

1



MAURITIUS KESTREL

The only remaining bird of prey on Mauritius and once considered the rarest bird in the world, this elegant, medium-sized kestrel has a white breast, chestnut head and dark markings. It feeds mainly on geckos, agamid lizards and small birds. Breeding pairs have been helped by specially constructed nest boxes.

PINK PIGEON

This pretty mid-size pigeon has a pale pink body, brown wings and a rust-coloured tail. Aside from the pigeons on Île aux Aigrettes, there are five further subpopulations around the Black River Gorges NP. They feed on flowers, leaves and fruit, and all known individuals are ringed to monitor their movements.



2

3



ECHO PARAKEET

The echo parakeet is the sole survivor of the six parrot species that once inhabited Mauritius. The female has an all-black bill and the male a pinkish-red bill. It is often confused with the more numerous (and introduced) Indian Ring-necked Parakeet, but has a lower pitched call, shorter tail and darker feathers.

MAURITIUS FODY

A small, forest-dwelling songbird, one of the island's prettiest species. The male has a bright red head and chest, as well as an orange rump in the breeding season; the female is olive-brown with darker wings. The Mauritius fody is endangered, unlike its near relative, the Madagascar fody, which you'll see everywhere.



4

5



ALDABRA TORTOISE

A distinct giant tortoise species from Mauritius became extinct after the arrival of humans on the island – tortoise meat was easy to keep and transport, making it ideal for sailors. The tortoises you see today belong to the Aldabra giant tortoise race from the Seychelles. They can reach a weight of 300kg.



trekking country. This sphinx-like land formation is a challenging hike – expect a few rocky and somewhat hair-raising scrambles. But the views from the lion’s ‘head’ are glorious, taking in all the drama-filled up-thrusts of the island’s interior.

Lion Mountain also happens to be a bastion for the Mauritius kestrel. From its 1974 low of just four individuals, 400 now patrol the skies, with 250 of these around Lion Mountain and the nearby private reserve of Vallée de Ferney. Having perhaps learned the lesson of the dodo, the kestrel is a secretive bird, although sightings are a real possibility during the breeding season from August to February.

The other remaining Mauritius kestrels, all 150 of them, soar above the Black River Gorges National Park. Here, too,

there is the sense of Mauritius as it once was. This is dramatic country, a vertical world of deep gorges, plunging waterfalls and the last remnants of the great forests of Mauritius. It may be all that is left and it may cover a mere two per cent of Mauritius’ land mass, but the park, in the island’s southwest, has a way of enveloping you within its embrace, closing out all views, clamour and even any sense of the island’s human population and all that goes with it.

That the park survived owes much to its former role as a hunting ground for the island’s elite – introduced wild boar, deer and macaque monkeys are common here. But stars of the show, alongside the splendid landscape, are the endangered bird species that have recolonised the park’s interior.

Trails cross the park, connecting a triangle of access points: the Pétrin Information Centre, high atop the plateau in the park’s east; the high-altitude Plaine Champagne Police Post, along the Chamarel-Pétrin road; and the Black River Gorges Visitor Centre, at sea level in the west. The pink pigeon is

commonly sighted around Pétrin, thanks to a breeding centre alongside the visitor centre. Elsewhere, the Parakeet Trail, a strenuous 8km trail from Plaine Champagne down to Black River Gorges Visitor Centre, is the best place on earth to see the Echo parakeet, a really rather lovely species of which an estimated 550 now remain.

THE PARK’S MACCHABÉE TRAIL, a taxing 10km trail, is another fine choice for traversing the park. It follows a ridgeline that affords splendid views out across the valleys, before dropping steeply down off the escarpment all the way into Black River. Dense tropical forests, beloved by locals foraging for wild berries, carpet the terrain in all directions, while white-tailed tropicbirds wheel out above a forest where

one-third of the plant species are endemic to the island. It is Mauritius’ most spectacular corner, a reminder of both what was lost and saved on this dramatic island rising up from the ocean depths.

These last remaining vestiges of wild Mauritius may evoke a poignant sense of wildlife clinging to survival in a remote corner of the ocean. But it is Rodrigues, situated far away to the north-west but administratively part of Mauritius, that truly evokes sense of a forgotten paradise somewhere close to the end of the earth. Encircled by a coral reef that resembles a turquoise halo from above as the plane drops down from the clouds, Rodrigues is a slower place, an isolated outpost of quiet civilisation yet to be claimed by tourism.

Were the island’s 40,000 inhabitants so inclined, Rodrigues would be a prime candidate for a small-scale ecotourism project, peddling remoteness and paradise in manageable quantities. Unlike the Mauritian mainland, sugar cane

“Mauritius was made first, and then heaven, and that heaven was copied after Mauritius” – Mark Twain



Far left: a hawksbill turtle in Mauritius’ clear waters. Clockwise from above: the Black River Gorges; a spinner dolphin close to the Mauritius coast; a bannerfish peeps round some bright soft coral; a grey crowned crane



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plantations are nowhere to be found, and quiet back-lanes lead to tables d'hôte, small guesthouse-restaurants serving up traditional cuisine and organic produce. Postcard-perfect beaches and coastal walking trails surround the island, at once beautiful in their own right and launching points for rarely visited snorkelling and diving spots pristinely preserved.

Atop the island's summit, the Grand Montagne Nature Reserve shelters native forests, not to mention the Rodrigues fody and Rodrigues warbler whose stories represent two of the most stunning turnarounds in the annals of conservation. In the 1970s, there were just thirty warblers. There are now four thousand. In 1968, just six pairs of the fody survived. Now eight thousand individuals inhabit the island.

AWAY TO THE WEST, close to the airport, the François Leguat Reserve is another success story, the site of an ambitious programme to plant 100,000 indigenous trees, as well as a wildly successful breeding programme for giant tortoises; hundreds now roam the grounds just as they did when the real François Leguat made his famous comment back in 1691.

Offshore from Rodrigues, 17 minor islands and lesser islets rise gently from the lagoon, within sight of waves that crash against the point where the reef meets the vastness of the Indian Ocean. Of all of these islands, Île aux Cocos stands out for its sheer beauty (untrammelled white sands, palm trees and turquoise waters) and bird populations – this is the only island in the Indian Ocean where the lesser noddy, brown noddy, fairy tern and sooty tern breed on the same island.

Along Île aux Cocos' sandy trails, it is the tameness of the lesser noddys and fairy terns in particular that will prove most memorable, for here is a birdwatching experience that is at once precious and extremely rare.

Inevitably, as you walk barefoot across this tiny Eden, it is difficult to escape the sensation that, here at least, in the land of the dodo, humankind may have learned its lesson just in time. More than that, perhaps it is time for Mauritius to shake off its reputation as the forerunner to mass human-caused extinctions, and instead be known as one of the most remarkable conservation success stories of our time.



Above: Benitiers Island, one of the hundreds of islets that surround Mauritius and provide habitat for many of its endangered species. Left: a fruit bat

TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★☆☆☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Bird Quest (www.birdquest-tours.com) offers 10-day birding trips to Mauritius, the Seychelles and Réunion that start at £4130; unusually, the itinerary includes Rodrigues.

GETTING THERE: Air Mauritius (www.airmauritius.com) operates

four direct weekly services between London-Heathrow and Mauritius. British Airways also flies direct to Mauritius from London-Gatwick twice or three times per week.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: Holders of full UK passports do not require visas to enter Mauritius and may stay for up to three months.

TIPS & WARNINGS: Cyclones are a recurring fact of life in Mauritius as

the island lies in the path of the Indian Ocean cyclone belt. December and January are the peak cyclone months, but they remain a possibility into March and even April. Direct hits on Mauritius and Rodrigues are not common but, if there's a cyclone nearby, extremely strong winds are almost certain and island-wide alerts are impossible to miss.

WHEN TO GO: High season runs from November to April. This coincides with the Mauritian summer which can

be hot and extremely humid. May to October is winter, although it's still pretty warm.

TOUR OPERATORS

BIRD QUEST TOURS,

Tel: 01254 826 317;
www.birdquest-tours.com

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL,

Tel: 01273 823 700;
www.responsibletravel.com

AUDLEY TRAVEL,

Tel: 01993 838 000;
www.audleytravel.com