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Island Restoration News:
Gough and Henderson

rspb giving nature a home

BirdLife INTERNATIONAL

Top: Relief and jubilation as the last bait is loaded (*Michelle Risi*)
Bottom: The helicopters perform a fly past as they return from their final baiting flight (*Michelle Risi*).

Baiting of Gough complete …

… but the project is far from over, with the vital work of the aviculture team reaching its climax in the coming days and weeks.

It is now over two months since the baiting operation completed on Gough: the seemingly endless rain of July (it rained 29 out of 31 days!) gave way to near perfect baiting days at the beginning of August, crucially with virtually no rain in the days immediately after the final application. The second and supplementary applications of bait were spread, a small celebration ensued and by August 11th, the baiting team was on board the S.A. *Agulhas II* beginning the journey back to Cape Town.

More detailed accounts of how the operation unfolded from Pete and the team can be found on pages 3-6. Pete, along with the rest of the New Zealand team members only managed to return home a week or so ago, such are the current challenges of travelling internationally. Thank goodness their quarantine slots back into New Zealand had been booked many months in advance, otherwise they would still be in South Africa!

While the baiting component of the Gough project has been completed, it is important to remember that it will not be until late 2023 at the earliest that we will be able to return to validate whether the operation has been successful in eradicating the mice. In the meantime, there is still much work to be done.

The aviculture aspect of the project has involved keeping a safeguard population of the two land birds, Gough moorhen and Gough bunting, in our care on the island over the course of the operation (see page 7). Indeed, the majority of the aviculture team arrived on island in early 2021, two or three months before the main baiting team. Since then, they have focussed on looking after the moorhens and buntings, and in this they have been expertly supported and advised by vets from the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. This has hardly been glamorous work, involving long hours to ensure the birds are kept in the best of health, with a fair amount of cleaning poo off mats thrown in (amongst a plethora of equally mundane but important tasks). But it is a vital part of the overall Gough Island Restoration Programme without which the eradication attempt itself would not have taken place. The dedication and professionalism of the core aviculture team (Amy King, Katie Wells, Megan Dalton and Rhiannon Gill) supported by the overwintering team (see IRN issue 7) has been outstanding; many others cleaned rocks, filled water bowls and constructed bunting perches too!

And the rewards of all their work are now becoming more tangible as first the moorhens and soon the buntings are returned to their natural, and hopefully mouse-free, environment. It will still be over two months before the aviculture work comes to a close, the infrastructure dismantled and the team on a boat back to Cape Town. They will leave behind the overwintering team who have committed to staying for a second year on Gough and will continue to monitor the fortunes of the island's species – and hopefully get to observe MacGillivray's prion chicks once again having the chance to fledge from Prion Cave.

So the Gough Island Restoration Programme is entering its final phase, when we wait to see whether we have been successful. Even discounting the two postponements, of course most notably because of Covid-19 in 2020, the scale of the operation has demanded multi-year planning and funding to get us to this point. The project has clearly resonated in its ambition with many, not least the RSPB's own membership who contributed to not one, but two of the Society's most successful Appeals ever. It has been anchored by a number of foundations that gave multi-year funding and stood with us through the delays, including the U.S.A.'s National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Packard Foundation. Thank you too to the host of individuals, other foundations and organisations who have shown such extraordinary generosity, with many contributing on multiple occasions. Without you, such work is simply not possible. Your funding has moreover been matched by a significant increase in funding from the UK Government, and its total contribution now stands at close to 40% of the overall budget. All this financial support is no less vital than the operational delivery; we just hope that we will have made you proud.

Indeed, all this gives us confidence to begin to plan for a return to Henderson (see page 9), to support other partners in their ambition (see Marion, page 8) and contemplate other challenges beyond.

Andrew Callender
Gough Island Programme Executive

The best laid plans of mice and men just require…

...adaptive management! **Pete McClelland** gives his take on the baiting operation — and shows how crucial it is to be able to respond to the conditions found on the ground.

The general methodology for undertaking an aerial baiting rodent eradication has been developed and refined over the last thirty years based on the lessons learnt from previous eradication attempts - both successes and failures - as well as developments in the relevant technology, particularly GIS and the bucket design. However due to differences between individual islands including topography, size, and isolation – which affect the logistics, non-target species, rainfall etc. – the general approach then has to be adapted for the specific conditions found on the target island.

A baiting strategy was developed for Gough which directed where the bait would be applied. While for some islands (smaller, less remote) it is possible to take much more bait than should be needed in order to cover unexpected scenarios, this was simply not possible for Gough – where neither the baiting window nor the complexities of managing unused bait would allow for overly generous contingency planning. As such, we took a set amount of contingency bait leaving only the decision on how to prioritise its use.

The baiting strategy was reviewed by international eradication practitioners and then built in to the project's Operational Plan. The strategy called for two applications over the whole of the island, which should be sufficient to target all mice, with a contingency to be used to cover situations such as unusable bait (e.g. bait that might have gone mouldy on the long journey from New Zealand), fill any possible gaps (for mice this is any area over 10m^2 which doesn't have the desired amount of bait), and then cover any areas of concern.

As is often the case when working on remote islands the plan had to be adapted once we were on the island. A major driver of this was the weather and the possibility that we wouldn't get enough suitable weather to spread all the bait – or even the real possibility that we wouldn't get one full application completed, which would have guaranteed failure. Gough is a very challenging environment in which to spread bait with frequent high winds and rain and when it's not blowing there is usually cloud covering the higher country. Best practice for aerial baiting is to not bait when the wind is stronger than 25 kts or when it's raining or is likely to rain in the near future (so it doesn't break down the bait too fast), and of course helicopters can't fly in cloud which meant prioritising the high country whenever it was clear. Given the unpredictability of the weather we took the approach that the

priority was to get one full application completed and everything after this was a bonus. Based on this, the decision was made to push the envelope for the first application and bait in sub-optimal conditions and then to tighten the criteria (allowable wind and rain) for the second drop.

As it turned out, due to good planning, a focused team, and some good luck with the weather we got the first application completed faster than expected and things were looking good. Having only started to spread bait on June 13th, by the end of the month we'd had seven days suitable for baiting and spread nearly half of the bait total. This lead to some people getting overly optimistic and predicting we'd be finished by mid July. However, the weather changed dramatically at the end of the month and we could only spread bait on two days in the whole of July. Just as quickly the weather improved again in August and we were able to spread 50 tonnes of bait in two days to finish the operation. This included applying supplementary bait on to areas of fern bush habitat in which the bait had disappeared faster than expected due to slugs eating it (see p5). The islands off-shore were also baited twice, for although it was unlikely that many of them would have had mice we couldn't take that risk.

A large part of the credit goes to the aerial team – four Kiwi pilots and two South African support crew. They made the best use of any suitable weather windows, with the main driver being to keep the helicopters spreading bait whenever the weather allowed. Maintaining the four helicopters under challenging conditions was a full-time job and while not without some issues, went well. As expected, the pilots were always keen to be flying and it was often a case of disappointing them by not letting them fly when the weather conditions weren't right.

On suitable baiting days we would start operations as early as possible, usually setting up in the dark, and to maximise the time that the helicopters were spreading bait we ran two adjacent loading sites. Each site had a team of eight people who had allocated roles to ensure the operation went smoothly and safely. Over 8,000 bags of bait were manually poured into the buckets with no injuries which is quite an achievement and a real demonstration of teamwork.

The logistics for undertaking the operation were daunting as if we forgot something there was virtually no chance of getting it sent out. Fortunately, there was one exception when Ovenstone fishing, who work around the islands, diverted their vessel M.F.V. *Edinburgh* from a supply run to Tristan to drop off some urgent helicopter parts. The logistics team did a fantastic job to arrange everything we needed without having a lot of gear that would go unused, as storage space was limited. In short, with few exceptions, if you needed something to do a job it was there – sometimes with a bit of ingenuity required on what you used or how you used it.

While there is never any guarantee that an eradication will succeed, and as always there are certainly a few things that I would change in hindsight, overall I believe we did as well as anyone could have under the conditions – and that should be good enough to have removed all the mice.

Above: Spreading supplementary bait in gullies, identified as a higher risk area (*Michelle Risi*)

Left: Great teamwork ensures the bait buckets are loaded efficiently (*Michelle Risi*)

A truly grounded operation

For all the talk of helicopters, it's been clear from the start that the mice on Gough would not be eradicated from the air alone – a concurrent ground baiting operation has always been an integral part of the restoration plan. But as it happens, the ground operation also provided crucial information that entirely shaped the distribution of the final aerial bait application and raised vital questions for future projects.

An entirely ground-based eradication operation on Gough Island would most likely have required in excess of 650,000 bait stations or hand broadcasting points to be placed/ marked out and regularly serviced. That's at least 622,000 more bait stations than have ever been placed out before as part of a mouse eradication operation on an island. Not such a surprise, then, that it was ruled out as a viable method for achieving eradication early in the day. Yet at least 500 bait stations and hand broadcasting points *were* in play during the operation, as well as a couple of hundred traps and numerous monitoring devices.

Each of the buildings that make up the South African weather station Base had to be baited inside as well as underneath (the majority are raised off the ground) to ensure no mouse was missed. In addition, an aerial exclusion zone was established around the buildings and aviculture facilities to protect the safeguard populations of land birds from falling bait, meaning that bait in these open areas would also need to be placed out by hand.

The ground operation was run by Dr Araceli Samaniego (Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research) and comprised much more than laying out bait. As a result of her work, we know that the bait was attractive enough and/ or the mice were hungry enough to travel 100 m or more to access bait – hopefully a good sign. We know that within three days of the first baiting, detection rates of mice plummeted and that despite a variety of detection tools and a lot of search effort, neither mice nor fresh mouse sign was seen anywhere since the second bait application. Hopefully another good sign!

Another crucial activity undertaken by the team was determining for how long the bait was available and in good condition on the ground. This is important as we needed every mouse to have an opportunity to come across it when it was still attractive to eat. In the uplands such a check had found the bait still available and in good condition despite days of heavy rain. This being so, it was a surprise when no bait was seen on the walk to Prion Cave (to monitor for mouse activity and double check that baiting in caves was not required) two weeks after the first aerial bait application.

Araceli organised an intensive search over a wide area of fern bush habitat (the dominant lowland habitat); not a single bait pellet was found.

Given the unexpectedly fast disappearance of the bait, plans were laid to repeat the exercise more systematically after the second bait application. This time, the searches were started just five days after the bait drop. And this time, very few mice were expected to be around to eat it so it should have lasted longer.

The results were again surprising. Whilst some bait was found, a lot had been eaten. At least two non-native slug species are known to be on Gough and these were identified as the likely suspects. So Araceli began slug trials. The bait does not affect slugs, but their apparent high rates of consumption opened up a potential route for the island's land birds to be exposed to the bait. Araceli's work determined that it would take about a week for a slug full of bait to have excreted the toxicant, meaning that after just one week it would not pose a risk to a consumer. Her work also demonstrated that one of the highest risks to eradication success was likely to be the availability of bait in the fern bush habitat. This was instrumental in determining which areas of the island would receive additional bait.

Sufficient bait was taken to Gough to bait the entirety of the island three times, but it was always expected that some areas would be higher risk than others and so would receive greater amounts of bait. The timely identification of bait consumption by slugs meant the team could react and adapt the baiting plans accordingly. Such adaptive management is vital in eradication projects.

Moreover, the Gough experience offers considerable insight into just how voracious slugs may be on an island (perhaps particularly if they are introduced rather than native to it) and highlights this as a crucial area to research more fully during the planning phases of future island restoration projects.

Left: Establishing the hand baiting grid (*Michelle Risi*)
Top & Middle: Hand baiting in, under and around the buildings, including under the fridge (*Michelle Risi*)
Bottom right:: Araceli sets up monitoring stations (*Michelle Risi*)

Celebrations as the first of the safeguard land birds set free

Running alongside the baiting operation has been the all-important aviculture work. Designed to safeguard the island's two land bird populations, the aviculture team have been beavering away on the island since early February and are set to be the last of the restoration team to leave. Now it's time to release the Gough moorhens into — what we hope is — a mouse-free island.

Cast your mind back to New Year's Eve. For some of our restoration team members, there was barely time to see in 2021 before they were down to business. Not wishing to risk exposure to Covid-19, many of our aviculture team embarked on a stint of self isolation in the first week of January to reduce the chances that any of their Covid tests taken during their official quarantine stint in South Africa would come back positive.

Their time in Cape Town must have felt like the calm before the storm, for in the nine months that have followed, they (and many helpers, including our overwintering team) have worked tirelessly to keep a safeguard population of both Gough moorhens and Gough buntings happy and healthy. They have been supported throughout by a team of vets from partner Royal Zoological Society of Scotland.

Between them they have cleaned and filled 21,840 bunting feeding cups, scrubbed clean and dried 13.500 bunting mats, and walked 350 km solely to feed moorhens!

With the potential risks to the land birds from the baiting operation having faded, the team are starting to release the birds back into their natural environment – hopefully in time to breed this season (it is already spring on Gough).

The moorhens are being released first, followed by the buntings in the coming weeks. We will bring a full report on the aviculture work in the next edition.

Celebration after the first cohort of the Gough moorhen safeguard population is released, rendering their release bags redundant (*Roelf Daling*)

Project to save Marion Island's seabirds gains momentum

Saving Marion Island's Seabirds™
The Mouse-Free Marion Project

The number of islands from which invasive rodents have been successfully eradicated has been increasing rapidly over recent decades. In each case, eradication projects benefit from lessons learned and experience gained from earlier operations. Following in the footsteps of the Gough Island Restoration Programme has been particularly helpful for the Mouse-Free Marion Project, which is being undertaken as a partnership between the South African Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment and BirdLife South Africa. There are many similarities between the two projects, and considerable scope for the transfer of skills and knowledge. The completion of the baiting of Gough Island is therefore wonderful news for both Gough and Marion, providing further impetus and encouragement for our own plans.

The Covid-19 pandemic has delayed and challenged many projects, and while the Mouse-Free-Marion Project has not been an exception, the project has made significant progress in 2021. Since the appointment of Dr Anton Wolfaardt as Project Manager in February, Keith Springer, who led the successful pest eradication project on Macquarie Island and has been integrally involved in numerous other eradication projects, joined the project as Operations Manager in July. In August, Robyn Adams was appointed as Communications Officer and Project Assistant. Most recently, Heidi Whitman joined the team as the Chief Philanthropy Officer. Heidi, who is based in the U.S.A., will be responsible for leading the project's fundraising efforts.

We're delighted that Andrew Callender has been co-opted as a member of the Mouse-Free-Marion Management Committee and the Mouse-Free-Marion Non-Profit Company Board to help strengthen the partnership between the two projects. The partnership enabled Anton to sail to Gough Island with the Gough baiting team in May-June this year. The opportunity to engage in many productive discussions with members of the Gough team, including island eradication experts, helicopter pilots, as well as the crew of the S.A. *Agulhas II*, was immensely helpful, providing valuable insights and lessons for the Mouse-Free-Marion project. Although we still have a lot to do, the project is rapidly gaining momentum to secure a positive conservation future for Marion Island and its globally important seabirds.

Wandering albatross colony, Marion Island. Marion Island supports about 25% of the global population of wandering albatrosses (*Anton Wolfaardt*)

Dr Anton Wolfaardt
Mouse-Free-Marion
Project Manager

A wandering albatross chick is scalped by an invasive non-native mouse on Marion Island (*Stefan and Janine Schoombie*)

Next steps for Henderson, and potentially Pitcairn!

An assessment of the feasibility, costs and benefits of combining eradication operations on Henderson and Pitcairn has been submitted to the Government of the Pitcairn Islands for consideration. Simultaneously, a funding application has been submitted to undertake detailed community consultation and address all outstanding technical issues for an eradication on Pitcairn, with a view to enabling a final, fully-informed local decision on whether to proceed.

Restoration operations tend to be costly affairs and this is especially so for projects that take place on remote oceanic islands. There are fewer islands more remote than Henderson and Pitcairn—and there have already been unsuccessful attempts to restore each of them (2011 and 1997/8 respectively).

That being so, it is exciting to report that a new feasibility study has been presented to the Government of the Pitcairn Islands and the Pitcairn Island Council which looks at the feasibility of delivering a combined rodent eradication operation on the two islands in one single expedition.

There are significant benefits of this approach over executing two single operations— not least in terms of cost and the biosecurity advantages of simultaneously tackling the likely main source of reinvasion risk to either island. The feasibility study concluded that there was a high chance a combined operation would be successful.

Uninhabited, 33 m high, flat-as-a-pancake Henderson Island (top, *Richard Cuthbert*) and rugged Pitcairn Island (bottom, *Tara Proud*), where cliffs reach 347 m, differ in more ways than one — with resultant impacts for operational design.

There are substantial differences between the two islands—most obviously the fact that Pitcairn is inhabited. This means the two islands may require different approaches to be taken during the operation itself. Whilst challenges to restoring uninhabited islands tend to come from logistical considerations, inhabited islands require all residents to support not only the concept of restoration but the on-the-ground practicalities the operation will entail.

Darwin funding is being sought to execute a preparatory project which will comprehensively work with the community to address the outstanding technical issues. Full community consultation will be a fundamental component of the work. The project will also seek to take a potential Tristan da Cunha Island restoration to the same point of preparedness.

The project will provide independent eradication expertise to enable both Pitcairn and Tristan to make informed decisions on community-preferred operational approaches. This, in turn, will enable revised feasibility studies to confirm final viability within the preferred approaches, and fully-informed Council decisions to proceed with (funding-dependent) eradication operation delivery.

The preparatory project—as well as any actual eradication project itself—is still funding-dependent, but it is wonderful to be able to report on this hugely important milestone. In addition, we can add a beneficiary species to the Henderson project: Phoenix petrel, which has now been confirmed present on the island!

Henderson lorikeet (*Tara Proud*) and Henderson petrel (*Sarah Havery*)

Gough and Midway: two projects a world apart

Albatross-eating mice have (so far) been reported from just three islands around the world: Gough, Midway and Marion. Project partner **Island Conservation** hope to lead an eradication attempt on the mice on Midway next year, which freed staff member **Wes Jolley** to join the Gough team. The islands may be different but the missions to restore them aren't.

I signed on to join the Gough restoration field team somewhat late because I was planning on spending June-September of this year helping lead the eradication of mice from Midway Atoll. I was given the exciting opportunity to go to Gough Island after the Midway project's management team made the decision to aim for a 2022 operation. My time on Gough was some of the best in my entire career but having spent so much time working on Midway it is difficult not to compare the two places and projects. To me, the differences seem superficial when compared to the foundations required to be successful.

The islands are physically very different. Gough is large, incredibly rugged, and typically cold and rainy. The beaches consist of large boulders skirting the edges of the many cliffs. Midway is small, flat and subtropical. It can get cool in the winter, but it's always hot by comparison. The long beaches are made of white sands, and unfortunately covered in plastic debris. One thing the islands share is a tendency for strong winds, which is simply to be expected when working on oceanic islands.

Both islands are home to incredible bird species, including multiple albatross species. On Midway the species overlap (impossible not to with Laysan albatross on every patch of open ground), so it was surprising on Gough to learn that the various species tend to nest in different areas. The sooty albatross likes cliffs, the Tristan albatross likes the higher elevations, and the Atlantic yellow-nosed albatross likes the coastal tussock. I was struck by how much space the Tristan albatrosses leave between their nests, something that simply isn't possible on Midway. It's made me wonder how densely the Tristan's might nest as the population increases after this project.

Introduced slugs and millipedes consumed bait on Gough (top), while cockroaches are expected to consume much of the bait on Midway (bottom) (*Wes Jolley*)

An unfortunate similarity is that both islands have experienced the damaging effects of invasive mice predating albatrosses. It's still hard to believe that something as small as a mouse can predate something large like an albatross, but they can and do. Hopefully in a few years both islands will be declared rodent-free.

Introduced invertebrate populations are an important part of both eradication projects because they consume the bait used to remove mice (it doesn't harm them) and thus are an important factor when designing baiting strategies. Although Gough has relatively low invertebrate diversity (number and variety of species) and abundance (number of individuals of each species) when compared to Midway, the effect of many small mouths consuming bait means that they need to be accounted for in our strategies on both islands to ensure the bait is around long enough for every mouse to eat it.

The most important connection between the projects is that neither could be possible without an incredible group of dedicated individuals with a wide variety of special skills, from technical eradication strategies, leadership, helicopter piloting and maintenance, cooking for large hungry groups, electrical, diesel engines, etc, etc. The core personality trait required for personnel is willingness to be part of a team and the ability to adopt new skills quickly and enthusiastically. Some of these seem silly, but they are all critical to the success of the project. On Gough people developed key skills such as how to move and bundle gigantic tarpaulins, how to build

the perfect bird perch, how to best wash bird poo from a rubber mat, and of course how to work safely and efficiently around helicopters. Midway will require people to master a similar suite of activities. And this is just part of the story; both projects require a massive commitment of support from people well beyond the lucky few who get to be part of the on-island operations.

The true heroes of both projects are the people involved with caring for the native species that might be impacted by the eradication activities. Both projects include teams dedicated to capturing and looking after potentially at-risk birds. The 'removing mice' part of the project seems quick and easy compared to the endless hours required by these teams. The work starts months before the baiting operation and continues for months after, and since birds never take a day off neither can the team.

It's clear to me that despite any differences in the islands, the similarities in the projects run deep and both are ground-breaking and important in their own way. I passed my 12th year anniversary in my eradication career while on Gough, and I'm more convinced than ever that eradicating invasive non-native species from islands is a critical conservation tool for saving species. We have a duty to protect and preserve these places and the species that make them unique.

A Tristan albatross on Gough has plenty of real estate (above) when compared to the crowds on Midway (below) (*Wes Jolley*)

Gough project brings Guadalupe mouse eradication plans closer to reality

Noe Silva was fundamental to the smooth running of the Gough operation with his specialist skills in bait bucket management. On loan to the project from **Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas (GECI)**, Noe looks ahead to the next exciting challenge.

My experience on Gough Island was very enriching, both personally and professionally. I enjoyed meeting new people and being on a new, spectacular island. I feel proud to have been part of such a complex and ambitious project, but ambitious projects are not new for me. I have participated in many eradication campaigns in my home country, Mexico. By participating in the Gough Island Restoration Project, I will be able to share new ideas with my colleagues at Grupo de Ecología y Conservación de Islas (GECI) to plan the future house mouse eradication on Guadalupe Island.

The Guadalupe Island Biosphere Reserve is Mexico's westernmost protected area, 260 km off of the Baja California Peninsula: definitely not as remote as Gough Island. It is also Mexico's fifth biggest island at 24,000 ha – 2.5 times the size of Gough Island! On Guadalupe Island, we have the largest nesting colony of Laysan albatross in Mexico, with over 1,500 breeding pairs. It is a colony that is growing and becoming the most important Laysan albatross population in the Eastern Pacific. Additionally, we hope to re-establish a black-footed albatross colony there through a translocation project in collaboration with Hawaii´s Pacific Rim Conservation and with funding from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and The David and Lucile Packard Foundation. This year, 27 black-footed albatross's eggs and chicks were translocated from Midway Atoll and successfully fledged from Guadalupe Island. So far, mice have not yet had an impact on albatrosses on Guadalupe, as they did on Gough, but we are monitoring them diligently. Furthermore, there are other endemic species, such as the Guadalupe murrelet, which recolonized Guadalupe Island following the removal of feral cats, and in the past years we have documented its vulnerability to predation from mice. The mouse population fluctuates every year but has reached high numbers in productive years when good rains lead to high seed availability (mostly from introduced grasses).

There are many things from the Gough Island Restoration Project that we could learn from for an island such as Guadalupe. One example is the use of several helicopters at the same time. Another is the set up of the aviculture project for potentially at-risk species. On Guadalupe Island, we most likely would need to protect the native and endemic terrestrial birds, such as the Guadalupe house finch, the Guadalupe junco, and the Guadalupe rock wren. We could also learn from having such a varied team of international professionals with expertise in islands worldwide to help develop the best operational plan for the project as well as the importance of being able to adapt to the ever-changing circumstances on the ground!

Over the years we have learned so much and have made steady progress with removing feral cats in order to save Guadalupe Island's birds from extinction. My hope is that in a few years we may be able to proclaim to the world that Guadalupe Island is free from invasive mammals! I have learned from GECI and Gough Island that even some of the most complex projects are achievable with the right team and good planning. I would like to thank RSPB, as well as Pete McClelland and Andrew Callender for inviting me to participate in the project and giving me the opportunity of learning from everyone involved.

Above: Noe on Gough Island (*RSPB*)
R: Guadalupe murrelet (© *GECI / J.A. Soriano*)

Rathlin Island restoration gets underway

Rathlin, Northern Ireland's only inhabited offshore island, is home to over 150 people and up to a quarter of a million seabirds. A new restoration project to remove introduced ferrets and rats should benefit people and wildlife alike.

Rathlin Island, home to 200,000-250,000 breeding seabirds, is by far the largest seabird colony in Northern Ireland and is one of the most important seabird breeding sites in the UK and Ireland. Manx shearwaters bred on the island up until the 1980s, potentially into their thousands, but have been extirpated due to predation by introduced mammals. Atlantic puffin, now assessed by the IUCN Red List as Vulnerable to global extinction, has declined on Rathlin by more than half in recent years.

Island restoration projects on inhabited islands are still few and far between and the scale and ambition of this project – which will seek to remove both the ferret and rat populations – is amongst the most challenging attempted anywhere. At 1,438 ha, Rathlin will be the second largest island in the world to be cleared of invasive rats using an entirely ground-based operation (i.e. laying the bait solely by hand).

The partnership project, known as Rathlin Acting for Tomorrow (LIFE RAFT) will safeguard Rathlin's seabirds and ground-nesting birds. With 70% of visitors to Rathlin citing birds and wildlife as their main reason for visiting, by restoring the island's natural heritage the project will bring benefits for the local community, too.

The project will help protect livestock and crops and create over 30 jobs. It will protect Rathlin's internationally important wildlife and landscape so future generations can enjoy seeing guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes and the iconic puffins and possibly even the return of locally extinct species such as Manx shearwaters and storm petrels, which were once common on the island.

The £4.5 million island restoration project has been given the go ahead following major funding from EU LIFE, The National Lottery Heritage Fund (development phase) and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with contributions from RSPB NI, Rathlin Development and Community Association (RDCA) and Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust.

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RDCA

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

CAUSEWAY COAST & GLENS HERITAGE TRUST

Life

NATURA 2000

HERITAGE FUND

Atlantic puffin (top), common guillemots (middle) and razorbills (bottom) on Rathlin Island (*Richard Else/Hazel Watson*)

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If you would like further information about the Gough and Henderson Island Restoration Programmes, please contact

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Cover image: Baiting Gough Island's east coast (featuring Tristan albatross chick) (*Michelle Risi*)

The RSPB is the UK's largest nature conservation charity, inspiring everyone to give nature a home.

The RSPB is a member of BirdLife International, a partnership of conservation organisations working to give nature a home around the world.

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