



HENDERSON ISLAND NEWS

World Firsts on Henderson Island!

Henderson Island Facts

- Part of the Pitcairn Island group, a UK Overseas Territory in the South Pacific
- The last near-pristine limestone island of significant size in the world
- Home to over 55 unique species, including 4 species of endemic landbird
- Only known breeding site of the endangered Henderson petrel
- Global stronghold of the gadfly petrel group
- Declared a natural World Heritage Site in 1988



Government of Pitcairn Islands

The RSPB, in conjunction with the Pitcairn Islands Government, is delighted to announce that the ground-breaking operation to restore Henderson Island has now taken place. At 43km², Henderson is the largest tropical or sub-tropical island ever to be subject to a rat eradication operation, and the third largest island yet treated in the world. The project was also the first time an aerial eradication operation has been conducted from the deck of a ship, and saw Henderson rails successfully bred in captivity for the first time.

Whilst we cannot yet be certain as to whether all the rats have been eradicated, we are optimistic of success and eagerly await the 2013 monitoring expedition which will hopefully provide confirmation that this unique World Heritage Site is now rat-free. A two-year monitoring period is



The operational vessel, MV *Aquila*, off the north beach of Henderson Island. (Andrew MacDonald)

always required after such an operation so as to be certain that no rats remain (any surviving rats would increase to a detectable level within this time).

Rat Impacts

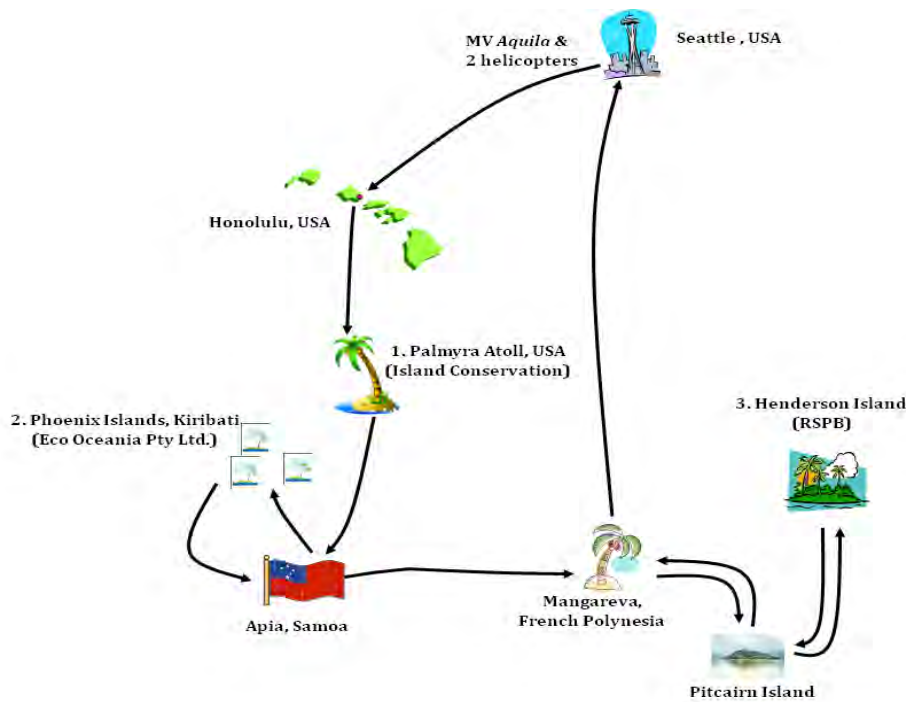
Rats have had a devastating effect on the island, killing over 25,000 petrel chicks a year and driving the Henderson petrel towards extinction. Seabirds, which would have numbered in the millions before rats arrived, have been

reduced to just 40,000 pairs. Rats have also been limiting the populations of other endemic bird species, altered the forest through seed consumption, and preyed upon marine turtle hatchlings and Henderson's unique invertebrate populations.

Voyage of Conservation

The single most challenging factor facing a rat eradication operation on Henderson is its extreme remoteness in the centre of the South

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The route of the *MV Aquila*, which implemented 3 restoration projects in succession.

Pacific, and the difficulty and expense of getting the team and their equipment to the island. The RSPB therefore formed a unique international partnership with two other island restoration projects in order to share equipment and expertise. In May, a single vessel, the *MV Aquila*, was loaded with two helicopters in Seattle, USA, before setting out to complete a remarkable 27,000km voyage of conservation. Sailing first to Palmyra Atoll (USA), the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA, Kiribati) and then Henderson Island, the *MV Aquila* worked to restore crucial seabird habitats at every stop by removing the introduced rats that have proved so devastating.

The additional conservation benefits of this joint-voyage were enormous: Palmyra Atoll Restoration Project, led by Island Conservation in partnership with the US Fish & Wildlife Service and The Nature Conservancy, hoped to conserve an atoll which is home to one million nesting seabirds, including the world's second largest colony of red-footed boobies. The Phoenix Island Protected Area Management Committee and Eco-Oceania Pty Ltd. meanwhile

implemented eradication operations on two islands within PIPA: Enderbury & Birnie. These islands are located within the world's largest World Heritage Site, and provide important nesting habitat for a large variety of seabird species.

Henderson Island Operations

The *MV Aquila* arrived at Henderson Island in early August, having picked up the project's 76 tonnes of rodenticide in Samoa (where it had been shipped from New Zealand in order to intersect with the ship en route), and project staff in French Polynesia and

Pitcairn. Baiting began almost straight away. Two helicopters, operating from the converted deck of the ship, were used to drop rodenticide across Henderson island from bait buckets slung beneath them. These buckets use small petrol-powered motors to fire the bait pellets out in a 80m-wide swath. Using GPS technology, the two highly experienced pilots could then work to methodically spread the bait across the entire island, returning to the boat to have their buckets refilled when required.

The RSPB is delighted to report that all baiting operations went extremely smoothly: the first bait drop was completed in just three days, with a second, two-day, drop then taking place almost a week later in an attempt to ensure that all rats had access to the bait. Fine weather greatly helped the rapid implementation of baiting operations, as did the world-leading expertise of the project team and the invaluable support of the *MV Aquila* crew. Indeed, baiting was completed almost ten days ahead of the allotted time, enabling us to bring staff home early and to send the *MV Aquila* on its way back to Seattle considerably ahead of schedule.

Helicopter spreading rat bait above the plateau of Henderson Island (Andrew MacDonald)





Composite shot of Henderson Island from the air.

At c. 43km², Henderson is the third largest island ever to be subject to a rodent eradication operation. (Andrew MacDonald)

This was one of the very first times that such a boat-based operation had been implemented, and it is hoped that this success will lead to many more similar operations both in the Pacific and elsewhere in future. The possibilities to link up future island restoration projects and achieve large-scale conservation benefits is significant.



(Andrew MacDonald)

On Island

A separate avicultural team, including staff from the University of Cambridge, Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS) and Pitcairn, set up camp on Henderson one month before the arrival of the *MV Aquila* in order to establish a captive population of Henderson rails for the duration of the operation (the rail had been identified as potentially being at risk from non-target poisoning). The team successfully bred the rails in captivity, a world-first, releasing 6 extra chicks at the end of the operation. Some mortality was observed in the wild rail population, but the rails have since been breeding vigorously and it is anticipated that the rail population will increase beyond its pre-operational level in the absence of rat predation and competition (the

rails had previously been losing approximately 25% of their chicks to rat predation within one week of hatching). The avicultural team were also able to monitor for rat presence and reported no signs of rats in the 11 weeks they spent on Henderson after the bait drops had taken place.

Next Steps

The next major monitoring expedition to Henderson to assess the success of the operation will take place in August 2013. In the meantime we will continue to support biosecurity work to prevent rats being accidentally re-introduced.

Thank You

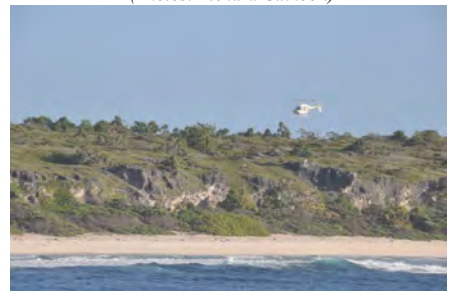
The RSPB would like to thank the Pitcairn Island community for their partnership on this world-leading operation.

A very special note of thanks is also due to all those who so generously provided funding or technical

assistance for the project, without whose support, goodwill and enthusiasm none of this would have been able to happen. We are enormously grateful for your support and hope to be able to update you with the very best of news in 2013.



(Photos: Richard Cuthbert)



An extremely rare sight: a Murphy's petrel chick on Henderson Island. Rats have been killing over 99% of Murphy's petrel chicks within 1 week of hatching.

(Richard Cuthbert)





Above: The Operational Team & Crew of the MV Aquila
 Below: The Avicultural Team on Henderson Island (sans Dr. Mike Brooke)



Exclusive Prints of Henderson's Endemic Birds



The endemic Henderson Lorikeet
 (Peter Harrison)

World-renowned seabird expert & wildlife artist, Peter Harrison, has painted all five endemic birds of Henderson Island in support of the restoration project.

A strictly limited print run of 36 copies of each painting are available, and can be viewed online at www.rspb.org.uk/hendersonprints. Every print comes with an original signature by the artist and a certificate of authenticity. Prints are £90 each (plus £5 postage & packaging), or the set of five is available for £400 (plus £5 p&p).

All proceeds will go directly towards ensuring the long-term success of the Restoration Project. Please contact Jonathan Hall (details below) to order prints and support this unique island.

Henderson Project Commemorative Stamps

The Pitcairn Islands Government has issued an exclusive set of commemorative stamps in support of the project, entitled 'Rare Birds of Henderson Island'. One New Zealand dollar from every set sold will be donated towards the operation.

These beautiful stamps can be viewed and purchased here: <http://www.stamps.gov.pn/rareBirdsHendersonIndex.html>.

'Rare Birds of Henderson Island' Commemorative Stamps



Supported by:

Supporting Partners: Dr. Mike Brooke, University of Cambridge; The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS); Forest & Bird; BirdLife International; Island Conservation; Eco Oceania and Tamarack Ventures.

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Contact Us

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Alternatively, visit

www.rspb.org.uk/hendersonisland

Donations can be made online at:
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