

# SPOTLIGHT ON...

## NEGLECTED TREASURES

### Part 1 of a series on UK Overseas Territories

**M**ost threatened wildlife for which the UK Government is responsible is not here in the UK: it is on our 14 Overseas Territories. But the Government commits very little to conserving these rare and wonderful places. No one is going to help them if we don't. So, as ever, the RSPB is giving nature a voice, standing up for the endangered habitats and species that need conservation action now. The Government needs to find around £16 million each year to tackle conservation priorities.



These marvellous places are astonishingly rich in wildlife, far outweighing their small size. The UK is responsible for 32 bird species threatened with global extinction. More support from the UK is needed, because most of the territories are small, remote islands with few people, and insufficient resources.

## 1 Focus on St Helena

**St Helena was discovered by the Portuguese in 1502. Britain's second oldest territory, it is the most isolated inhabited island in the world. It is known as the place of exile for Napoleon and the Zulu king, Cetshwayo.**

The tiny island lies 1,000 miles (1,600 km) west of Angola. The uplands once had a rich and dense forest. Many endemic plants, birds and other creatures became extinct in the centuries following discovery, because of people and introduced goats, pigs, dogs, cats and rats, as well as alien birds and vegetation. By 1588 there were thousands of goats, in flocks almost a mile long.

St Helena still has endemic species: 45 plants, several lichens and bryophytes, hundreds of insects and one remaining endemic bird, the St Helena plover or wirebird. These are all unique, but the beautiful St Helena olive tree became extinct in 2004 and two ferns, once abundant on the misty peaks, may also be lost. Many more hang on with just a single specimen or tiny population, and the native wirebird is critically endangered.

Alien plants, and increasing development on the island, continue to threaten endemic species. An EU-funded South Atlantic Invasive Species project examines ways to deal with plants that do not belong there but compete with native ones. The project, spanning the southern hemisphere from the sub-Antarctic to the Equator, is managed by the RSPB, working closely with the overseas territory governments and two local organisations.

On St Helena Phil Lambdon, Andrew Darlow, the local project officer, and volunteers, recently made a comprehensive plant survey. Although endemics represent 10% of the species, they occupy less than 1% of the area, the rest being covered by introduced species: the sort of bad news replicated on many tropical islands. But the news is not all bad. One long lost endemic, last seen more than 200 years ago, was rediscovered, perhaps just in time to save it from real extinction. The delicate and ephemeral neglected

tuft sedge still clings to survival on a few remote rocky ridges. The extremely invasive African fountain grass threatens to smother the last few colonies.

Delyth Williams, a volunteer, visited the botanical surveyors.

"Botany on St Helena is extreme. The botanists on the project don't seem to notice contour lines on maps, 70° scree slopes or overhanging rocky outcrops. I learned not to look down, mainly because the bottom is too far away, and for the same reason not to peer over precipices, which tend to appear without warning.

"Nowhere else will you see primeval, mist-engulfed tree thicket dominated by tree fern, with black cabbage and lobelia on the high ridges. Nor will you see the aptly named babies' toes or the vivid blue salad plant, both rare plants of the coastal desert regions. Before people came with their goats, gumwood was the most abundant tree and scrubwood one of the dominant shrubs of arid parts. Their ancestors in South Africa are long since extinct. Remnant populations cling to vertical rock faces at the extremities of the island.

"Botanising is tough, but, apart from the privilege of enjoying the endemic species, the rewards defy description. The cliffs and knife-edge ridges are a geologist's wonder, with breathtaking panoramas at every turn. The people are kind and friendly, the pace of life relaxed and it takes a week to get there. There was not enough time to do even half the things I wanted to. Given the chance I'd be back like a shot."



Working with the St Helena National Trust, we hope to save the wirebird

(RSPB)