

Chagos News

*The Periodical Newsletter of the
Friends of the Chagos*

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EDITORIAL

AGM and EGM

Our Annual General Meeting will be held at 1700 Thursday 7 October and will be preceded by an Extraordinary General Meeting at 1645. Details are on the back page. The reason for the Extraordinary General Meeting is also on the back page and in an article overleaf by our Chairman. We hope as many Friends as possible will attend. Please feel free to bring family and friends. After the meetings we hope to have a meal, drinks and conversation together.

Contents

There are two other articles after that of the Chairman. They both deal with wildlife in Diego Garcia and Eagle Island.

Secretary

Our Secretary has changed his email address to SimonHughes@hughes-mccormack.co.uk. Please make a note of this and if you are on the Internet, let him have your latest email address as well. Thank you.

Mike Fleming

It is with great regret that we have to report the death of Mike Fleming in a bicycle accident on Diego Garcia. Mike was racing his new bike when he collided with a bus on Sunday 27 July. The Friends were shocked and deeply saddened by the news of Mike's death. Those of our group who knew him personally always spoke of him as a very good friend. And those of us who did not have the pleasure of meeting him had a strong sense of his friendliness and very effective help as (literally) our point of communication with people on Diego Garcia and those passing through. Together we were able to make available, to many people, interesting information about Diego Garcia and the Chagos, not least its human history and its wider natural history. We would like to express our deep sympathies to Mike's family and friends and to his colleagues in Cable and Wireless and elsewhere.

John Topp

THE FRIENDS AND THE FUTURE

by

William Marsden

What are the priorities for The Friends of The Chagos in the coming years?

Our Executive Committee has been considering the question since the general meeting held last year at the Royal Geographical Society in celebration of the Friends' tenth anniversary.

Our starting point is that the Chagos archipelago is both outstandingly important and potentially vulnerable as probably the most pristine tropical, marine environment left on the planet. It is a British responsibility.

“The Friends of the Chagos” is established as the main non-governmental organisation promoting conservation, research and education related to the Chagos and it will have an important role in protecting the area for the future. The recent award to John Topp of an OBE, for environmental conservation in the British Indian Ocean Territory, provides deserved recognition of John's own role and that of this society which he founded.

We see the prime conservation objectives over the next few years as the implementation of an effective, new Chagos Conservation Management Plan and the designation of the Great Chagos Bank as an environmental protection zone. The fact that the BIOT Government endorses both projects in principle is to be welcomed. The possibility of human re-settlement re-enforces the requirements for an ecological policy framework. We will also look for longer-term designation of the Chagos on a Ramsar or World Heritage basis.

Scientific research studies and visits, habitat protection projects, publications and possibly the creation of a small research facility on an island in the Chagos stand to serve the basic conservation objectives.

We will promote the scientific importance of the Chagos, as a very rare pristine area of tropical marine ecology of particular value for scientific benchmarking. It is highly relevant for specific issues of interest in the UK, the US and other countries, such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity and maritime ecology (including coral, fish, sharks, turtles, and whales). The Society will organize or sponsor specific research-related projects such as a major scientific group visit to the Chagos (provisionally in 2005) as well as smaller group visits (with one expected in early 2004).

Generally the Friends wish to promote awareness of the ecological importance of the Chagos and support for the conservation objectives from scientific and other opinion formers and organisations in Britain and elsewhere, not least in the USA.

We aim to disseminate information about the special ecological value of this British Territory. (For example the world risks losing 50% of its remaining coral reefs by 2050 and the Chagos reef area is the most pristine of all.) We will also continue to produce and promote publications about the Chagos, including a new edition of Richard Edis' book "Peak of Limuria".

In connection with our plans for such wider involvement in the work of the society, we propose to adopt the "Chagos Conservation Trust" ("CCT") as the new name for the Society, while retaining "incorporating the Friends of The Chagos". The reason for the proposed change is that when the Executive Committee consulted others about attracting further international, expert involvement it was pointed out that our existing name (while evidently friendly!) did not indicate anything about the objectives or area of activity of "The Friends". Also it was thought that the name suggested a rather private group rather than the open organisation that it is. Several of the comparable organisations concerned with conservation in other British Overseas Territories have "National Trust" in their title. The Charities Commission has approved the change to "Chagos Conservation Trust" and it will be put to an Extraordinary General Meeting immediately before the AGM.

Our plan would then be to take some practical steps to widen participation, such as inviting a small number of people to join the Society as Honorary Presidents and forming a Section 501 charity in the USA. We would be particularly grateful to our members and to readers of Chagos News for suggestions for prospective new individual or corporate members.

William Marsden CMG was elected Chairman of the Friends of the Chagos in October 2002. He retired in 2000 from HM Diplomatic Service in which his posts included Under-Secretary for the Americas in the FCO; Ambassador; and Commissioner of the British Indian Ocean Territory.

Diego Garcia 119 Years Ago

In January 1884, the sailing ship 'Windsor Castle', with Captain Raymond as Master, had arrived with several hundred tons of coal. The ship anchored at East Point on the 24th of February. Whilst under the influence of drink, Capt. Raymond landed at East Point with sixteen of his crew, armed with muskets, had the Union Jack hoisted to the top of a tree in front of the manager's house, which was at the time occupied, and then informed the manager that he had taken possession of the island in the name of the British Government. He also appointed M. Le Conte, the Head Manager and signed the document 'Lieutenant Governor'. After this escapade Capt. Raymond returned to his ship and sailed next day, relinquishing his temporary gain.

[Source Under Two Flags, p35] (Perhaps the traditions of the island should include an annual re-enactment of this event.)

REMOVING RATS FROM EAGLE ISLAND

by

Karen Varnham

Remote island groups like the Chagos can be especially vulnerable to the effects of introduced species, as native species that have evolved in isolation often lack defences against new invaders. The black rat is one of the world's most widespread invasive species and can have a devastating impact on ecosystems through competition and habitat modification as well as predation of plants and animals. Rats have been introduced to around 80% of the world's major islands and island groups and the Chagos Islands are no exception.

I first heard about the rat problem on Eagle Island two years ago when I met Nigel Wenban-Smith and Colin Watkins of the Friends of the Chagos. Together we began planning a pilot project to look at the possibility of removing the rats as a vital first step in the recovery of the island's ecosystem. Earlier this year, with support from DEFRA's Flagship Species Fund, I spent three days on Eagle Island on behalf of Fauna & Flora International, along with James Millett and Richard White of the RSPB. I have spent the last five years working on rat eradication projects around the world and was very excited at the chance to visit such an unusual destination.

We arrived on Eagle Island on April 24th, after a 12-hour journey from Diego Garcia with the Royal Marines on board the FPV Pacific Marlin. Their landing craft specialists took us to the edge of the island's fringing reef, and from here we waded ashore with our equipment. I spent my time on the island studying the rats, while James and Richard carried out a brief bird survey and set up some vegetation monitoring plots. We also looked for signs of the marine turtles that are known to use the island. Rats were feeding on a range of foodstuffs, including insects, seeds and other vegetable matter. They were seen at all times of the day and we watched several climbing up coconut trees to a height of more than 20m. The fact that so many rats were seen during daylight suggests a high population density, which is not surprising considering the lack of predators and the abundance of food.

Rats are likely to be affecting the ecosystem of Eagle Island in many ways - suppressing regeneration of native plants as well as predated hatchling turtles and many invertebrate species. They are also likely to be competing with CITES-listed coconut crabs for food resources. White tailed tropicbirds and white terns, two bird species known to be predated by black rats, are also present on Eagle Island. Previous research has suggested that the island supports only a tiny population of seabirds, far fewer than would be expected for an island of 243ha. Introduced rats are certainly not the only man-made ecological problem on Eagle Island - its historic use as a coconut plantation has dramatically reduced the amount of suitable seabird nesting habitat. However, the removal of rats from Eagle Island, the second largest island in the Chagos, is likely to benefit seabirds as well as other native species.

Eradicating rats is a fairly straightforward procedure and relies on a class of poisons known as second-generation anti-coagulants. These compounds are very similar to well-known first-generation compounds such as warfarin and cause death by internal bleeding. The essence of an eradication project is very simple - you just need to make sure there is poison available to every rat, and make sure it stays available until they're all gone. We will do this on Eagle Island by setting a regular grid of bait stations 30m apart across the island. The bait stations need to be checked daily and fresh bait added until there are no more signs of rat activity - usually within 4-6 weeks. The risk of rats returning to Eagle Island is small, and leaving a network of permanent bait stations on the island should further reduce the chances of new arrivals surviving long enough to breed.

Eagle Island is not particularly big for a rat eradication project – islands of several thousand hectares have now been successfully cleared – but the logistics will be complicated and it will be very labour intensive. We estimate it will take ten people, three months and about two tons of rat poison! The FCO and the Royal Marines were very supportive of the project and their continued help will be invaluable. This is a rare chance to visit a remote area for such a long period of time and also a great opportunity to do some in-depth survey work on the island, in order to monitor changes to the island's ecology following the removal of rats. We are currently looking for funding for the project and aim to start work in autumn 2004. So, with luck, 2005 will be a great year for Eagle Island's native wildlife.

Karen Varnhan is an independent invasive species biologist.

WILDLIFE ON DIEGO GARCIA

by

Nestor Guzman

RED-TAIL TROPIC BIRD

It was in May 1996 four months after I arrived in Diego Garcia that I first saw a pair of Red-tail Tropicbirds (*Phaeton rubricauda*) nesting underneath the dodder-infested (*Cassytha filiformis*) scaevola (*Scaevola taccada*) behind the Fleet Recreation Area. Unique to these birds are their dark red beak, all-white pink-flushed plumage (characteristic of a nesting Red-tail) and the single strand long red tail-streamer that they later shed after the babies are fledged. They had never been seen in DG before. (I saw one nesting at R-Site in 1998 but not subsequently). During the end of 1998, I saw eight on the same spot and in 1999 there were twelve of them. When the cat removal program went into full swing in 2000, the number of nesting birds increased to 14. The biggest count was between the end of 2001 and March 2002 where I recorded 16 nesting birds, 11 babies and 5 eggs. There was one recorded roadkill in 1998 and two deaths from dodder entanglement in March 2001.

The Red-tails breeding season starts in September and normally ends in April or May the following year. On DG, they breed all the year round with the majority of

nesting birds being seen from December to March. Today, you can easily spot them hovering at the Fleet Recreation Area while you take your leisurely drive along DG-1.

WHITE-BREASTED WATERHEN:

Another resident native bird species that's gaining relative abundance from uncommon status listed during the 1995 survey is the White-breasted Waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*). They love to play 'chicken' and forage on the grassy portion of roadsides. In typical rail fashion they are shy and quickly seek cover in the bush when approached. The fuzzy black chicks trailing the mother hen in the early morning sun are fun to watch.

SHEARWATER:

Recently, three fledglings of a nocturnal Shearwater were found when trimming the thick foliage of screw pine right in the middle of the downtown area. They can be easily located because they vocalise like kittens, often in a duet. Similar vocalisations can be heard on the thick screw pine at the back of the swimming pool and on the thickets north of the downtown tennis courts. PACDIV's Field Biologist, Tim Sutterfield, identified the bird as the Wedge Tailed Shearwater.

OTHER VISITING BIRDS SEEN:

PURPLE HERON:

A Purple Heron was here from November 2000 to February 2001. It was sighted almost regularly at the drainage ditch near the control tower and in the wetlands vegetated by dense cattails (*Typha domingensis*). I know it has a chestnut plumage but why is it called Purple Heron? Anyway, I had a chance to take great photos of this lovely tall bird. I hope it comes back.

HOUSE CROW:

On my way home for lunch one sunny day in May 2002, I heard an unfamiliar sound from birds hovering near the big Takemaka (*Calophyllum inophyllum*) tree in front of the old bulk sale building. Up in the tree, I saw a crow (*Corvus splendens*) pestering the Mynah birds. That was interesting. Terry Moore and Jim Murphy of the US Department of Agriculture working for the cat removal program on DG reported having seen this bird on different occasions at the Marina and wash rack area. The bird is still here. If I hear that high pitch "caw-caw" again, I know that's him.

FOUR FALCONIDAE AT T-SITE

Seen from Nov 2002 to Dec 2002 at T-Site by Cdr Chris Jewett, former NSF XO, that he later identified as Amur Falcon (*Falco amurensis*). This species is known to breed in NE Asia and winters in Southern Africa and has been sighted in Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Tonkin and now in Diego Garcia.

A dead bird was picked up at the flight line on 21 Nov 2002 and identified by the Smithsonian to be a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).

(Editor's Note: **Lanner.** To these can be added Lanner's Falcon (*Falco biarmicus*). There have been sightings over the last two or three years of a hawk or falcon but no positive identification. One evening in February 2002 the Executive Officer NSF came to tell me he had that day sighted a pair of Lanners at Point Marianne. He is a sometime falconer so would know. Next day he, Britrep, the Meteorological Officer and I saw the birds and took photographs.)

AUSSIE SHELDUCKS

Shelducks belong to the sub family Tadornidae and are primarily restricted to the Old World. They are often described as being intermediate between true geese and ducks. They are the more aquatic and more colorful than the larger sheldgeese. A very rare find in Diego Garcia.

Five (5) juveniles were seen swimming at R-site sewage lagoon by a Base Operating Support contractor in Sept 2002. A month later, I saw and took pictures of the two adult pairs. Their colors are awesome. The white patch around the eye and a white ring around the bill of the female are very evident.

CATTLE EGRETS:

Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) from the Seychelles were introduced in 1953 to Diego Garcia according to Hutson (1975). Recent colonization and worldwide introduction over the last century has resulted in the almost worldwide distribution of this species. Since the 1970's, Cattle Egrets have been common to DG with high counts at some locations. The Landfill site alone has 275 Egrets at present. Their behaviour is to congregate on big flocks in the airfield and this poses an unacceptable hazard to aircraft operations on Diego Garcia. The active Bird Air Strike Hazard program has greatly reduced the Egret population near the airfield. The Point Marianne Egret rookery at one end of the runway has been abandoned since April 2002. I recently discovered a new rookery 2000 metres south of the gas station, about 500 metres from the airfield. This is a small nest site with around 15-20 nests.

AGAMA LIZARDS

This prehistoric looking lizard was first sighted at the Seabee Park in May 2001. The accidental electrocution of one gravid foot-long mature lizard on March 2002 served as a wake up call. A month later, we found out that these animals had colonised a portion of Diego Garcia in a 300 to 500 ft radius around the Beach House area. Identified as the variable lizards or bloodsucker lizards (*Calotes versicolor*), they are seen on the beach front, on top of a log, on the scaevola or sitting steadily on a coconut trunk or up on the big takemaka trees. They eat mainly insects and small vertebrates. No known predator identified so far. With ten to twelve eggs per breeding season, I expect this animal to be widespread in 5 years. No known threats to the environment except that they control the population of their prey. Occasionally, Pest Control and myself decimate some in an effort to control or contain the population. More than 140 different sizes have been removed with slingshots since April 2002.

Nestor Guzman is a Department of Defense Biologist in the Diego Garcia Environmental Team

FRIENDS OF THE CHAGOS EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL MEETING 2003

In accordance with Article 11 of our Memorandum and Articles of Association we will be holding an Extraordinary General Meeting at 1645 on Thursday 7 October 2003 at Pizza Express, 46 Moreton Street SW1V 2PB (downstairs) in order to change our name to the Chagos Conservation Trust. The special resolution reads:

It is proposed to change Article 1 of our Memorandum and Articles of Association to read: *The Name of the Association is Chagos Conservation Trust (hereinafter called "the Association")*.

FRIENDS OF THE CHAGOS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2003

Our Annual General Meeting will be held at 1700 on Thursday 7 October 2003 at Pizza Express 46 Moreton Street SW1V 2PB (downstairs).

In accordance with the Memorandum and Articles of Association those present will elect a Chairman, a Treasurer, a Secretary and members of the Executive Committee.

One third of the members of the Executive Committee must stand down each year, and those co-opted during the year must stand for election. This year the following are therefore standing down:

- Geoff Hilton
- Simon Hughes
- Richard Martin
- Charles Sheppard

Nominations for office must be received by the Secretary at 29 Champion Hill, London SE5 8AL at least seven clear days before the meeting.

The nearest Underground station to Moreton Street is PIMLICO, on the Victoria Line. When you leave the station walk west 100 paces into St George's Square/Belgrave Road and turn right. Walk a further 100 paces and Moreton Street is on your left. The Pizza Express is on the right hand (north)side of the street and 70 paces from Belgrave Road. Bus No 24 stops in Belgrave Road. Bus 360 stops at Pimlico Station.

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