



Saving Our Special Nature of Montserrat

Newsletter 7, November 2018



Male Montserrat oriole, Montserrat's national bird on red heliconia, Montserrat's national plant. Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Foreword

Welcome to the seventh issue of the newsletter about the current joint programme of work by Montserrat National Trust and UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum, in conjunction with the Government of Montserrat. The first two years of this current programme were supported in part by a grant from UK Government's Darwin Plus fund, under the title *Maximising long-term survival prospects of Montserrat's endemic species and ecosystem-services*. At present, the programme is not in receipt of outside funding but this is being applied for. Meanwhile, UKOTCF and MNT are keeping the programme going at a maintenance level using just their own limited resources – because it is important to maintain the excellent momentum built up and support the committed and effective efforts of local partners.

We are very grateful for the many kind and encouraging comments from people welcoming the first six newsletters. We hope that you enjoy this one too. In it, we outline some continuing progress by *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* teams, in some cases in conjunction with new partners, including the Durrell-led work on potential recovery of the characteristic mountain chicken frogs. We touch on other collaborations, including an initiative with H.E. the Governor, as well as UKOTCF responding to a request

from Montserrat to explore help with conservation of the turtle population. We also update on other elements of the co-operative programme and prospects for the future.

Please feel free to show or forward these newsletters to others. If anyone sees these and would like to be added to the circulation list, please send your email address to cwensink@ukotcf.org. For more information on the project, the main contacts are:

Dr Mike Pienkowski & Mrs Catherine Wensink, UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum: m@pienkowski.org cwensink@ukotcf.org. See also www.ukotcf.org.uk.

Mrs Sarita Francis, Montserrat National Trust: mnatrust@candw.ms

Adopt a Home for Wildlife continues: news from Corkhill Reunion Committee

Over a year on from the opening of access to the Corkhill area, the ambitious work of the the Corkhill Reunion Committee, as part of *Adopt a Home for Wildlife*, continues. The Committee organised an extra meeting to coincide with the visit in October of UKOTCF's Chairman, Dr Mike Pienkowski.

At the meeting, Mike assured the Committee of UKOTCF' and MNT's continuing support, despite the funding gap meaning that there was no local project officer at present. Mike explained that he works as an unpaid volunteer in the project. As there was no travel budget at present, he had arranged the



Some of the members of the Corkhill Reunion Committee at a meeting with UKOTCF to explore progress and future developments. Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski



Rose Willock and Roland Irish (and Mike's mic) in the ZJB Radio Studio broadcasting Rose's Saturday show on 27th October 2018.

Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski



Above: An impressive start has already been made at Corkhill by the clearance of the overgrown cricket ground and certain other areas, where native plants from the MNT nursery will be grown, such as around the edges of this ground. Photo: Dr Nicola Weber.

opportunity of a visit to the region funded from elsewhere to spend 9 days in Montserrat to encourage progress.

The meeting discussed with Mike the increased opportunities to develop the work, especially once there is a MNT/UKOTCF project officer in place again, and outlined the further work that the Committee would be undertaking in the interim.

A couple of days later, Committee member, Mr Roland Irish joined Mike Pienkowski on Rose Willock's ZJD Radio Montserrat Saturday show to inform Montserratians and others on island and across the world of progress. Mike and Roland were able to explain that invasive plants are those which do not occur naturally on Montserrat but have been introduced deliberately or accidentally by people. In some cases, these invaders spread widely, and threaten native plants and animals. Because humans brought these aliens, we have some responsibility to overcome their negative effects.

At present, we do not have the technology to remove the invaders from the whole island – and, for some of them which are useful (if kept under control), we would not want to anyway. By looking after their areas of Montserrat, the participants in *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* are helping locally native plants and animals survive in the long term – especially important because some of these species occur only on Montserrat and nowhere else in the world: if Montserrat loses them, so does the world.

Some species, such as the Australian pine *Casuarina*, are particularly harmful because they shade out native plants and also kill them by poisonous chemicals secreted by their roots. The

Casuarina plants are also very liable to be uprooted and add to erosion during hurricanes. So, they have no human uses (except shade, which can readily be achieved using native plants). In contrast, a plant like black-berry is important for making drinks and foods. However, for over 20 years, people have been unable to manage this area. Black-berry trees have spread hugely, at the expense of the loss of much native vegetation. In this situation, we need to get the area of black-berry reduced to just what we need, so that native species can be given space to recover, helped if necessary by planting additional specimens from the MNT native plant nursery.

We look forward to further developing this co-operation.

Below: a great deal remains to be done: black-berry trees overwhelming the formerly residential area at Corkhill: (left) just the road remains uncovered (so far); (centre) houses now almost hidden behind the invaded front gardens; (right) the useful fruit, but only if the bushes are managed in gardens and not abandoned. Photos: Dr Mike Pienkowski



Adopt a Home for Wildlife continues: the project and Tim Orton help the Durrell team work to conserve the mountain chicken



Mountain chickens used to be abundant on Montserrat, with their calls a characteristic sound, and the frogs relatively easy to find in many of the ghaunts.

Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Tim Orton (left) speaks with Mike Pienkowski, both standing in an area from which invasive acacia plants have been removed. This is now the area of gradation from the conventional garden to the restored tropical dry forest. Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Tim Orton continues his work, as one of the partners in *Adopt a Home for Wildlife*, on progressively removing the invasive plants from his land on Garibaldi Hill. This is an area of tropical dry forest, one of the most threatened ecosystems in the world – even more so than tropical rain forest. The native plants from natural seeds are being encouraged and supplemented by native plants from Montserrat National Trust's nursery.

Tim was one of the inspirations for *Adopt a Home for Wildlife*. Early in the project, while the project partners were working out how best to deal with invasive plants, Tim bumped into Mike and Ann Pienkowski, when all were waiting for friends and colleagues to fly into the airport. That discussion was very productive! Later, Tim enthusiastically welcomed entomological project-partners Montana State University to undertake some of the studies on his land.

When Luke Jones, of Durrell Wildlife, was looking for experimental sites in relation to possible restocking of the Critically Endangered mountain chicken frog, Tim volunteered again.

The mountain chicken is the largest native frog in the Caribbean. Previously spread across several islands, it was reduced by hunting for food (hence its name) and by predators such as rats, introduced by humans, to survive on just two islands, Montserrat and Dominica. The volcano and ash-fall had some impact on the mountain chickens in Montserrat, and a number were taken into captivity, as an insurance policy, for captive-breeding in Jersey and UK.

The chytrid fungus has had a major negative impact on amphibians around the world, causing the total extinction of some species. Human trade, especially when inspections and quarantine arrangements are inadequate, has unwittingly spread the chytrid fungus to many countries where it does not naturally occur.

In 2002, this deadly fungus reached Dominica (which is 10 times larger than Montserrat), and reduced the mountain chicken population there by 80% in just 18 months, and subsequently to no detectable frogs in Dominica in 2006, although small numbers have since been detected.

This horrible disease arrived in Montserrat in 2009, leading to a rapid 85% decrease in the population – one of the most marked

declines ever recorded in an animal population over such a time period. Despite continued surveys in difficult terrain, survival of mountain chickens has not been confirmed, although hopes remain, noting what happened on Dominica.

Nevertheless, the frogs on both islands need help to ensure their long-term survival. There are good captive populations of both Montserrat and Dominica populations (kept separately to preserve any genetic differences) at several zoos (including Durrell in Jersey, the Zoological Society of London and Chester in the *Mountain Chicken Project*). However, there is no point in releasing any of these frogs into the wild if they are just going to be killed by the fungus.

Intensive research has addressed this issue in recent years, trying many approaches. As one of these, Mike Hudson discovered in his PhD work that, above 28°C, mortality of the fungus increases. Therefore, the *Montserrat Mountain Chicken Project* is experimenting with providing ponds at high temperatures, using a combination of black plastic piping to heat water and solar panels to pump the water, as well as other simpler approaches. They are removing the canopy over some such areas to increase solar heating, and providing warm basking sites on rocks, it having been discovered that several species of amphibian suffering from chytridiomycosis increase basking behaviour. This can be beneficial in that it is often the underside of the frogs which suffer most from the fungus.

And this is where Tim's site comes in. The work is at the stage of experimenting with the effectiveness of providing warm pools and monitoring these, so no frogs have been released yet. This will not happen until the team know that suitable pools can be provided to raise the chances of the frogs' survival.

In line with some other work helping sensitive species recover from a human-introduced alien disease, experiments will be made also to help the frogs overcome other stresses. This may include provision of additional food (native insects, rather than bringing in other aliens and creating a new conservation problem!) Such measures may help the frogs adapt to the presence of the chytrid and overcome it. As in all such experimental approaches pioneering new conservation measures, monitoring and adapting the techniques will be crucial. This will include measures like rat-proof refuges.

We all agreed that this work is very complementary to *Adopt*

a *Home for Wildlife*, and we looked forward to providing updates in this newsletter as well as elsewhere.



Deeper into Tim's tropical dry forest, he and Luke Jones inspect one of the experimental ponds described in the text. Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Adopt a Home for Wildlife continues: news and videos

Many other aspects of *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* continue, and we look forward to updating on these and new elements in future newsletters.

In addition, we have made a series of videos about several aspects of this initiative. At present, those available are:

One features the work of the Cork Hill Reunion Committee in restoring the area of their former homes where access has recently been restored:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1L0dFD_PkqU



Another features Dwayne Hixon's site at Old Road Bay:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDsDmg_Vrb0



A third features Montserrat National Trust's native plant nursery, which is vital in supplying the young plants for *Adopt a Home for Wildlife* and other sites:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YyBY0F31II>



Especially for those who like an old-fashioned slide-show, UKOTCF's Chairman gives the background, purpose and overview of activities of *Adopt a Home for Wildlife*:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVVSZUU_NOvo



We look forward to adding further ones soon, including on Tim Orton's tropical dry forest (see pages 3-4) and the mountain chicken work.

These will be available also through our new web-site, which already has sections on the ongoing work, previous work and Montserrat generally.

UKOTCF responds to request for help with Montserrat's turtles



Meeting on turtle conservation in Montserrat Governor's office: (from left) Miss Catherine Tomms (Acting Head of the Governor's Office), Ms Annesta Fergus (Press, Public Affairs, Projects and Policy Officer, Governor's Office), Dr Mike Pienkowski (Chairman, UKOTCF) and Mr Alwyn Ponteent (Chief Fisheries Officer) discuss needs and potential actions. Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Montserrat's Chief Fisheries Officer, Mr Alwyn Ponteent, and his retired predecessor, Mr John Jeffers, are dedicated to the conservation of Montserrat's turtles. Alwyn contacted UKOTCF to seek advice on the latest best practice in this activity. UKOTCF's part-time Conservation Officer, Dr Nicola Weber, is a turtle researcher and was, for several years, the Conservation Officer of the UK Overseas Territory of Ascension Island, which supports one of the largest green turtle nesting populations in the Atlantic Ocean.

Nicola, and UKOTCF's Executive Director, Mrs Catherine Wensink, discussed matters by Skype and, briefed by them, UKOTCF's Chairman, Dr Mike Pienkowski, picked up the discussions in person while in Montserrat in October 2018.

As a result of these very early discussions, it is anticipated that a gap-analysis will be undertaken of needs for work to take account of new legislation and best practice also reviewing what happens currently to ensure that Montserrat is fulfilling its role as guardians of these critically endangered species. This would then be used to identify a modular programme of proposed actions that would be needed over the next, say, 5 or more years as well as associated resources needed to implement them.



Above: turtle track on the beach; below left: female green turtle lays her eggs. Photos: James 'Scriber' Daley

Further integrating the natural environment into physical planning

In an earlier stage of our project (see *SOS Nature of Montserrat* 3, page 7), international environmental and social planning specialists, Dr Jo Treweek and Ms Jennifer Hruza, advisers on environmental audit to the World Bank and other international banks, donated their skills to work with Montserrat Physical Development Authority and others to identify ways of even more integration of the natural environment and physical planning.

In his brief October visit, UKOTCF's Dr Mike Pienkowski was able to discuss these and other outcomes of the work with Hon. David Osborne, Minister of Agriculture, Trade, Lands, Housing & Environment, and Ms Eulyn Silcott-Greaves, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry. Ms Silcott-Greaves will be exploring with her team how best to take forward the recommendations from Dr Treweek and Ms Hruza.

Dr Pienkowski was able to follow up other points and explore further future possibilities in separate valuable meetings with Director of Environment, Ms Ernestine Corbett, and Acting Director of Lands & Surveys and Chief Planning Officer, Ms Lavern Ryan.



Governor H.E. Andy Pearce builds on UKOTCF visit to encourage further collaboration

The Governor, H.E. Andy Pearce and Mrs Pearce took the occasion of the visit to Montserrat of UKOTCF's Chairman, Dr Mike Pienkowski, to host a dinner for those involved in environmental work, with the intention of enhancing communication and collaboration, in a light and informal way.

Following the Governor's introductory remarks, stressing the importance of the environment and the need to communicate, he asked Mike to speak. Here is the gist of what Mike said:

Thank you Governor; thank you all for coming.

The Governor has asked me to say a few words about our involvement here and the natural riches of Montserrat – so this could be very long, but I promise not to be!

As many of you know, UKOTCF is a non-governmental body bringing together many (both governmental and NGO) across the UK Overseas Territories, Crown Dependencies and those supporting elsewhere to help conservation in the UKOTs where this help is requested.

Our involvement has been long term. (My first meeting here was in the mid-1990s in Plymouth.) That is UKOTCF's approach with its partners in all territories – to stay in touch whether we have current projects or not; we work only at the invitation of local partners – we are the only organisation whose sole business is the environment across all UK's Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies – so we have no competing objectives

– but the disadvantage of no other income streams! Even though we work mainly as volunteers, we need to find some costs including for workers in the territories.

Over the years, we have been heavily involved with our partners in Montserrat, including (but not limited to):

- *Setting up the first biodiversity survey in a UKOT – sadly interrupted by the volcano*
- *Coordinating initiating emergency work by RSPB/Durrell/Kew & others after volcano*
- *Coordination is key – for example: via our regional working groups, including the Wider Caribbean Working Group by Skype every 2 or 3 months; conferences of conservation practitioners when we can resource these; providing the secretariat to meetings of environmental ministers of*



An informal environmental dinner, hosted by Montserrat Governor, H.E. Andy Pearce (far end of table)

UKOTs/CDs – all of these to help identify needs of territories and ways to address them, and to coordinate effort within and between territories.

- *Environment Charters between UK and UKOTs – facilitating the development by territory stakeholders of strategies to implement these; and collating information from territories on progress towards implementing these, as well as the Aichi Targets under international conventions and the Sustainable Development Goals*
- *Ramsar Convention Sites (Wetlands of International Importance) review of qualifying sites*

Specifically in Montserrat:

- *Helping finding funding for aspects of Montserrat National Trust's Botanic Gardens;*
- *Helping finding funding from the British Library to initiate the archiving and making available online, by Montserrat National Trust, Montserrat's historic archives;*
 - *the writing, illustrating and publishing of the guidebook Birding in Paradise: the Caribbean Emerald Isle of Montserrat – a guide to bird-watching, nature and heritage sites, launched in this room a few years ago, with Sarita, Scriber and some of us from UKOTCF as authors*
 - *Introduced the Waitt Institute to Montserrat, at the request of the Government of Montserrat, including Alwyn here, for help with marine work, when UK Government did not have the resources to help.*



What are they looking for? From left: Dr Mike Pienkowski (UKOTCF), James 'Scriber' Daley (DOE and Scriber's Tours), and Luke Jones (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust), in the Centre Hills in October 2018 (see next page). Photo: Jennifer Parker

Why are we so concerned with Montserrat?

Of course, Montserrat is a lovely place with delightful people (some of them here tonight), and part of the family of British territories.

Biologically, it is particularly rich, despite its small size and the loss of habitat to the volcano. It has species which occur nowhere else, like the Montserrat oriole and several species of lizards. Recent work by Montana State University – as part of our recent and we hope continuing work to help strategically and practically to keep this globally important wild nature in the long term – found that Montserrat has as many species of several taxa as does Dominica, which is ten times larger and rises to higher altitude, providing extra ecosystems. The reasons for this are not certain. However, it is possible that Montserrat has had some forest vegetation in places throughout its geological history, whereas some other islands may have been totally ash-covered at times. Also, it is possible that, during the plantation era, there was better continuity of natural habitat. Continuity of habitat of reasonable extent is a key element to the maintenance of natural biological diversity.

The Montana State University work was one of four parts of our recent (and current) joint project. The overall objectives were to help native species maximise their range – the best way to ensure long-term survival of a species – and to provide back-up for senior staff at Montserrat National Trust, as well as to help build up capacity for GoM specialists. The four elements of the first phase of the programme were:

- The work of Montana State University to collect, as a first and pilot stage, all the records of beetles – one of the most ecologically and economically important animal groups – from North American and European institutions, digitising and cataloguing this, and building a publicly available internet search system specific for Montserrat: the Montserrat Virtual Museum of Natural History (MVMNH);*
- Environmental Impact Assessment training, and recommendations for more effective (and inexpensive) incorporation of environmental aspects into planning. These are vital if the necessary development in Montserrat is to take place while still allowing wildlife its place both in other areas and, as far as possible, alongside built developments. This work started year or two before the joint project, at the specific request of FCO & the Government of Montserrat. This was provided pro bono by Treweek Environmental Consultants, after FCO found that the funding it had promised was no longer available. The work was continued within the project. This resulted in recommendations to the Government of Montserrat, which I know the Minister and his team are looking to implement (subject of course to any political interruptions).*
- Agreeing, across a wide range of stakeholders, a vision for the South (I think that several of the people here (and others invited but unable to attend) participated in those workshops, which secured that agreement last year.);*
- Adopt a Home for Wildlife – particularly dealing with invasive plants, to secure survival of native plants and animals – as well as building up local “ownership” and support (several local teams, particularly productive being Corkhill Reunion Committee (whose meeting I was at earlier this evening); Tim Orton (who is with us tonight); Dwayne Hixon (who could not be here tonight), and the coastal and shallow marine team organised by Charlie*



Answer: these, of course: (left) male and (right) female Montserrat orioles, near the Oriole Walkway, October 2018. This species is one of a number of animal and plant species which occur nowhere in the world, except Montserrat.

Photos: Dr Mike Pienkowski

Bartlett at Island Dive Centre (here tonight).

We are trying to secure resources to allow us all to build further on these last two elements, not forgetting at a later stage further elements of MVMNH.

I look forward, as do my colleagues, to maintaining our long-term help to Montserrat, both through visits and continual remote working to progress projects in support of conservation of your exceptional environment – for its own sake, for the local quality of life, and for the economic benefits to the local community from the ecosystem services which depend on it, whether this be water, plant products, fish, sustainable tourism or many other things.

Others then took turns during the meal to outline their own projects. One notable feature was the businessman who was bringing in veg-plastic materials to replace conventional plastic and the horrible food “clam-shells”. The Darwin-supported glass-recycling project was also noted, as was the long-term turtle work, dedicated local fund-raising activity, the new mountain chicken work, the swimming and water-based training for children, and of course the work of Montserrat National Trust – as well as several other activities.

There was good, lively debate. There was enthusiasm for such a gathering over dinner perhaps every 3 months.

Mike mentioned the situation that used to occur in the Turks and Caicos Islands (partly because an official there had, the previous week, mentioned to him its usefulness. After UKOTCF had facilitated the development there of a local strategy to implement the Environment Charters, TCI Government kept the working group going, tending to time its meetings to coincide with UKOTCF visits) as a way of coordinating environmental action and monitoring progress. Mike did not advocate that for Montserrat as it would probably be impractical in the present situation. He did, however, offer the services of the UKOTCF Wider Caribbean Working Group for wider coordination/info-exchange, noting that, on occasions it had given more attention to particular territories when useful. This might complement more informal internal Montserrat arrangements.

Future funding for this programme of work

The first main phase of this project (April 2016 to March 2018) was part-funded by Darwin Plus grant 049. The final report of this project was rated by an independent reviewer. Here are a few extracts from the review:

“Protecting the South Soufriere Hills, mainly from feral animals, since humans cannot easily access it, might be the best way to preserve this ecosystem in Montserrat. With this in mind, maximising the survival prospects of Montserrat’s endemic species and ecosystem-services on which the local community depends, is dependent on maximising the area of natural ecosystems.”

The project’s “design involved extensive community consultation with the Minister; the Department of Environment and Montserrat National Trust, Montserrat’s civil society environmental body, in the year running up to the project start date. While ambitious, the design took into account what would be feasible within the timeframe.”

“The project had four stated Outputs, each of which was achieved to a greater extent.”

“The emergent Montserrat Virtual Museum of Natural History (verified through Annex 19) is a good example of the repatriation of data to the host country through data sharing and open access.”

“the ‘Vision for the South of Montserrat’ included in Annex 9 is a very comprehensive and detailed statement of goals and requirements that provide a very useful point of reference for future work within the exclusion zone.”

“The detailed narrative of the Final Report does however, indicate a project that has been well managed both from the UK and within Montserrat. The project (and the people of Montserrat) were unfortunate to endure such extreme weather events during the time of the project, but it appears that the consequences and emergent challenges have been navigated successfully.”

“The project identifies both immediate and long-term strategic outcomes. The former has been to identify and agreed priorities with key stakeholders as to the most sustainable approach to the ongoing recovery of Montserrat’s ecology and economy. The latter is to establish capacity on island to enable this to happen. Both have been achieved which is a credit to the project and all those involved. As set out and described in the consultant report, there exist the legislative and political frameworks to enable appropriate governance decisions to be made on Montserrat and there is an ongoing political support for sustainable change to occur. Grade: A”

“the unique situation on Montserrat required an initiative such as that set out in this project to address, at an island-wide level the need for a strategic vision and initial planning towards sustainable recovery following a major natural event.



(Above) Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF Chairman, speaks on current conservation work on Montserrat, at a fund-raising meeting of the Friends of the British Overseas Territories (FOTBOT), where the following speaker was UK Minister for Overseas Territories, Lord Ahmed (below, with Mike and FOTBOT’s Founder & Chief Executive, Philip Smith). FOTBOT brings together students from, and interested in, all aspects of UKOTs (not just environmental). Photos: FOTBOT



To a greater extent the legislative and institutional capacity was already established on Montserrat through for example, the Physical Planning Department and the Department of the Environment. Working with these departments and with wider stakeholders the project has ensured strategic plans and decisions are owned locally.”

“The Adopt a Home for Wildlife scheme is one example of a grass-roots initiative to both remove invasive non-native species and facilitate the recovery of native species. Indirectly, this should lead to a more naturally biodiverse ecosystem from which services would be derived. Recovery and stabilisation of the terrestrial environment on Montserrat has implications for the surrounding marine environment (much of which is an ongoing exclusion zone to the South of the island). While the marine environment has not been a key focus of this project it will clearly need to be included in the strategy for the wider recovery and sustainable development of Montserrat. It is good to see this recognised in the Vision Statement and as part of the Marine Spatial Planning exercise and the Blue Halo Project.”

“An important output from the project has been the consultant report (Annex 7) and the promotion of this to discussions

with the Government of Montserrat. Further responses to the document were made as shown on Annex 17. This in turn, has led to the creation and agreement of the Vision for the South of Montserrat' (Annex 9). This is more than a vision statement and sets out a framework for subsequent action/management plans."

"a signature of the project has been the continued inclusion and participation of stakeholders from local community to ministerial level. While this might be a positive attribute of smaller, isolated, island communities there is still an important message in terms of project design and management."

"Perhaps the key legacy of this project is the increased capacity, but also the will, to embark on a programme of recovery, habitat restoration and economic development on Montserrat. This will be facilitated by the opportunity to fully adopt and implement the main strategies and agreements that have emerged from the project's mission and to strive towards the detailed Vision for the South of Montserrat. As a consequence of the significant effort to disseminate and communicate the key project activities and to include local communities at grass-roots level through the Adopt a Home for Wildlife initiative, ongoing engagement with and commitment to, environmental sustainability is likely to endure. Private ownership of large parts of South Montserrat within the current exclusion zone has been addressed through direct engagement and a shared understanding of the importance of these areas for future biodiversity conservation on island including the management of invasive non-native and feral species."

"The Montserrat Virtual Museum of Natural History represents a significant, secure and accessible biological and education resource that will enable end-users to record new discoveries and changing ecosystems and inform environmental management decisions.

The Adopt a Home for Wildlife initiative is a highly transferable and commendable, community lead scheme to encourage local people to understand and value local biodiversity and plan an active part in its conservation."

As noted in *SOS Nature of Montserrat 6* (March 2018), the application to Darwin Plus for immediate follow-on work was unsuccessful. A new application was made in the following Darwin Plus round, whose applications closed on 3rd September 2018. At the time of writing, the outcome is unknown. However, in view of the rating of the completed work (see above) and the fact that the new proposal was based on the conclusions of a series of local stakeholder consultations over two years, rejection by Darwin Plus would be illogical.

Nevertheless, UKOTCF is looking to novel funding methods to help continue this important work. This includes via UKOTCF's new website and other initiatives. The likelihood of success through these routes are, of course, unknown.

Did you know...?

Forest thrush

The elusive forest thrush is found only in the Lesser Antilles and so is referred to as a regional endemic. ("Endemic" when used in ecology and conservation means found nowhere else.) The really distinctive scaly plumage on its front makes it u n m i s t a k e a b l e , although you may need to view this with binoculars as they rarely seen up close.



In fact, if you are asking yourself: "was that a forest thrush?", it probably wasn't; you will know it when you see it. The thrushes feed mostly on insects and berries from ground level to canopy, and breed mainly in April-May. Their local name tannin thrush is thought to have arisen because the start of their singing was a reliable indicator to start planting the root-crop tannia.

Black snake

This harmless species is widespread in the Caribbean and South America, but the subspecies is found only in Montserrat. The



Left: forest thrush (Photo: Dr Mike Pienkowski); above & below: black snakes (Photos: James 'Scriber' Daley)



length can reach 1.2m, but most are much smaller. There are wide colour variations between individuals. Common forms include light brown with larger brown splurges in the back and a stripe running along its body, or black with blotches of yellow on the back and sides. In some of the second type, the rear of the body and tail are shiny satin like jet-black. Males and females look alike and young are usually light brown. It is most active in

the morning and late evening, retreating at midday and at night underground or in a rock crevice. They feed on large insects, lizards, frogs, mice and rats. Breeding is usually between March and May with eggs laid under a rock pile or log. Eggs hatch in two or three months. Neither species of snake found on Montserrat are poisonous.

In memory of Dr Erica Gibbs



Dr Erica Gibbs Photo: Jean Handscombe

As this newsletter was being completed, we received the sad news of the death of Dr Erica Gibbs. In addition to her own role as a doctor of medicine and the support to her late husband, the Administrator (the then equivalent of Governor) of Montserrat, Erica played a key role in the founding of Montserrat National Trust and its long-term development.

Sarita Francis, Director MNT, said:

With the passing of Dr Erica Gibbs, the Montserrat National Trust mourns the loss of one its main benefactor members and its longest serving volunteer, spanning the years 1970-2018. The Trust was formed and signed into law in 1970 by her husband Dennis Gibbs, a former Administrator (Governor equivalent) of Montserrat. They came to Montserrat in 1965.

Erica became actively involved in the Trust in the early 1980s, serving in the capacities of Secretary, Recording Secretary, and Editor of the Trust newsletter. She served also on several subcommittees for many years and represented the organisation at regional and international meetings at her own expense. Many overseas experts who provided support to the Trust were accommodated gratis at her home in Olveston.

Erica was our greatest champion and was still volunteering in the Trust gift shop up to her brief illness and passing on 8th November 2018. Her friendship, generosity, wisdom, her smile and warmth will be missed by the council, members, staff, and supporters of the Trust. Her contributions to the Trust and to Montserrat are deeply appreciated.

We extend sincere condolences to her family.

UKOTCF's Chairman, Dr Mike Pienkowski, added:

Erica was a quite remarkable person, a small lady with a formidable personality. I was not the only person to admit to being slightly intimidated when I first met her, such was her determination to support Montserrat's National Trust, and encourage others to do so. However, we all soon realised that this determination was backed by a genuine warmth, friendship and generosity. This was built on a wide base of wisdom, knowledge and experience across a range of subjects. She also made the best rum punch most of us have ever tasted! For all these things, Erica will be greatly missed by all who met her – and is a loss also to those who never did. We offer our deep condolences to her family and many friends.