

*Championing UK's most special species:
the wildlife of UK's Overseas Territories (UKOTs) and
Crown Dependencies (CDs)*

FACT-SHEET ON:

**Montserrat Oriole *Icterus oberi*
UK Overseas Territory: Montserrat**

Montserrat Orioles are restricted to the rain- and cloud-forest. The birds never stray far, and have never been recorded in the nearby neighbouring islands in sight of Montserrat, even in apparently suitable habitat.

With the loss of most of the forest and other vegetation over much of the Soufrière and South Soufrière Hills due to the volcanic activity 1995-2010, the orioles lost most of their remaining habitat. This had already been reduced over the previous 500 years by progressive human clearance of forest on the lower lands. There was also now increased pressure on the remaining forest in the Centre Hills, as the majority of the human population displaced from Plymouth and the central and southern parts of the island need somewhere to live.

Equally, the Montserratian Department of Environment and NGO the Montserrat National Trust did not want to forget about their environment and the world natural resources for which they are responsible. At their request, meetings and other consultations were coordinated by UKOTCF to work out which partner organisations could help in which ways. Durrell, later joined by the Zoological Society of London and other zoos, responded with captive breeding programmes for orioles and the Mountain Chicken frog (the latter endemic to Montserrat and Dominica). The RSPB, also in conjunction with local partners, started studies on the orioles and other birds. Royal Botanic Gardens Kew investigated the plants. Work on some of the insects was coordinated by Mike Ivie of Montana State University. At the time of major volcanic eruptions, some work, funded by FCO via UKOTCF was in progress in Montserrat on biodiversity studies and planning. This had to be transferred to another Caribbean UK Overseas Territory when conditions for



Male (left) and female Montserrat Orioles © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

field-work became impossible. UKOTCF secured commitments from FCO that replacement work would be funded in Montserrat when conditions allowed.

The studies on the orioles tried to assess the effects of other pressures, in the hope that some could be alleviated to compensate partly for the volcanic impacts. Factors studied included the effects of repeated ash-falls, of the increased number of feral animals from the farms which had had to be abandoned in the exclusion zone, and egg- and chick-predation by rats, long ago introduced to Montserrat by humans, as well as by introduced bird species.

Because of the reduction of its population size by more than 50% due to the volcanic activity and the very restricted range, making it very susceptible to other natural or man-made threats, the species was classified as Critically Endangered, following the start of volcanic eruptions. A major threat is the potential damage to these birds (and other species) and their habitats by introduced mammals, including feral farm animals, so that control or eradication of these invasives is vital.



Male oriole probes tree-hole for food



Male Orioles probe tree-hole for food and catch insect.
© Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF



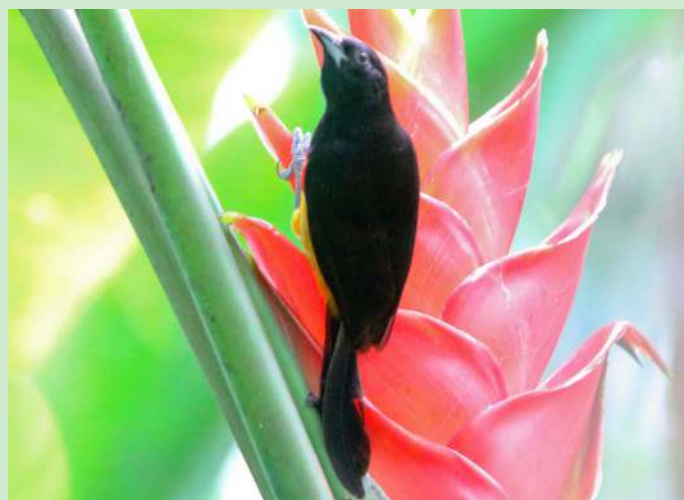
Male Montserrat Oriole catches flying insect.
© Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

Centre Hills and 20% in the South Soufrière Hills, beyond the volcano. This is a tiny world population, and its world range is only about 30 km². With the pressure also for replacement human housing on this small island (only 17 km long), there remain high risks to the survival of this species – and continual vigilance is essential.

The orioles feed mainly on insects found primarily at the undergrowth level, towards which they can sometimes be seen diving to catch such insects. The birds breed in the summer, the timing depending somewhat on the timing of rains. The nest is a basket-shaped structure of woven vegetation suspended under a horizontal leaf of *Heliconia*. Both parents feed the nestlings.

A variety of monitoring and analytical techniques indicate annual declines of 8-52% during the period 1997-2000, following a rapid one-off event when a volcanic eruption caused a 60% decrease in range and population in 1996. There was some recovery between 2003 and 2005, and there was no evidence of a continuing population decline between 2000 and 2013 despite continuing volcanic activity and the presence of native and invasive nest predators, although large uncertainty surrounds the trend estimates. The population in 2013 was estimated as 50% of that in 1998. However, the current population trend is estimated to be stable. Because of the stability of estimated population size, status was reclassified in 2016 to Vulnerable.

In 2012, the total population was estimated at between 200 and 460 mature individuals, with about 80% of these in the



Male Montserrat Oriole rests on the flower of red Heliconia – Montserrat's national bird with Montserrat's national flower. The orioles build nests underneath the large leaves of this plant.
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