



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

FACT-SHEET ON:

**Henderson and Pitcairn endemic birds**  
**UK Overseas Territory: Pitcairn Islands**

Henderson Island, in the Pitcairn group, is a World Heritage Site and one of the most natural islands in the Pacific Ocean, being the most unspoilt raised atoll. 5 bird species found nowhere else (endemic) depend on the maintenance of this near-natural state.

There are 4 islands in the Pitcairn group. Oeno, the westernmost, and Ducie, the easternmost (and Easter Island's nearest neighbour), are both low atolls. Pitcairn itself is a peak of geologically recent volcanic origin. Henderson was a low atoll, but the creation of Pitcairn caused flexing of the Earth's crust, causing Henderson to be lifted 33m into a raised atoll, the formerly almost sea-level atoll becoming a raised plateau.

The islands are remote. There are no airports. It takes about 1.5 days in a boat south-east from the nearest French Polynesian island, Mangareva, with its airport, to reach uninhabited Oeno, with Pitcairn a further 0.5 days. Henderson is half a day further east, and Ducie another 1.5 days east from Henderson.



*The plateau (raised atoll) at the north end of Henderson Island, above the reef, beach and beach-backing vegetation.*

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**Henderson flightless Rail or Crake *Porzana atra***

The Henderson Rail or Crake is one of only seven species of flightless rail surviving on Pacific islands. Population estimates in 1987 and in 1991/92 were 3240 and 6200 individuals respectively, the difference possibly due to methodological reasons, rather than real increase. The species is classified as Vulnerable. While some eggs may be lost to the introduced Pacific Rats *Rattus exulans*, the crakes are very aggressive towards the rats, and have co-existed with them for some 800 years. The crakes are omnivorous, foraging in the leaf-litter, gleaning items such as skink *Emoia cyanura* eggs from the undersides of fallen leaves, large nematodes, beetles, moths, spiders, dead caterpillars, land snails and small insects. The breeding season is long, extending from late July to mid February (double broods are not uncommon) and clutch-size is 2-3. Helpers may provide extraparental care such as defending eggs and chicks from crabs and rats.

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**Henderson Reed-warbler *Acrocephalus taiti***

The Henderson Reed-warbler has been the subject of a detailed single-season breeding study which established that about one-third of breeding territories were occupied not by pairs but by trios. Such trios, either two male/one female or one male/two females, were of birds unrelated to each other. Population estimates in 1987 and in 1991/92 were 10,800 and 9,500 individuals, respectively. The species is classified as Vulnerable.

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**Pitcairn Island Reed-warbler *Acrocephalus vaughani***

The only land-bird species breeding on Pitcairn Island itself, and occurring nowhere else, it is classified as Endangered. It is closely related to the Henderson Reed-Warbler. The potential threats include potential alien invasive species introduced by human activity.

Photo © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF





## Henderson Fruit-dove *Ptilinopus insularis*

The Henderson Fruit-dove, also known as Scarlet-capped Fruit-dove, is an endemic representative of a widespread Pacific genus. Its diet includes most fruit species available on the island, but the watery *Procris pedunculata* is especially important. Population estimates in 1987 and 1991/92 were 3420 and 3140 individuals, respectively. Its natural habitat is tropical moist lowland scrub forest, which it formerly shared with three other endemic species of pigeon, now extinct. The species is classified as Vulnerable.

Photo © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF



## Henderson Lorikeet *Vini stepheni*

The scarcest of the landbirds is the Henderson Lorikeet, also known as Stephen's Lorikeet, which feeds on nectar, pollen fruit and also arthropods. No nest has ever been found. It is the only species of *Vini* living in habitats relatively little altered by man. A population estimate in 1987 was 720-1820 individuals. The species is classified as Vulnerable.

Photo © Pawl Warren



## Henderson Petrel *Pterodroma atrata*

Henderson Petrel is Endangered. It is known only from the Pitcairn Islands, although it is possible that it may also eventually be found in French Polynesian Islands. However, it is likely that the majority, perhaps the overwhelming majority of this taxon, breeds on Henderson, where there are 16,000 pairs. In addition, the populations on Henderson of Herald and Kermadec Petrels are 11,100 and 10,000 pairs, respectively, in both cases about 20% of the species' world populations. There are also about 2500 pairs of Murphy's Petrel, a small number in comparison with those on Ducie and Oeno.

These 'gadfly' petrels nest on the ground, rather than in burrows, as there are no natural predators. Henderson Island's wildlife is under severe threat from the impacts of invasive Pacific Rats *Rattus exulans*. Nesting seabird numbers have already dropped from an estimated 5 million pairs before rats were introduced by humans (probably as a food source), to only 40,000 pairs. The rats devour an estimated 25,000 petrel chicks per year on Henderson. There were successful removals of introduced Pacific Rats from Ducie and Oeno in 1997. A major exercise to remove rats from Henderson was undertaken in 2011 by RSPB. This was very nearly successful, but a few rats survived, probably due to an unexpected change in the weather providing the rats with surplus alternative food to the bait being used. The cull resulted in greatly increased breeding success of the birds for several years while rat numbers recovered. Further research is being undertaken before attempting another extermination attempt.



Henderson Petrel on its nesting grounds on Henderson Island.  
© Alve Henricson

Other challenges for conservation of the islands' wildlife are the need for designation of Henderson, Ducie and Oeno as Wetlands of International Importance, the preparation or updating of management plans, and the challenge of enforcing these, because of the distance of the uninhabited islands from Pitcairn itself. For example, Ducie is relatively frequently visited by cruise ships *en route* from Easter Island to Pitcairn and Tahiti, so that Ducie is reached (as is potentially Henderson) before local briefing by Pitcairners is possible. Some of these challenges could be addressed by increased resources.



Adamstown, the only settlement on Pitcairn Island.  
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