



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

FACT-SHEET ON:

**Wirebird *Charadrius sanctaehelenae*  
UK Overseas Territory: St Helena**

The Saint Helena Plover *Charadrius sanctaehelenae*, locally known as the Wirebird due to its thin legs, is a small wader endemic to the island of Saint Helena in the mid-Atlantic. It is non-migratory. The bird is similar in appearance to the Kittlitz's plover of sub-Saharan Africa, from which it may have evolved, but is rather larger. It is the national bird of St Helena and has been depicted on the country's coins. This plover is resident all year on the open, non-forested areas of Saint Helena.

Populations in general have been declining since at least the 1970s. Threats include predation by human-introduced cats, rats and common myna bird, off-road vehicle use, the construction of the Saint Helena Airport and a projected windfarm. In 2016, the population had recovered to about 560 mature individuals, from a previous minimum of less than 200 in 2006; consequently, the species was downlisted to Vulnerable from its previous assessment of Critically Endangered. Its tiny distribution and numbers will continue as a serious risk. It is the only one of at least 9 endemic bird species that has survived human settlement of the Island. Several more endemics are extinct and known only from subfossil remains: St Helena Petrel, Olson's Petrel, St Helena Shearwater, St Helena Crake, St Helena Rail, St Helena Dove, St Helena Cuckoo and St Helena Hoopoe.

The increasing use of off-road vehicles threatens nests and eggs. Feral cat populations are increasing, as trapping levels have declined and fewer people neuter their pet cats. Construction activity has apparently dispersed some of the smaller subpopulations. The newly-built St Helena Airport at Prosperous Bay Plain and its construction access road from the port have altered some of the major patches of remaining habitat, and some other grassland is now slated for reforestation to aid recovery of the island's ecosystem, and a major wind turbine project has been proposed for the species' most important breeding area. Whilst there were studies in place during airport construction, funding for such work has largely ended, despite the continued fragility of the population – and some restoration of resources is needed to ensure recovery of its numbers.



*Like most plovers, Wirebirds hunt their prey by interspersing waits of some seconds (above) with darts (below) to survey from a new hunting position or to catch insect or other small prey spotted.*

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*Left: Adult incubates eggs. Both parents share incubation and care of the young.*

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*Right: Like most wader or shorebird species, the chicks hatch with down and long legs. The adults do not feed them but guide them to feeding localities and guard them from potential predators, which they may fly at to mob or pretend to be injured themselves to lure the predators away from the well camouflaged chicks which crouch on motionless on the ground.*

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