UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum

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FACT-SHEET ON:

Endemic land-birds
UK Overseas Territory: Tristan da Cunha

The Tristan da Cunha archipelago (37°08' S, 12°28' W) comprises six islands lying 1,900 km SSW of Saint Helena. Tristan Island, with an area of 96 km^2, is the only inhabited island of the archipelago, with a population of 293 people (2016) who claim it as the most remote settlement in the world. It was first permanently settled in 1810. At 2062m, the summit of the shield volcano that forms Tristan Island, is the highest point in the Tristan da Cunha archipelago. Within 40 km SW of Tristan Island lie Inaccessible Island (14 km^2, up to 600m high) and the Nightingale Island group comprising Nightingale Island (3.4 km^2, up to 400m high) and Middle and Stolenhoff islands (both < 1 km^2). Gough Island (which is staffed by South African weather station personnel on 1-year shifts) is a further 350 km SE of Tristan Island, with an area of 65 km^2 and height of 910m, consisting of a main island and several islets and rocks. The Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) attributed to the Tristan archipelago extends to around Gough Island, making it the second largest in the South Atlantic, at 754,720 km^2 in area.

This island group supports 7 endemic land-bird species: 2 rails, 1 thrush and 4 buntings which evolved from South American finches – plus 1 rail and 1 bunting which went extinct on Tristan before 1900.

Inaccessible Island Rail *Atlantisia rogersi*

The smallest flightless bird in the world (13-15 cm long, 34-52 g), found only on Inaccessible Island. This tiny rail, with soft, fluffy-looking plumage, creeps through dense cover, dashing across openings like a mouse. Occurs singly, in pairs or family groups. Pairs defend territories, and breed October-January. Nest is a woven ball of grasses and sedges, with a short entrance tunnel, on the ground among dense vegetation. Two eggs are incubated by both adults; the bird off-nest often delivers food to its mate. Chicks leave the nest within one day of hatching but return to the nest to be brooded at night for a few days, and remain under close supervision and fed by adults for several weeks. Adults defend eggs and chicks vigorously against Tristan Thrushes. Occasionally eaten by skuas. Diet is mainly invertebrates, including earthworms. centipedes, caterpillars. moths, amphipods and weevils; also seeds and berries. Mainly diurnal, but also calls at night. Occurs in all habitats from edges of boulder beaches and vegetated cliffs to highest peaks; most abundant in marshy areas. Population: is about 5000 pairs. IUCN classifies as Vulnerable, given its small range and susceptibility to accidental introduction of predators such as rats and mice.

On the beach of Inaccessible Island: (above) Inaccessible Rail; (below) Tristan Thrush: and (bottom) Inaccessible Bunting. © Dr Mike Pienkowski, UKOTCF

Tristan Thrush *Nesocichla eremita*

At 23-26 cm long and 80-120 g, this thrush apparently evolved from vagrants from South America. It is endemic to the northern islands of the group, with different sub-species found on each of: Tristan (<50 pairs, confined to gulches and the Base {plateau on lower slopes of the mountain} up to 1,200 m); Nightingale (400 pairs in all habitats); and Inaccessible (850 pairs in all habitats). Classified as Near-Threatened, given its small range and susceptibility to introduced predators. The population at Tristan is greatly reduced due to predation by cats and rats. Opportunistic feeder. Breeds September-December. Chicks fledge after 20 days. Fledglings remain with parents for 3-4 weeks, begging vociferously for food.

Inaccessible Bunting *Nesospiza acunhae*

This and the following closely-related *Nesospiza* species, confined to the northern islands, provide a fascinating example of evolution in action, especially at Inaccessible, where three forms have evolved to exploit different habitats. Large- and small-billed forms were lumped together. but genetic evidence shows independent evolution at Inaccessible and

Nightingale. A small-billed bunting at Tristan went extinct before 1900. probably due to predation by introduced mice and feral cats.

At 17-21 cm, 24-49 g, the Inaccessible Bunting is endemic to that island. It is remarkably variable, with 3 distinctive subspecies: large-billed Dunn's Bunting *N. a. dunnei* mainly in woodland and two small-billed birds: bright yellow Upland Bunting *N. a. fraseri* on the plateau averages larger with a smaller bill than drab Lowland Bunting *N. a. acunhae* of *Spartina* tussock. Some immature Upland Buntings feed along the coast in winter and spring. All 3 subspecies hybridise on the eastern plateau; hybrids are intermediate in size. Breeds November-January. Incubation by female only for 17-18 days; fed near nest by male. Chicks brooded by female for first 5- 7 days, then both male and female feed chicks. Nestling period 18- 21 days; chicks remain in dense cover for another 10 days, then accompany adults foraging on natal territory. Only raise one brood per season. but may re-lay following breeding failures; main causes of failure are predation by thrushes and bad weather. Eats seeds. fruits and invertebrates. Small-billed birds eat mainly seeds of sedges and grasses, Nertera fruit and insects. Dunn's Bunting and large-billed hybrids feed on *Phylica* fruit; hybrids also glean insects from epiphytes on *Phylica* trees. Occasionally killed by skuas. Classified as Vulnerable, given its small range and susceptibility to accidental introduction of predators.

Left: Nightingale Bunting © Nancie Petersen. Right: Wilkins Bunting © Team Endemic Birds. Below: Gough Bunting © RSPB. Bottom: Gough Moorhen © Dr Peter Ryan

Nightingale Bunting *Nesospiza questi*

Endemic to the Nightingale group, with a population of 4,000 pairs, the Nightingale Bunting (16-18 cm, 24-29 g) is Vulnerable, given its small range and susceptibility to accidental introduction of predators such as rats and mice. Breeds October-January; adults territorial at least September-March. Both sexes chase intruders. Diet mainly seeds and berries; chicks fed on invertebrates. Forages by gleaning vegetation and hopping on ground.

Wilkins (or Grosbeak) Bunting *Nesospiza wilkinsi*

Endemic to Nightingale and confined to areas with *Phylica* trees, and with a population of only 50 pairs, Wilkins Buntings are Critically Endangered, given the tiny population and range, and the susceptibility to habitat loss and accidental introduction of predators. Its body (20-22 cm. 46-53g) is larger than, and its bill almost twice as deep as that of, the Nightingale Bunting. The bill is specialised to crack open fruits of *Phylica* trees. Adults are territorial at least September-March. Breeds November-January. Diet mainly *Phylica* fruit. Clambers around canopy of *Phylica* trees, crushing woody fruits to obtain large seeds; also gleans invertebrates from surrounding vegetation.

Gough Bunting *Rowettia goughensis*

Endemic to Gough, this Bunting (23-26 cm. 50-56 g) occurs in all habitats from boulder beaches to highest peaks, but nests only on steep cliffs, below 400 m. With a population of only 1000 pairs, reduced due to predation of eggs and chicks by introduced mice (for which there are major plans to attempt eradication), it is classified as Vulnerable. Breeds September-December. Incubation is by female only, fed near nest by male. Chicks are brooded initially just by female; later both male and female provision chicks. Nestling period is 20-26 days; chicks remain in dense cover near nest for another week or so, then accompany adults while foraging. Raise only one brood per season, but may re-lay following breeding failures; <48% of eggs result in fledged chicks. Diet includes various insects, spiders, seeds and berries (especially *Nertera* fruit); also occasionally scavenges from skua kills. Forages by gleaning from vegetation; often pulls up moss and other loose vegetation with bill or feet to expose prey.

Gough Moorhen *Gallinula comeri*

At 32-36 cm and 400-530 g, resembles Common Moorhen, but with reduced wings and more robust legs. Occurs in coastal tussock and fern bush where there is sufficient cover to avoid skuas. Remains in dense cover; sometimes climbs larger branches of *Phylica* trees and enters seabird burrows. Pairs defend territories. Breeds September-February; nest is an open cup built by both sexes low in dense vegetation, usually a dense tussock; nest often reached through a tunnel up to 1 m long. Eggs incubated by both adults for 20-22 days; partner may feed incubating bird on nest. Chicks leave nest shortly after hatching but remain under close supervision for several weeks. Pairs may raise 2 broods per season, with chicks from first brood assisting with rearing second brood. Diet mainly invertebrates, seeds and other plant material; also scavenges from skua kills and takes abandoned seabird eggs. Endemic to Gough, but introduced to Tristan (likely derived from eight Gough Moorhens released in 1956). At Tristan, range is still expanding, and is now almost all around the Base, but not found on Settlement Plain. Population perhaps 3,500 pairs at Gough and 2,000 at Tristan. Classified as Vulnerable, given its small range and susceptibility to accidental introduction of predators. Tristan Moorhen *G. nesiotis,* endemic to Tristan, apparently went extinct before 1900, killed off by feral cats, hunting and perhaps rats. lt is unknown why Tristan Moorhen disappeared when the very similar Gough Moorhen is thriving at Tristan.

This note draws heavily on Peter Ryan's 2007 book: Field Guide to the animals & plants of Tristan da Cunha & Gough Island.