

Polynesian Megapodes thriving on Fonualei

Dieter Rinke



An estimated 300–500 Polynesian Megapodes *Megapodius pritchardii* (Critically Endangered) have been found on an uninhabited island where eggs and chicks were transferred 10 years ago

A visit by Dick Watling, BirdLife's Affiliate in Fiji, to remote Fonualei island, Tonga, discovered an estimated 300–500 Polynesian Megapodes *Megapodius pritchardii*, doubling the population estimate of this Critically Endangered species.

At least five species of megapodes lived in the south-west Pacific prior to human colonisation. Today, just one species, the Polynesian or Niuafo'ou Megapode known locally as the Malau, survives, on Niuafo'ou, Tonga's northernmost island. In June 1989, the Government of the Kingdom of Tonga initiated a bird conservation programme with the Brehm Fund for International Bird Conservation based in Germany, under the direction of Dr Dieter Rinke. This work revealed a total population of 188–235 pairs of Malau in 1993, which was in slow decline largely because of over-hunting and egg-harvesting by local people, and predation by introduced rats, cats and dogs. A decision was taken to move eggs to uninhabited, rat-free, volcanic Fonualei. In June 1993, 43 megapode eggs were taken

from Niuafo'ou and carried to Fonualei. Six eggs hatched on the journey, the chicks were released and the remaining eggs buried in warm volcanic sand. The following year, a further 31 eggs and three chicks were transferred, and an adult bird from the previous transfer was seen.

A change of job and other commitments meant that Rinke was not able to visit the island in subsequent years. However, he encouraged Watling to do so, and he was finally able to get ashore in March 2003. On the first evening, he and colleague Eva Taumalolo observed 13 Malau. They left the island the following day, but during their stay made 56 observations of Malau in only a small area and extrapolated their sightings to give a total population estimate of 300–500 birds. Also present on the island were good numbers of Shy Ground-dove *Gallicolumba stairii* (Vulnerable), a species with a patchy distribution across central Polynesia. The presence of so many Malau is a wonderful conservation success story in the region.

A protected world for the

"My work as a bird tour leader takes me to many countries around the world each year. I'm perhaps more exposed than most birdwatchers to the threats facing so many species these days - and so I really appreciate the importance of the conservation work of the BirdLife Partnership. Including a legacy for BirdLife in my will seemed like the least I could do to help."

(David Fisher is Managing Director of the British bird tour company Sunbird, and has been an active supporter of BirdLife for more than 25 years.)

Pledging a legacy in your will, however small, is an extremely valuable way of helping BirdLife International and our Partners ensure that vital work to protect birds continues into the future.

It need not be difficult or expensive to amend your will to incorporate a legacy. For a leaflet and detailed information, please contact: BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA, UK. Tel: +44 (0) 1223 277318 Email: birdlife@birdlife.org.uk

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