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Cape Verde's seabirds in trouble

The Cape Verde islands off the west coast of Africa are home to some remarkable birds. Although the plight of the landbird species, many of them unique subspecies that perhaps warrant full specific treatment, such as the Cape Verde Kite *Milvus (milvus) fasciicauda* and Cape Verde Heron *Ardea (purpurea) bournei*, is relatively well-known, the threats facing Cape Verde's seabirds are less well publicised.

However, many of these are also unique forms and, like the landbirds, many are in danger of extinction. Manuela Nunes of SPEA, the BirdLife Partner Designate in Portugal, and Cornelis Hazevoet of Universidade de Lisboa, present an overview.

According to the Cape Verde Red Data Book, the majority of seabird species in Cape Verde are classified as Endangered or Vulnerable. This includes Fea's Petrel *Pterodroma feae*, perhaps the most emblematic seabird of the archipelago, and one that is of priority conservation concern in Europe. Outside of Cape Verde just one small colony of this species, of around 150–200 pairs is known, on the tiny islet of Bugio, off Madeira (although on-going genetic studies may soon demonstrate that the two populations represent distinct taxa). The Cape Verde population numbers between 500 and 1,000 pairs, which breed on high cliffs in the

interiors of Fogo, Santo Antão, São Nicolau and Santiago. Although the inaccessibility of these nesting sites affords the birds some protection, local people continue to catch birds, especially on Fogo and Santo Antão, because of the belief that the birds' body fat has medicinal properties (on the former island) and its alleged culinary properties (on the latter).

The Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii*, which is endemic to the islands and classified as Endangered, is another target species of human persecution. The total world population is around 10,000 pairs, but each



Cape Verde Shearwater *Calonectris edwardsii* chicks are considered a culinary delicacy by some people

year an estimated 5,000 chicks are taken from their nests on Raso and Branco by fishermen to be sold in markets, especially on Santo Antão, where they are considered a culinary delicacy. Smaller numbers of Cape Verde Little Shearwaters *Puffinus (assimilis) boydi*, another endemic taxon, are also captured for this trade.

Formerly, colonies of hundreds and even thousands of Brown Boobies *Sula leucogaster* were found in Cape Verde, but the numbers have been much reduced through heavy human exploitation of the adults, chicks and eggs for food, and nowadays fewer than 1,000 pairs nest in the archipelago. Similarly, numbers of Red-billed Tropicbirds *Phaethon aethereus* have declined so that only 100–125 pairs remain, and the population is considered highly threatened. The five remaining pairs of Magnificent Frigatebirds *Fregata magnificens* that still bred in the 1990s on the small islets of Curral Velho and Baluarte off Boavista, may already have disappeared: the only population of this species in the eastern Atlantic Ocean. In the absence of trees, these birds atypically nested on the ground, amongst Brown Booby colonies.

Today, the most accessible seabird colonies have declined massively or have disappeared altogether, and the only protection for the remaining breeding sites is their sheer inaccessibility. In common with many formerly uninhabited oceanic islands, a further major threat to seabirds comes from introduced terrestrial predators. Even a single cat can have devastating effects on burrow nesting species, and cat droppings found near the important seabird colonies on Raso islet included remains of petrels and many Red-billed Tropicbird feathers.

The development and implementation by the relevant governmental agencies of a strategic plan for the sustainable use of natural resources within Cape Verde is a matter of utmost urgency. In 1991, the government



The population of Brown Boobies *Sula leucogaster* has been reduced through heavy human exploitation of the adults, chicks and eggs for food

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Only about 125 pairs of Red-billed Tropicbirds remain on Cape Verde

declared the islands of Santa Luzia, Branco, Raso, Cima, Curral Velho and Baluarte as natural reserves. This, at least in theory, protected some of the more important seabird colonies. However, the regulation of human activities on these islands was never published and there is no wardening in place.

Urgent conservation measures are necessary to prevent Cape Verde's important seabird populations falling into a steady and potentially fatal decline. The swift establishment of a comprehensive network of protected areas, with effective wardening,

would perhaps be just in time to protect the unique seabird breeding colonies.

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SPEA is BirdLife in Portugal

Further reading

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Cape Verde Little Shearwater *Puffinus (assimilis) boydi*

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