

Endemic birds and seabirds of the Indian Ocean

The Seychelles, a group of granite islands in the Indian Ocean, is a birdwatcher's paradise. Mahe, Praslin, La Digue and Cousin hold eleven endemic species. Some of these are extremely rare, including the beautiful Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher and the restricted Seychelles Magpie Robin. We are visiting at a peak time for nesting seabirds and migrant shorebirds from Asia. After our stay in the Seychelles, we travel to the Mascarene Islands of Mauritius, Reunion and Rodrigues situated east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. Our main base is on Mauritius, the largest of the three islands and once home to the legendary Dodo. From here we make excursions by air to neighbouring Reunion and Rodrigues. The islands hold fourteen extremely rare endemics with seven on Mauritius, five on Reunion and two on Rodrigues. In addition to these 'special' birds, we can also study tropicbirds, shearwaters and terns that breed in abundance on offshore islands. Each of the islands has its culture, climate and unique habitat. The local inhabitants are extremely friendly, their ancestry dating back to the days of slavery. This holiday gives you an opportunity to study and observe some of the world's rarest species and relax in delightful surroundings on remote and beautiful Indian Ocean islands.

Day 1: We have an evening departure to the main Seychelles island of Mahe. Arrival is the following afternoon.

Day 2: At the airport, we can expect close views of Madagascar Fody and Zebra Doves. High volcanic peaks shrouded in natural forest dominate the island. Around the edges are muddy beaches and mangrove trees. We transfer to our hotel situated on the north coast of Mahe, passing through the quaint capital of Victoria. In the afternoon, we visit Union Vale and search for our first endemic birds. Seychelles Swiftlet, Seychelles Sunbird and Seychelles Bulbul are all relatively common on the lower slopes and in flowering gardens.

Day 3: We have a full day exploring the varied habitats on Mahe. An area close to Victoria Harbour has extensive mudflats attracting Crab Plover, Greater Sandplover, Common Greenshank, Terek and Curlew Sandpipers. Various piers and jetties offer resting places for Saunders' and Black-naped Terns and ever-present Grey and Striated Herons. The cross-island road traverses some spectacular scenery offer-

Dates

**Wednesday August 28th -
Wednesday September 11th 2019**

Leader: Mark Finn and local guides

Group Size: 8

Birds: 80-100 including 30 endemics

ing views of distant coral-lined islands. The village of Port Glaud, nestling under huge granite cliffs, is our destination. This is a reliable site for the extremely rare and tiny Seychelles Kestrel. The fields have Cattle Egrets, Madagascar Turtle-dove and Common Myna. As we travel on meandering roads into the forested peaks, we should find the gaudy-looking Seychelles Blue Pigeon. In the evening we are joined by a local ornithologist who can show us the elusive and little known Seychelles Scops-owl.

Day 4: A morning visit to a remote village situated high above Mahe for Seychelles White-eye of which fewer than twenty pairs remain. We can re-check Victoria Harbour for shorebirds, herons and terns. In the afternoon, we make a leisurely exploration



Brown Noddy Photo: Jo Finn

of north Mahe with a visit to the Plantation Club for Yellow Bittern and the endemic sub-species of Common Moorhen.

Day 5: Transfer to Praslin, the second largest of the islands for a three-night stay. Prasline has a much slower pace of life and is home to the endemic Coco de Mer palm. Later in the morning we visit the nearby island of La Digue. The star bird here is the Seychelles Paradise Flycatcher which inhabits the vanilla woods. Other species we may encounter include Yellow Bittern and Common Waxbill. The shoreline usually holds a few Whimbrel, Common Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone and Sanderling. On our return to Prasline, we have a chance of observing Wedge-tailed Shearwaters, Lesser Noddy and elegant Fairy Terns.

Day 6: Today we travel to Aride, an outlying island seabird colony holding 20,000 White-tailed Tropicbirds, nearly a quarter of a million Sooty Terns and significant numbers of Bridled and Roseate Terns. On the crossing, we should encounter Wedge-tailed and Tropical Shearwaters. After a barbecue lunch on the beach, we visit the north side of Aride, an area of steep cliffs attracting large numbers of Great and Lesser Frigatebirds. Return to Praslin, watching seabirds in abundance.

Day 7: After breakfast, we travel by boat to Cousin, a low-lying island of natural woodland and one of the most important islands for breeding seabirds. A slow walk takes us into the trees where we can see White-

tailed Tropicbirds nesting around tree trunks and Fairy Terns perched on bare horizontal branches. We can also expect hundreds of nesting Bridled Terns, Lesser and Brown Noddies and, overhead, the menacing threat of Great Frigatebirds. A rare endemic form of Common Moorhen is present on Cousin. The island has a few introduced Giant Tortoises that scuff up the earth revealing worms. This is important for the Seychelles Magpie Robins that walk around your feet. Other endemic species present are the critically endangered Seychelles Fody and increasing populations of Seychelles Warbler. Back on Prasline, we visit the Coco de Mer plantations in the Vallee de Mai. This fascinating place holds the rare Seychelles Black Parrot, Seychelles Swiftlet and Seychelles Bulbul. Mammals occurring include the introduced Tenrac and endemic Seychelles Fruit Bat. We can check out an area known as Zimbabwe which gives views of Cousin and Aride. The woodlands have Seychelles Blue Pigeon while the shoreline has wintering waders which may include Grey Plover and Bar-tailed Godwit.

Day 8: Transfer to Prasline airport via Grand Anse Bay, an important area for waders and Crested Terns. A short visit to Praslin Golf Club may produce a vagrant Ruff. Return to Mahe for the two-hour flight down to Mauritius in the Mascarene Islands. Transfer to our hotel for four nights.

Day 9: Mauritius is dominated by high, thickly wooded peaks towering above swathes of sugar cane fields in the lowlands. The Indian Ocean here is a brilliant turquoise blue lapping gently onto palm-fringed beaches. Our main interest, however, is the island's endemic birdlife. Most species find a stronghold in the Black River Gorges National Park and surrounding area. Today we concentrate on the lower altitude of the park. Passing through the countryside, we may find Grey Francolin and parties of Mascarene Swiftlets and Mascarene Martins. Careful checking of telegraph poles and dead trees should yield the beautiful Mauritius Kestrel. This species dwindled to less than ten wild birds when it was saved from extinction by a cap-

Seychelles, Mauritius, Rodrigues & Reunion

tive-breeding programme. We should also locate endemic Mauritius Bulbuls and the common Mauritius Grey White-eye. Common species include Rose-ringed Parakeet, Spotted Dove, Red-whiskered Bulbul, Village Weaver and Yellow-fronted Canary.

Day 10: Travel to the north west of Mauritius for a boat trip to Round and Serpent Islands off the north coast. The crossing may produce Mascarene and Wedge-tailed Shearwaters and pods of Humpback Whales. These two islands hold thousands of breeding seabirds with significant numbers of Red-tailed and White-tailed Tropicbirds, Trinidade Petrel, Great and Lesser Frigatebirds, Masked and Red-footed Boobies, Bridled and Sooty Terns, and Brown and Lesser Noddies. Return to Mauritius for lunch and a return visit to Black River Gorges.

Day 11: A special day with visits to two closed areas of Black River Gorges National Park accompanied by staff from the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation. We should see all the endemic species including Mauritius Kestrel, Mauritius Cuckoo-shrike and Mauritius Bulbul. Two species, namely Mauritius Olive White-eye and Mauritius Fody, are attracted to flowering plants. They probably number less than 100 individuals and are critically endangered. The other two species, Pink Pigeon and Mauritius (Echo) Parakeet, are slowly increasing in numbers and we expect close views at feeding stations situated in an area of natural forest. A visit to Combo, a stronghold of the rare Mauritius Paradise Flycatcher, is also planned.

Day 12: Transfer to the airport for an internal flight to Rodrigues, an isolated and rather barren island. The island has a distinctly West Indian atmosphere in contrast to Mauritius. On arrival, we make the short journey to our hotel for a night's stay. The hill opposite our base is home to endemic Rodrigues Fruit Bats.

Day 13: Morning visit into the interior and Solitude Forest Station. It is here that the two endangered endemic species,

Rodrigues Fody and Rodrigues Warbler, reside. Both are slowly increasing in numbers due to careful conservation work on the island. Transfer to the airport for our flight to Mauritius and on to Reunion, an isolated French territory for a two-night stay.

Day 14: Reunion is literally the top of an extinct volcano jutting 3,000 metres above the surrounding Indian Ocean. Coastal cliffs can hold good numbers of White-tailed Tropicbirds. Our main interest is the central ground of the island where we can look for endemic land species in Reunion Paradise-flycatcher, Reunion Cuckoo-shrike, Reunion Stonechat, Reunion Bulbul and Reunion Olive White-eye. Species shared with Mauritius, but more numerous on Reunion, include Mascarene Swiftlet, and the closely related Reunion Grey White-eye. Open areas with scrub and brush attract near endemic species in Reunion Harrier and Mascarene Martin. We can visit St Pierre on the south coast for close observations of the critically endangered Barau's Petrel as it flies inland to its nesting sites on the edge of an extinct volcano.

Day 15: A final morning birdwatching on Reunion. We then transfer to Plaisance Airport on Mauritius for our flight home to England. Arrival is early the next morning.

Prices

Ground Price: £4,995
Single room: £200
Deposit: £500
*Air Fare: £1,800

This holiday is fully inclusive of accommodation and meals, transport and permit fees, guidance, tips and taxes.

Not included: drinks, insurance and items of a personal nature. Airport departure taxes from the Seychelles, Reunion and Mauritius.

**Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights*