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*Neither fish nor fowl? A hybrid bunting with an intermediate-sized bill.*

## GOING INACCESSIBLE

Last issue's Fitznews described a new initiative to investigate the status of Aldabra's birds. Another project based at a similarly exotic location is also about to receive a new lease of life: the study of the buntings at Inaccessible Island.

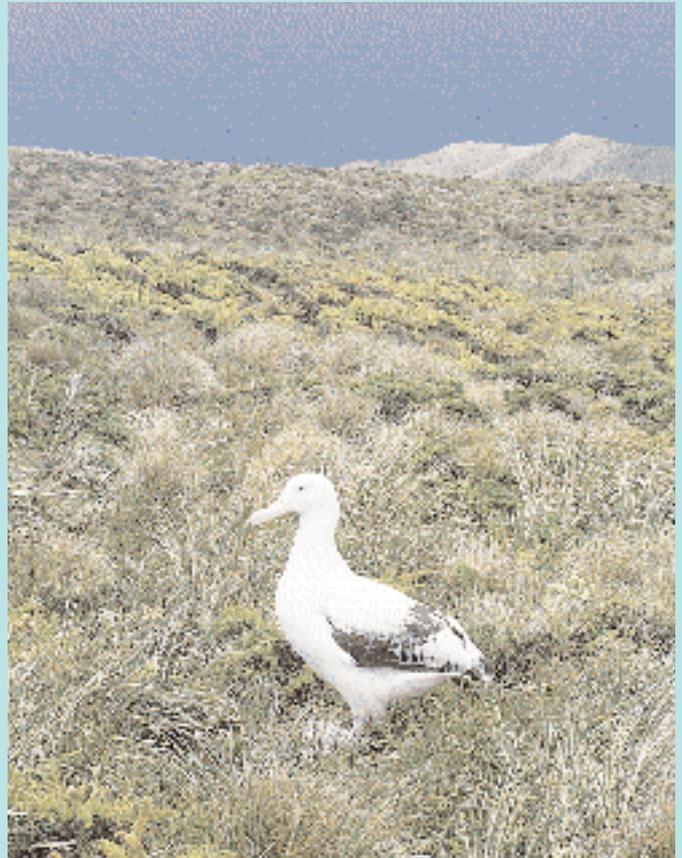
Inaccessible is one of three main islands in the Tristan da Cunha group. Situated midway between Cape Town and South America, Inaccessible, like Aldabra, is a volcanic island divorced from continental influences. It is home to four land birds, all restricted to the Tristan islands. Star attraction is the Inaccessible Island Rail, famous for being the smallest flightless bird in the world (other, smaller, species such as the Steven Island Wren in New Zealand were wiped out by introduced predators).

Less attractive but interesting in a macabre way is the Tristan Thrush, which has a tongue adapted to lap up the contents of seabird eggs. It is a supreme dietary generalist, though, and has even been observed catching storm-petrels in flight and killing them by

battering in their skulls. Its pugnacious character has allowed this thrush to persist at the main island of Tristan despite the presence of rats and mice.

The remaining land birds are buntings: small, drab, olive-green birds that are easily overlooked among the millions of penguins, albatrosses and petrels that breed at the island. But what they lack in visual appeal they more than make up for in terms of biological interest. Like Galapagos finches or Hawaiian honeycreepers, Tristan's buntings have evolved at the islands to fill a variety of niches in a process termed adaptive radiation. Because of the small size of the islands and the paucity of habitats, only two species have evolved: a small-billed, dietary generalist and a large-billed specialist that feeds primarily on the seeds of the islands' only tree species.

The really interesting phenomenon at Inaccessible Island is that the two species hybridize in food-poor areas. Mixed-species pairs appear to have an advantage in such situations because the male



*The male of one of the two pairs of Tristan Albatross at Inaccessible Island.*

and female can exploit different foods. The problem is that the offspring have intermediate-sized bills which probably are not adapted for either large tree seeds or small sedge and grass seeds. It is this question – the foraging efficiency of birds of known bill size – that we shall investigate this summer.

Of more pressing concern, however, is the need to obtain up-to-date information on the status of some of the island's seabird populations. Inaccessible is the sole breeding site of the Spectacled Petrel, which we know has been hard-hit by long-line fishing off Brazil. It is also the only breeding site away from Gough Island of the Tristan Albatross, with a

population of only two pairs for the last 50 years. Inaccessible Island is fortunate to have remained free of any introduced mammals, and is one of the few near-pristine temperate islands left in the world. The most important aim of the current visit is to work with the Tristan community to draft a management plan that will ensure it remains that way. □

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