

When the cat's away

In *Africa – Birds & Birding* volume 12, number 4, FitzPatrick researcher Ross Wanless reported the amazing impacts of predatory mice on the seabirds of Gough Island. This finding prompted a review of the effects of mice on seabirds around the globe, in a bid to reveal the nature and scale of the problem. Could it be that on Gough, unlike on most islands, mice are the only introduced mammal and, quite literally, when the cat's away the mice do play?

It turns out that the introduced house mouse *Mus musculus*, probably the most widespread mammal in the world after humans, occurs on most of the world's islands. Its influences on plants and invertebrates on islands are both significant and well known, but almost no one has documented its influence on seabirds.

The global review found just three other well-documented cases besides Gough Island: the Farallons (off San Francisco, USA), Marion Island (South Indian Ocean) and a small island in the Madeiran archipelago (North Atlantic Ocean). Unfortunately, the evidence of nibbled eggs and wounded or disappearing chicks on those other islands couldn't be blamed squarely on mice. At first glance, one might assume that mice generally are harmless towards birds, with the Gough Island situation being the exception rather than the rule.

However, a more detailed analysis revealed an interesting fact. In each of the other documented examples, mice were the only introduced mammal on the island. Everywhere else where reasonable data exist, mice occur together with other introduced mammals, such as rats or cats. It seems that under these latter conditions, mice stay meek and mild. But the adage seems to have significant biological relevance for, with the cat (or rat, pig, goat, etc.) away, it seems the mice do indeed come out to play.

One of the islands where mice are suspected of bad behaviour is on



ANGEL/WANLESS

Injuries caused by house mice to a Tristan Albatross chick on Gough Island.

The adage seems to have significant biological relevance for, with the cat away, it seems the mice do indeed come out to play.

South Africa's Marion Island, in the sub-Antarctic. Disturbingly, wounded Wandering Albatross *Diomedea exulans* chicks have been recorded there in recent years, the first time in more than two decades of study, and about 15 years after cats were eradicated from Marion, leaving mice as the only introduced mammal.

Around the world, more and more islands are being restored, thanks to the removal of invasive mammals. Some

argue that island size is no longer an obstacle to removing cats, goats or even rats. But, for some reason, mice seem to be harder to eradicate. What this means is that more and more islands are being cleared of other invasive mammals, leaving the mice behind.

Our research suggests that this is not a great situation. Some encouraging news on this front is that an expert from New Zealand, after visiting Gough Island and doing an in-depth review, concluded that eliminating the mice there is indeed feasible, effectively giving the green light to launch a serious fund-raising campaign. Two researchers from the FitzPatrick Institute are currently spending a year at Gough Island to ascertain exactly how best to ensure that an eradication attempt is successful. □

Visit the FitzPatrick website: <http://www.fitzpatrick.uct.ac.za>

Percy FitzPatrick Institute of African Ornithology (a DST/NRF Centre of Excellence), University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, Cape Town, South Africa. Tel. (021) 650 3290; fax (021) 650 3295; e-mail fitz@uct.ac.za