



# resetting THE system

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The FitzPatrick Institute's mandate is to conduct cutting-edge research while educating the next generation of ornithological researchers and conservation leaders. Our work is divided into two main themes: understanding and conserving biodiversity. We try to ensure that the lessons learned from our studies reach the relevant management authorities and, wherever possible, work with them to implement conservation solutions. However, much of the time it feels as though we are merely slowing the inevitable – we have our fingers in the dyke, but no one is coming to patch the hole.

Occasionally, though, we are involved in a project that can result in a lasting gain for conservation. The Gough Island Restoration Programme is one such project. The story will be familiar to

above *The mysterious deaths of Gough Albatross chicks first drew attention to the impacts of mice on the island's seabirds.*

most readers of *African Birdlife*. House mice were introduced accidentally to the island by sealers in the 19th century. In addition to having major impacts on the island's invertebrate fauna, the mice acquired a taste for seabird chicks – a startling finding by researchers sent to the island by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Fitz in the early 2000s. Since then we have worked closely with the RSPB to assess the feasibility of eradicating mice on Gough.

It has been a long road. The cost of the project was substantial, so as well as testing the feasibility of the project, we documented the magnitude of the threat. Importantly, we obtained graphic images of mouse attacks to help loosen purse strings. And just when we were all set to go – the bait was on its way to Cape Town and the initial construction team was already on the island – Covid struck, forcing the project to be postponed for a year.

But, finally, in winter 2021 the project

came to fruition. I was fortunate to be able to spend three months on Gough prior to the actual baiting, helping to catch Gough Buntings and Gough Moorhens for the captive 'safeguard' populations. These endemic landbirds could be at risk during the operation, so individuals were taken into temporary captivity to keep them safe for the duration of the baiting exercise. I was thus there to see the main team arrive in June. It was an impressive sight: four helicopters, more than 200 tonnes of bait and a team of dedicated helicopter personnel, bait loaders, GIS experts and logisticians.

For the project to succeed, bait has to be delivered throughout the island. This is done using spreader buckets slung beneath helicopters, which fly precise lines across the island to ensure complete coverage. From the outset, I was most worried about having sufficiently good weather. The eradication was scheduled for winter, when mice are most hungry and hence likely to eat the bait and the impact on non-target