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International bid to save endangered flycatchers

A university biologist is part of a multinational effort to save two rare species of bird—the Rarotonga and Tahiti flycatchers—from extinction. Dr Graham Wragg, a graduate at the University's Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology, said: 'It has recently become clear that 80 per cent of the birds native to the Pacific Islands had been driven to extinction since the arrival of humans 2000 years ago. Islands like Gambier and Easter have lost all their land birds, and most others have lost at least half or more of their species.'

The three major causes of the loss of bird species are deforestation, which destroys their habitat, hunting of the large-bodied birds for food, and introduced rats, which have driven many smaller species to extinction by taking eggs and chicks.

On the high islands such as Tahiti and Rarotonga, some species of bird remained in the surviving rain forests, but their survival was threatened by the introduction 200 years ago of European black rats, which climb trees and raid the birds' nests.

Ten years ago there were just twenty-nine Rarotonga flycatchers known to be alive. Now, numbers have risen to more than 200 after scientists, led by Ed Saul of the New Zealand Wildlife Service, launched a programme to reduce the rat population and raise conservation awareness among local people.

Dr Wragg raised money last year on behalf of the French Polynesian Ornithological Society for the Tahiti flycatcher conservation project. He said: 'There are about five pairs of these birds surviving, which probably makes them the world's most endangered species of bird. Last year we weren't even sure if any of the survivors were female until eggs were laid. Three chicks were successfully raised after our first year of rat control but it's still on a knife-edge.'

The Pacific islands are home to a quarter of the world's endangered birds and BirdLife International, a world-wide partnership of conservation organisations, is focusing its efforts on the region. The first 'South Pacific Bird Conservation Workshop' was held in Rarotonga last April to bring together people from French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, Tonga, Samoa, Tuvalu, and Pitcairn to discuss bird conservation with BirdLife International and scientists from New Zealand and the UK.