

BIRD NOTES by Rick Pyeritz

The Last Dodo on Earth

“The variety of life-forms on Earth remains largely unknown to science. The species discovered and studied well enough to assess, notably the vertebrate animals and flowering plants, are declining in number at an accelerating rate---- due almost entirely to human activity.”

E.O. Wilson from *Half-Earth*

The Mascarene Archipelago, which is comprised mainly of three islands, Mauritius, Reunion, and Rodriguez, lies 500 miles east of Madagascar in the Indian Ocean. A long distance from the mainland was the state of many oceanic islands in the Indian and Pacific oceans. A common characteristic of these remote islands was the large number of unique species that evolved over millions of years. Few predators were found on these



islands which had certain obvious advantages. It was common occasionally for a bird species to become flightless. Flight was not necessary to escape predators. It was not until man arrived on these remote islands that birdlife began to change. The presence of man fulfilled a basic rule of extinction biology: ***the first to fall are the slow, the dumb and the tasty.***

The island of Mauritius demonstrates a relatively recent devastating example of man's effect on the bird life of a remote oceanic island. The first recorded visit to Mauritius was by Portuguese sailors near the end of the 16th century; they were soon followed by the Dutch who made the island a Dutch possession. On the island, sailors found a large, flightless, dove-like bird which had no fear of them. These Dodos were killed for food and sport.

Sir Thomas Herbert, an Englishman who visited Mauritius in 1627, provided one of the earliest accounts of the Dodo.

“First, here and here only.....is generated the Dodo, which for shape and rareness may antagonize the Phoenix of Arabia: her body is round and fat, few

weigh less than fifty pound are reputed of more for wonder then for food, greasie stomackes my seeke after them, but to the delicate, they are offensiue and of no nourishment....Her visage darts forth melancholy, as sensible of Nature's injurie in framing so great a body to be guided with complementall wings, so small and impotent, that they serue only to prove her bird.....The halfe of her head is naked seeming couered with a fine vaile, her bill is crooked downwards, in midst is the thrill, from which part to the end tis of a light greene, mixt with pale yellow tincture; her eyes are small and like to diamonds, round and rowling; her clothing downy feathers, her traine three small plumes, short and inproportionable, her legs suting her body, her pounces Sharpe, her appetite strong and greedy.”

As the size of the human colony on Mauritius grew, so did the number of dogs, cats, rats and pigs. The Dodo had no defenses against these predators. The numbers of the Dodos quickly decreased, as did the populations of the Mauritius Blue-Pigeon and the Pink Pigeon. They all retreated to more inaccessible parts of the island. Their predators, however, followed. By 1680, the Dodo was not seen again on the island. Due to their ability to fly for short distances, the Blue-pigeon lasted a bit longer, becoming extinct in 1826. The Pink Pigeon is today on the verge of extinction. Two other flightless doves were lost on the Mascarene Islands in a similar fashion. The Rodriguez Solitaire became extinct in 1760 and the Reunion Solitaire in 1715.

Taxonomy of the Dodo

Order *Columbiformes* Pigeons/Doves

Family---*Raphidae* Dodo/Solitares

Genus---*Raphus*

Specie---*cucullatus*

Extinct: 1680

Rodriguez Solitaire (*Pezohaps solitarius*): extinct 1760

Reunion Solitaire (*Raphus solitarius*): extinct 1715

Pink Pigeon (*Columba mayeri*): on verge of extinction

Mauritius Blue-Pigeon (*Alectroenuas nitidissima*): extinct 1826

“The Anthropocene,” far distant geologists might say, “unfortunately married swift technological progress with the worst of human nature. What a terrible time it was for people, and for the rest of life.”

E.O.Wilson from *Half-Earth*

Questions/Comments---email me eapyeritz@gmail.com