

Translocation of Ultramarine Lorries

Vini ultramarina

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More species of Eastern Polynesian landbirds have become extinct since the arrival of people than currently survive today. All of the 15 endemic species (and 40 subspecies) inhabiting French Polynesia are considered threatened or endangered. This conservation crisis facing island birds is not restricted to Polynesia alone. Ninety-three percent of the 93 species and 83 subspecies of birds which have become extinct since 1600 lived in island communities. Here in the United States, the Hawaiian islands are home to 31 endangered bird taxa, 12 of which number less than 100 individuals. Hawaii is considered to be the endangered species capital of the world. Pacific Island birds are struggling against the devastating effects caused by the introduced predators, plants, disease and habitat disturbance which accompanied the arrival of humans into their fragile, small, isolated ecosystems.



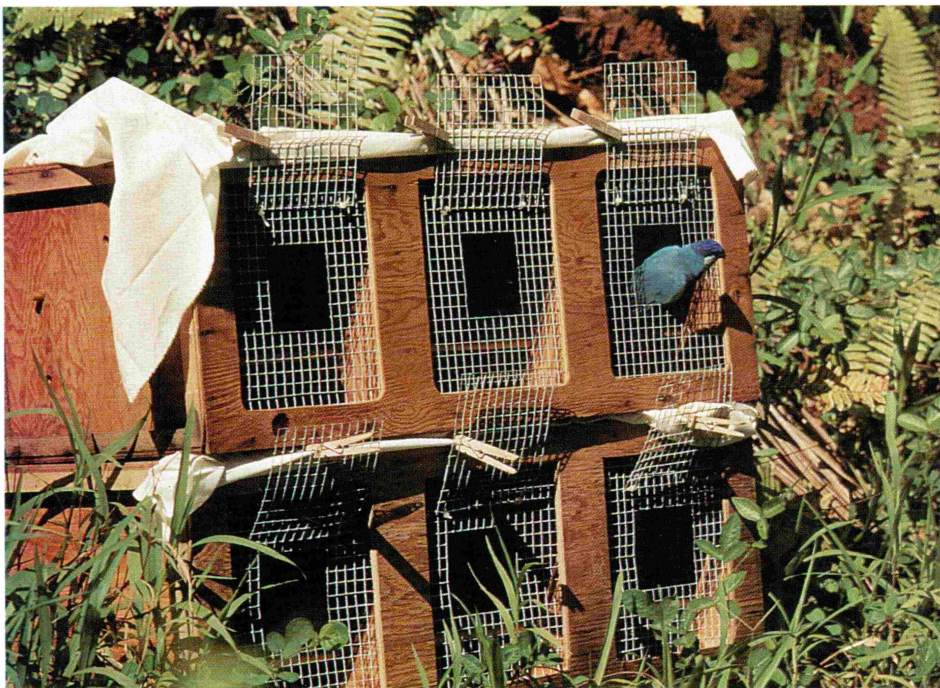
Photos by Alan Lieberman

*The beautiful but endangered
Ultramarine Lory*

In 1990, information describing the distribution of the Ultramarine Lory (Ultramarine Lorikeet, Marquesas

Lorikeet, Pihiti) *Vini ultramarina* in the Marquesas Islands was incomplete. Based on fossil records, before the arrival of people, most or all species of flying birds in the Marquesas were found throughout the island chain. However, since the arrival of colonists, the diversity of species has been decreasing. Observations by biologists in the 1970s and 1980s reported the Ultramarine Lory to be scarce and localized on Nuku Hiva, widespread and fairly common on Ua Pou, and fairly common on Ua Huka. On Ua Huka, the population descends from two birds originating from Ua Pou and released on Ua Huka in 1941. More recently, the Lory was reported declining and restricted to higher elevations on both Nuku Hiva, where it may have been completely extirpated, and Ua Pou where it was very rare.

Due to the decline of the Ultramarine Lory in its historic range, in 1990, a conservation program was initiated by the



Release boxes for the Ultramarine Lory

Delegation de L'Environnement, French Polynesia and the Zoological Society of San Diego to capture and relocate birds from Ua Huka to establish a satellite population on Fatu Hiva. Management efforts involving the transferral of birds from one area to another site to establish a second population, is not a new conservation strategy, and has been used successfully for other island bird species.

The island of Fatu Hiva was chosen as the site to establish a satellite population of Ultramarine Lories because of biological, political and practical reasons. Biologically, selection of a rat-free island with essential habitat was considered the highest priority; introduced Black Rats which prey on eggs and chicks are probably the greatest cause of decline for the Lory. Decreased habitat due to agriculture and grazing herbivores, tropical storms, competition with introduced species of honeybees, and disease afflicting banana flowers may have also contributed to the decline. However, harbor improvement on Nuku Hiva and Ua Pou allowing the introduction of rats is probably the major problem. Ua Huka and Fatu Hiva do not have populations of Black Rats. The Polynesian rat is the only resident

species and is probably not as detrimental to Lories as the more aggressive Black Rat. Additionally, Fatu Hiva does not have an airport or improved harbor and wharf. Major portions of the 80 sq. km. island still support suitable habitat for lories.

Politically and practically Fatu Hiva was chosen because the local government of Fatu Hiva employs a staff member who resides permanently on Fatu Hiva and was willing to monitor and safeguard the birds. The collaborating biologists felt that if long-term conservation efforts for the Ultramarine Lory were going to succeed after their departure, education, involvement and partnership with the local people was essential. Efforts were made to include the communities through presentations at the local schools, pictures, posters and written literature.


Twenty-nine Ultramarine Lories were released from three translocations in 1992 (7 birds), 1993 (7 birds), and 1994 (15 birds). On 22 October 1994, prior to the third translocation, a survey of the Omoa Valley resulted in the observation of 14 birds. Additionally, in 1994 Lories were seen in the Hanaveve and Pupuauiwi Valleys, and five juveniles

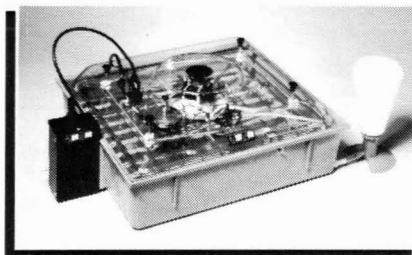
were observed feeding.

Single populations of threatened and rare island bird species are at great risk of extinction. Preliminary results from our three translocations of Ultramarine Lories from Ua Huka indicate that relocated birds are surviving and reproducing on Fatu Hiva. Continual monitoring is essential and as part of the Zoological Society of San Diego's ongoing commitment, an intensive survey is planned for 1996 to evaluate the success of the program by determining if the transplanted population is reproducing and growing.

The Polynesian Lory translocation project is funded by the Zoological Society of San Diego and the Delegation de L'Environnement, French Polynesia. Collaborating institutions include: The Peregrine Fund, Inc., Service Economie Rurale, Marquesas Islands, MANU (French Polynesia Ornithological Society) and Omoa Elementary School.

Acknowledgement:

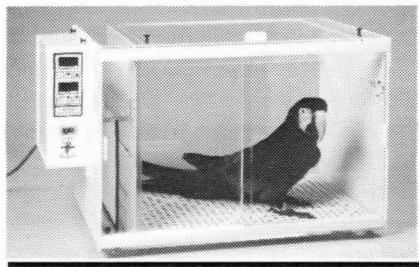
The authors would like to acknowledge the efforts of Phil Unitt from the San Diego Natural History Museum whose survey work in the Marquesas islands laid the ground-work for the translocation project. 



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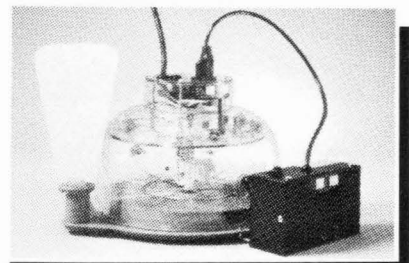
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