The Tahiti Monarch

2019 Endangered Species – Two Stamp Set

The Tahiti Petrel *(Pterodroma rostrata)* 10F CFP and the Tahiti "Monarch" *(Pomarea nigra)* *80F CFP*

Issued in Tahiti: 85,000 with 700 First Day Covers
Issued in France: 15,000 with 400 First Day Covers

The 80 F CFP value is equivalent to €0,67.

Image Source: https://www.tahitiphilatelie.pf/

On 29 January 2019, the French Polynesia Post Office issued two bird stamps in a set entitled "Endangered Species". One of the birds featured in this stamp set was the Tahiti Monarch *(Pomarea nigra).* This article is about that bird and the related stamp.

This is the first and only issue of a stamp featuring this bird.

Having already written a rather sombre article about endangered birds in New Caledonia, it was a pleasure to be able to pen a positive story about an endangered species from French Polynesia (Tahiti). Here, "Manu" the Ornithological Society of Polynesia (https://www.manu.pf/), has a story of steady progress to report in protecting the future of the Tahiti Monarch, a Critically Endangered (CR) species which is endemic to Tahiti (French Polynesia). In the Tahitian language the Monarch is known as 'Ōmama'o.

The Tahiti Monarch is a relatively small bird, at 15cm and the adult bird (over four years) is completely metallic black in colour. The beak is grey and the legs and feet are bluish-grey. As a juvenile (one to two years old), the Monarch is orange-brown. As the young bird gets older, the plumage starts to turn darker brown and then black, this transformation starting first on the back and on the wings, gradually spreading to the rest of the body.

The main threat to the existence of the Tahiti Monarch come from predation by Black rats (Rattus rattus) which are very arboreal. Consequently, the rats are able to attack the nests of the Tahiti Monarch, eat the eggs and prevent the birds from reproducing. The Ornithological Society of Polynesia (Manu) has been involved in programmes to remove the rats, initially from the areas where the Monarchs are located, to try to control this "Public Enemy Number One". Gradually Manu has expanded the zone covered by the programmes to control the rats; as well as the time period over which the programme operates (over the year as a whole).

However, evidence from a three-year study suggest that an additional danger is presented by birds introduced to the islands: notably the Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) and the Red-vented Bulbul *(Pycnonotus cafer)*, both of which are native to South-East Asia (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nepal) but which have become introduced into areas of Oceania. These two stamps from Bangladesh and Pakistan show the Myna and Bulbul in their native territory. In Tahiti, the Common Myna and the Red-vented Bulbul affect the Monarchs by disturbing their breeding pattern and in some cases, by eating the chicks and even attacking the adults. Both the Myna and the Bulbel are particularly aggressive and harmful birds.

2010 Bangladesh - Common Myna *(Acridotheres tristis)*

2013 Pakistan – Red-vented Bulbul *(Pycnonotus cafer)*

Image Source: www.birdtheme.org

In response, since 2009, Manu has also embarked upon a programme designed to trap and remove the introduced birds which are most harmful to the Monarch. From 2012, Manu was able to put in place a network of over 50 local volunteer trappers, who were able to successfully remove over a period of time the Mynas and Bulbels that had colonised the entrance to the valley where the Monarchs are based.

The other principal threat to the Monarch is the loss of habitat, again from introduced species such as Miconia *(Miconia Calvescens)* which CABI https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/33990 describes as:

"…a small tree, usually 4-12 m tall with large leaves (80 x 30 cm). It was introduced to Tahiti (French Polynesia) in 1937 in a botanical garden and first recorded as invasive there in the early 1970s. The

species now occurs on two-thirds of the island (about 80 000 ha) between 0 and 1400 m elevation, forming dense monospecific stands on about one-quarter of the island, mainly the wet areas where the mean annual rainfall exceeds 2000 mm. Because of its distribution and abundance, it is considered invasive…"

The Miconia is now regarded as a "botanical pest", because it has effectively taken over from the native dense forest (where the Monarch lived) and replaced it with an environment that is unfriendly to the Monarch. Again, Manu has established programmes of work with volunteers to cut back or uproot the swathes of Miconia.

The other botanical threat is the African Tulip Tree *(Spathodea campanulata),* another invasive species, which according to CABI:
https://www.cabi.org/isc/datasheet/51139#tosummaryOfInvasiveness

"……has been introduced pan-tropically for its ornamental value. However, profuse fruiting and the masses of wind-dispersed seeds means that only a few trees can begin a process of invasion, and suckering ensures that it is difficult to remove by standard cutting methods….."

Manu has also carried out projects designed to clear and manage anew areas that were occupied just by the African Tulip Tree and to replace these trees with native plants from local botanical nurseries.

What impact has all this work had on numbers of the Tahiti Monarch? Back in 1998, when the Ornithological Society of Polynesia embarked on its project to save the Monarch, there were just 12 known individual birds. Today (2019-2020), the number of Monarchs ahs increased to 93 known adult birds; and to 29 juveniles, the result of the various initiatives to protect the habitats and to remove the predators. Each year Manu carries out an annual census of the birds to monitor their progress. This steady increase in the numbers of the Tahiti Monarch is of course, cause for optimism that the work done by Manu is succeeding and that the bird can be saved from possible extinction. And on that positive note, this article ends.

https://www.manu.pf/protection-du-monarque-de-tahiti/