

Mauritius – New National Bird

Mauritius Kestrel (*Falco punctatus*)

Introduction

This news item, about the new National Bird of Mauritius, is courtesy of the May 2022 edition of *Stamp Magazine*, supplemented by information from the Mauritius Government website.¹

On 12 March 2022, the Republic of Mauritius celebrated its 30th anniversary. As part of these celebrations, Mauritius Post issued a single new stamp illustrating the Mauritius Kestrel (*Falco punctatus*) as the new national bird, replacing the extinct Dodo.

The Mauritius Government website says of the new national bird:

“The Mauritius Kestrel (Falco punctatus) is unique to Mauritius and is one of the nine endemic bird species still left on the island. The species was saved in-extremis with an increase from just four birds in 1974, including a single breeding female, to a peak of about 600 individuals. However, because of the degradation of the Mauritian native forests, the kestrels are now found only on the eastern and western part of the island - where they continue to face the effects of habitat degradation and predators. The actual population of the Mauritius Kestrel in the wild amounts to some 350 individuals.”

Hopefully, the nomination of the Mauritius Kestrel as the new national bird will give greater impetus to conservation efforts both by the public authorities and wildlife and bird protection charities.

The Government website explains that the nomination of the Mauritius Kestrel as the new national bird is in effect, based on a decision of the Cabinet, made on 17 December 2021. However, this Government proclamation will be subject to ratification by the country’s legislative body (the National Assembly) in a bill in which the Government will seek both to consolidate and update the Flag, Arms, Anthem and other National Symbols of the Republic of Mauritius. The Cabinet made the commitment to present this bill on 11 March 2022.

Government Ministers and Mauritius Post launched the new stamp and First Day Cover at the information centre located at Le Pétrin in the Black River Gorges National Park, to the South West of the country, which is where the Mauritius Kestrel may be found.



¹ <https://govmu.org/EN/Pages/NewsDetails.aspx?n=First-Day-Cover-and-New-Postage-Stamp-mark-30th-Anniversary-of-the-Republic-of-Mauritius.aspx>

The stamp

The 2022 stamp is available from Mauritius Post e-shop in sheets of 50 stamps. I don't usually collect that number of stamps in each new issue, so I won't be buying that one. On the other hand, the First Day Cover (FDC) is quite attractive, even if it is a somewhat simple design:

2022 Mauritius Kestrel (12 March)



Image Source: Mauritius Post

Other stamps from Mauritius showing the Mauritius Kestrel

Mauritius is not the most prolific postal authority when it comes to bird stamp issues. Nevertheless, there are several stamps from Mauritius Post which illustrate the Mauritius Kestrel, starting with the familiar definitives from 1965 and the 1967 overprint:

1965 Birds Definitives (16 March)



1967 Birds Definitives – Self-Government Overprint (1 September)



Next up is a stamp from 1978, just a few years into the conservation programme to save the Mauritius Kestrel from extinction.

1978 Global Conservation – Endangered Animals, World Wildlife Fund for Nature (21 September)



This stamp was part of a four-stamp miniature sheet, which also featured the Blue Citrus Butterfly (20c stamp), two lizards, or more precisely, the Geckos *Phelsuma ornata* and *Phelsuma Guimbeaui* (R1 stamp), and the Flying Fox Bat (R1.50 stamp). The miniature sheet included a brief commentary on each animal, with the text for the Mauritius Kestrel reading as follows:

“This rare bird, now in danger of extinction, is confined to the forests in the small Black River Gorge area of Mauritius. Even though they are now officially protected, the kestrels, particularly the chicks and the eggs, are still under constant threat from predators.”

1984 Mauritius Kestrel (26 March)



These two stamps were from a set of four from Mauritius Post, celebrating the Mauritius Kestrel.

Given that the Mauritius Kestrel can only be found on Mauritius alone, you would not necessarily expect to see stamp issues from other countries featuring this bird. That said, because of its threatened status, you might expect the United Nations Postal Administration to have included the Mauritius Kestrel in its series on Endangered Fauna, but so far, it has not yet done so. However, there is one from Jersey Post, linked to the work of the Gerald Durrell and the Wildlife Preservation Trust that he helped establish:

1988 Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust (6 July)



This stamp formed part of a set of five issued by Jersey Post to commemorate the work of the Jersey (now Durrell) Wildlife Preservation Trust². The Durrell website modestly states the following about the Mauritius Kestrel and its own contribution to saving this bird from extinction:

*"In 1974 only four of these beautiful kestrels were known to exist in the wild, which made it the world's rarest bird. Today, thanks to Durrell, over several hundred kestrels fly free in the forests of Mauritius, and the species has been taken off the critical list. Captive breeding and intensive management of wild birds over the last 25 years have undoubtedly saved the Mauritius kestrel from extinction, making it one of Durrell's greatest success stories. But while the kestrel is out of immediate danger, the population is still monitored, to give advance warning of any new problems."*³

When the Government Ministers launched the new stamp for 2022 featuring the Mauritius Kestrel, they also praised the work of the Mauritius Wildlife Foundation (MWF). From their website, the MWF states:

"The story of the Mauritius Kestrel, from once being the world's rarest bird to today being the National Bird of the Republic of Mauritius is one of great hope, that we can restore even the rarest of the rare.

Without the conservation work it is likely the kestrel would have become extinct. Rarely has any species been recovered from such very low numbers. The restoration of the Mauritius Kestrel is one of the most successful bird recoveries. The experience gained with the kestrel was the incentive to work with other species.

The proclamation of the Mauritius Kestrel as the National Bird gives recognition to a bird that demonstrates hope for reversing the decline in biodiversity. Mauritius is showing the way forward. It

² Established in 1963

³ Source: <https://wildlife.durrell.org/animals/birds/mauritus-kestrel/>

is however incumbent upon us to continue to restore our wildlife in which the Mauritius Kestrel has pride of place, and to build a better, more colourful future, pulsing with life.”⁴

The MWF website also acknowledges that Gerald Durrell, founder of the Jersey Wildlife Trust, was also an instrumental player in helping to establish the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation.

Acknowledgements

Images of the stamps (other than the 2022 issue) are from www.birdtheme.org for which I am grateful. Background to the new 2022 stamp issue is from the Mauritius Government and the Mauritius Post websites which provided helpful information, including the image of the FDC. I am also grateful to the websites of the Durrell Wildlife Preservation Trust and the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (as referenced in the footnotes) which had provided useful historical context to the conservation work that has helped save the Mauritius kestrel from extinction. Other sites that I consulted include www.stampworld.com and <https://colnect.com>.

Footnote

The update of Reg E Jones project on “National Birds” includes reference to the Dodo as the Mauritian national bird. That updated article retains the Dodo as the Mauritian national bird, as it was completed before the new stamp issue on 12 March 2022.

⁴ Source: <https://www.mauritian-wildlife.org/mauritiuskestrelnouzwazonasional>