

BIRD STAMP SOCIETY
ENDEMIC BIRDS OF NEW CALEDONIA FACING EXTINCTION

Flicking through the Yvert & Tellier 2020 Catalogue for Monaco and French Overseas Territories, I came across the **miniature sheet below (issued in 2006)** which features three critically endangered birds of New Caledonia (Nouvelle Calédonie). I thought that it would be interesting to learn more about these three birds; and in particular, to establish if their prospects for survival had improved in the intervening 14 years. Calédoscope, the philatelic website of the New Caledonian Office des Postes et Télécommunications (OPT) provided a useful starting point for this article.

According to Calédoscope (<https://caledoscope.opt.nc>), the New Caledonian Lorikeet (*Charmosyna diadema*) is a small parrot around 19 cm long, which is bright green in colour with a yellow face and a blue crown. The Museum of Natural History in Paris is home to a female Lorikeet that was captured in 1860 where it is preserved. I tried a search on the Museum website to find it, but without success. Calédoscope describes the New Caledonian Owlet-nightjar (*Aegotheles savesi*) with more optimism, pointing to a 1998 expedition in which the Owlet-nightjar was re-discovered, offering renewed hope that the bird could yet be saved. Finally, the commentary on the New Caledonian Rail (*Gallirallus lafresnayanus*) casts doubt on its continued existence at all, saying that there is little evidence to show that it is present either in the forests or marsh lands.

For a more authoritative (and perhaps up to date) assessment on the outlook for these three birds, I then turned to Birdlife International.

First was the New Caledonian Lorikeet, which Birdlife International indicates is not just categorised as Critically Endangered, but could possibly be extinct, so long ago it is the bird was recorded with any certainty: the last sighting was in 1913. There were searches between the years 2002 and 2011 but no confirmed sightings. If the Lorikeet is still around, then numbers are likely to be less than 50. The reasons for the decline are loss of habitat, disease introduced into the islands; and predation by introduced rats.

Second up, with a similar background story, is the New Caledonian Owlet-nightjar. Again, Birdlife International paints a bleak picture of the outlook for this bird (Critically Endangered), which is in similar numbers to the Lorikeet, i.e. a population less than 50 which has likely suffered predation from rats and possibly cats; as well as losing habitat to fire and economic activities: logging and mining. The sighting of the Owlet-nightjar in 1998 mentioned by Calédoscope was just one bird. The Owlet-nightjar is reportedly around 28cm in size and is grey-brown to black in colour.

The third and final bird in this miniature sheet is the New Caledonian Rail, which again is Critically Endangered owing to predation by introduced species: cats, pigs and rats. Again, the population is estimated at most to be 50, with the last confirmed sighting in 1890. The artwork by Larence Ramon captures accurately the recorded colours of this bird: upperparts a dull brown, with greyer underparts and short yellowish legs. In overall size, the New Caledonian Rail is large (40 cm) and is also flightless and has a long bill.

Birds of New Caledonia

17 June 2006 - miniature sheet containing three stamps (40,000 issued)

Designed by: Larence Ramon

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110f New Caledonian Lorikeet *Charmosyna diadema*

110f New Caledonian Owlet-nightjar *Aegotheles savesi*

110f New Caledonian Rail *Gallirallus lafresnayanus*

Source of image:

<https://caledoscope.opt.nc/fr/timbres-et-philatelie/bloc-feuillet/oiseaux-endemiques-tres-menaces>

In addition to the miniature sheet, separately, OPT issued a three-stamp set with different depictions of the same birds, as shown below. The three stamps feature the motif of the New Caledonian Ornithological Society [La Société calédonienne d'ornithologie] identified by the combined Kagu and the SCO logo. The SCO is in turn is affiliated to Birdlife International whose logo also appears on each stamp. The SCO website is at: www.sco.nc.

New Caledonia/Nouvelle Calédonie – Endemic birds facing extinction

2006 – Set of three stamps (featuring the same birds as on the miniature sheet)

Designed by Larence Ramon

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New Caledonian Owlet-nightjar (*Aegotheles savesi*)



New Caledonian Lorikeet (*Charmosyna diadema*)



New Caledonian Rail (*Gallirallus lafresnayanus*)



Source of images: <http://www.birdtheme.org/country/newcaled.html>

I found an interview dating from 2014 with the then director of the SCO (Fabrice Cugny), in which he stated that of 24 endemic species in New Caledonia, 18 were in danger. Three of the four most critically endangered had not been seen for many years: three of these were the birds depicted by the OPT in the 2006 miniature sheet and stamp set. The fourth consists of the Crow Honeyeater (*Gymnomyza aubryana*). This bird has featured in three separate issues, including this one from a set of three issued in 2007 which I like best because it includes a close up of the head and the red flash around the eye:

2007 Crow Honeyeater (*Gymnomyza aubryana*)

140,00 issued of the three stamps

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Design: Larance Ramon



Source of image: <http://www.birdtheme.org/country/newcaled.html>

The second of the three stamps is from a set of four issued on 8 November 2018 in a miniature sheet celebrating “Pollinators of New Caledonia”. The OPT issued 18,000 of the sheet.

Design: Jean-Jacques Mahuteau



Source of image: <http://www.birdtheme.org/country/newcaled.html>

The three other stamps in the miniature sheet (all at 110F) show: The Ornate Flying Fox (*Pteropus ornatus*); the European dark bee (*Apis mellifera mellifera*) and the lemon-yellow butterfly (*Eurema hecabe novaecaledoniae*).

For information on the Crow Honeyeater, I consulted the SCO website and followed a link to the website endemia.nc, which provided interesting background on this bird. In size, it is 35-40cm, though the female is smaller than the male. It is black, but with a flash of orange-red around the eyes, as highlighted in both stamps. It lives exclusively in the dense and humid forests of the Grande Terre, the main island that makes up the New Caledonian territory. It feeds on insects and nectar from flowers, such as the aptly named “bottle brush” shown on the stamp from the miniature sheet. The Crow Honeyeater is essentially a shy bird that sings only at night and only then in the two hours or so before the sun rises. The season for building nests runs from July through to February, this being the responsibility of the female whilst the male stands guard, surveying the surroundings.

Birdlife International indicates that there are probably fewer than 250 Crow Honeyeaters in existence, which makes it Critically Endangered. More positively, there is apparently, a specific

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Conservation Plan for the bird which aims to manage rat and cat populations, as well controlling deer and pigs which also present threats to the Crow Honeyeater. Loss of the forest habitat through economic activity (mining) is also a major risk to the Crow Honeyeater and the plan includes actions to involve the mining industry in the conservation strategy. Let's hope that this approach works.

Finally, this stamp from 1967 featuring the Crow Honeyeater formed part of a set of six values on the theme of birds:



The OPT has made a special effort to highlight birds of New Caledonia which are threatened with extinction and deserves some credit for featuring these in several issues over the years. There are, as the SCO has indicated, other threatened species and it may be worth revisiting these through the OPT's stamp issues in a further article.