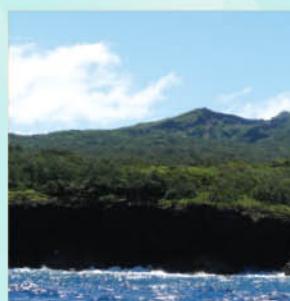


# Integrated Island Biodiversity Technical Series

## Bird Surveys of Late and Fonualei Islands

Vava'u, Kingdom Of Tonga



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Dr. David J. Butler

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# **BIRD SURVEYS OF LATE AND FONUALEI ISLANDS, VAVA'U, KINGDOM OF TONGA**

**SEPTEMBER 2013**

Report to Ministry of Lands, Environment, Climate Change and Natural Resources (MLECCNR)

Dr David J. Butler

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## Introduction

The objective of the project was improved conservation status of priority threatened species, consistent with selected outcomes set out in the Island Biodiversity Programme of Work (IBPOW). Surveys were initially aimed at establishing the status of species at different sites in the Vava'u Group, Niuafou'ou, Late and Fonualei to assess fate of introduced populations of Tongan Megapode. However cancellation of flights to Niuafou'ou resulted in work here being deferred.

Late Island is an isolated 6-km wide circular island about 55 km WSW of the island of Vava'u which rises to 565m. The island is an uninhabited 15sq km island which rises to 565m. It is volcanically active but has been dormant since 1854. Late has some of the finest forest to be found in Tonga and is a global stronghold of the threatened friendly ground-dove *Gallicolumba stairi* and the endemic Tongan whistler *Pachycephala jacquinoti*. A translocation attempt of the Tongan Megapode *Megapodius pritchardii* to Late was made in 1992. An initial positive report (1997) was not confirmed by searchers at the translocation site in 2003 and 2004. Late is also home to seven central Polynesian Restricted Range Species, as well as eleven species of seabird which are currently believed to breed on the island.

Fonualei is an isolated island about 65km north west of Vava'u. It is a round volcanic cone with a fumarolically active crater, approximately 1.5km across, which rises to about 195m. There are steep cliffs on all but the eastern side. Fonualei IBA comprises the whole island of Fonualei which supports a recently established population of the Tongan Megapode and another globally threatened species, the friendly ground-dove *Gallicolumba stairi*. The island is an isolated active volcano, approximately 200 ha in area and the megapodes lay their eggs in soil heated by volcanic ducts. The introducing of Polynesian Megapodes to Fonualei in the 1990s was successful as the result in 2003 shows a doubling in the population of Polynesian Megapode in the island.

## Key Findings

- The Tongan megapode (malau) continues to survive in good numbers on Fonualei but was not located on Late.
- Both islands are important refuges for Tongan bird species with Fonualei of greater significance for seabirds (and malau) and Late having a greater variety of landbirds including the endemic Samoan whistler.
- No reptiles were found on Fonualei and four widespread species (2 geckos and 2 skinks) were found on Late.
- No rats were found on Fonualei but the invasive Pacific rat (*Rattus exulans*) is present on Late.
- Eradicating rats from Late appears both feasible and worthwhile.
- There needs to be a strong emphasis on biosecurity to keep these islands free of any further invasive species.

## Personnel

### Field team:

Samuelu Pakileata  
Senituli Finau  
Viliami Hakaumotu  
Felimone Moli

### MVAkina Crew:

Vili  
Eriki  
Ola

### Project Coordination:

Ana Fekau

### Regional Project Support:

Gianluca Serra, Bruce Jefferies, Easter Galuvao (SPREP).

## Itinerary (Butler)

Thurs 29 August – Nelson to Auckland (NZ 8388)  
Fri 30 August – Auckland to Nukualofa (NZ 970)  
Sat 31 August – Nukualofa to Vavau (Real Tonga)  
Sun 1 September – Vavau  
Mon 2 September – Vavau to Fonualei  
Tues 3 September – arrive Fonualei  
Wed 4 September – Fonualei  
Thurs 5 September - Fonualei  
Fri 6 September – Fonualei to Late  
Sat 7 September - Late  
Sun 8 September - Late  
Mon 9 September – Late to Vavau  
Tues 10 September – Vavau to Nukualofa (Real Tonga)  
Wed 11 September – Nukualofa to Auckland (NZ 277)  
Thurs 12 September – Auckland to Nelson (NZ 8375)

## Methodology - Summary of activity on islands

### Mon 2/9 Vava'u to Fonualei

Left Neifau, Vava'u at 12.35pm on MV Akina in fine southerly weather. Around 6pm Loku Island visible to right. 8.45pm anchored off Fonualei – opposite beach of small rocks on NW corner.



MV Akina at anchor



Fonualei – beach of small boulders (future landing) Fonualei – landing beach of large boulders  
2013 (Malau nesting ground above fissure with steam)

### Tues 3/9 Fonualei (see map 1)

Sailed down to rocky beach on west side opposite cliff faces issuing steam and landed ashore on large rocky boulders with some difficulty. Two malau ran to greet us as soon as we entered forest. Set up camp (waypoint 459). Several hours of searching up slopes looking for malau – difficult going with thick angled trees and much loose soil. Visited an area between waypoints 462, 463 and 467 observing 30+ adults and 3 malau chicks and found one active burrow with a single egg (466).

## Wed 4/9 Fonualei

Set out 9.30am directly uphill, setting glue traps from just above camp to summit & using playback to locate malau. Six birds located before waypoint 473 and last bird at 475 in habitat with much fern ground cover and some trees. Walked to beyond summit making observations of other bird species and back at 3.40pm in heavy showers. Set 15 rat traps to 6.40pm from camp along coast to 483 – peanut butter/roasted coconut.

30 minutes of lizard searching at night in ideal warm conditions with negative results. A few *Carcinus*-type crabs were seen including one up a tree but no hermit or coconut crabs. I automatic sound recorder set up at camp from 9pm for 12 hours.

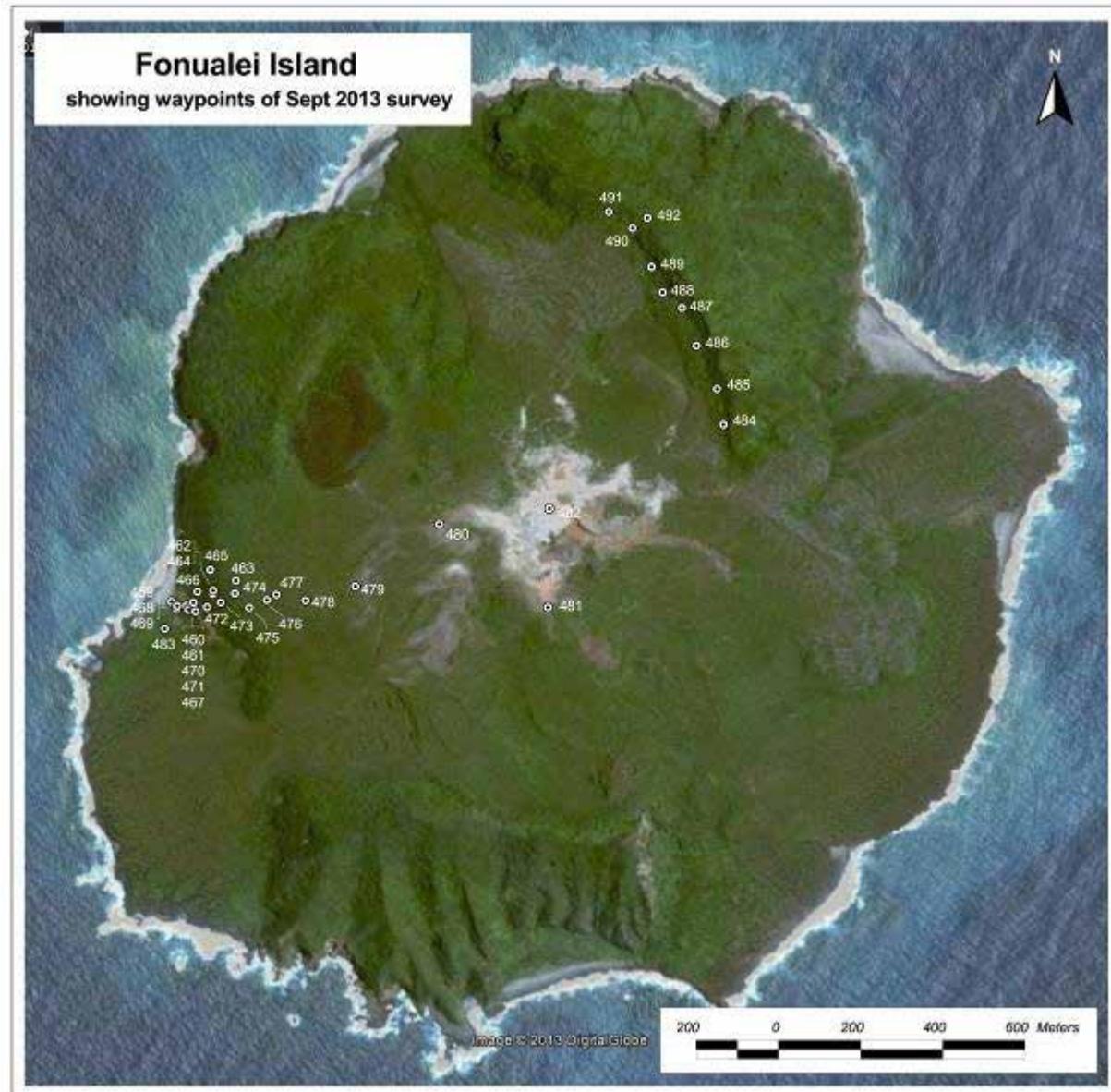
Thurs 5/9 Fonualei

Checked rat traps – 1 sprung by a crab, rest untouched and bait intact.

9.05am climb up hill checking glue traps and reached first sooty tern colony on crater rim after 1hr. Climb down grassy then rocky slopes to east and at 11.50pm dropped into top of gully (waypoint 484). Playback done and response after 5 minutes by a bird that flew close. Playback not required after that point as we encountered malau at regular intervals walking north down the dry bed of the gully. West side of the gully was rocky and the east side was an easy slope with deep soil. Gully a sequence of pairs and expect more on slopes above to coast. 35 malau were seen over gully length of 620 metres (waypoints 484-491), some as singles and some as pairs. Also found malau at the top of the eastern slope at 492 where two mature coconut trees were found so anticipate birds occupying a large area of forest in this area potentially to the coast. Left gully at 3.45pm.

(Note: following this gully round further you would approach the coast at the long beach with small boulders (due west of 491) that we anchored opposite on the first evening. This beach would be suggested as the landing point for future work on malau on Fonualei providing fairly ready access to the gully forest.)

Collected sticky traps on descent – no lizards, rodents, few ants and one spotless crake in a lower trap.



Map 1 Fonualei

### Fri 6/9 Fonualei to Late

Checked rat traps – none sprung - most of coconut left. Swam to boat and departed 8.45am in slight swell but no white caps. Arrived Late 5.45pm and at anchor at 6pm. (9 hour trip) – good sailing throughout and no rain.

### Sat 7/9 Late Island (see map 2)

9am at camp site (493) after landing though a narrow gap into sheltered small rocky bay. Set up camp and one party of three set out inland on compass bearing south while the otherwalked round the coast to the east (no waypoints collected as GPS faulty) – both conducting playback

for malau at intervals with no response. Coastal team caught three geckos and a skink. Set glue traps with coconut bait on inland transect (1 on tree 1 on ground) using GPS to measure distances between waypoints: 494, 495 (50m apart), 496, (100m), 497, 498, 499 (first Tongan whistler seen here), 500 (100m apart). One automatic sound recorder placed on top of hill at 501 (AR4 – 15% used – 3pm for 20 hours 123m alt facing SW to summit.), 502 (120m).

Turned back 3pm and reached camp at 3.30pm about same time as other party. Placed ten further glue traps - 9 at camp, 10 in coconuts (503), 11 in pandanus (504), where a rat was seen in morning (505), and rocks by coast (506). 5 rat traps set each direction from camp (10 in all).

## **Sun 8/9 Late Island**

Checked rat traps and glue traps to coast. Caught and processed 2 *Rattus exulans*.

One team re-traced inland transect to waypoint 502 collecting rats from 496 and 500, then continued on to summit (compass bearing S to 160°) finding some ridges with good walking and thick fern-filled gully that required much bushknife work. Playback of malau calls at intervals until habitat became dry and rocky – no responses. Reached summit (521) at 2pm and back by 3.45pm, collecting glue traps and sound recorder.

Other team based at camp set 5 rat traps and 17 glue traps parallel with coast. Night-time survey for lizards found two geckos.

## **Mon 9/9 Late Island – and to Vava'u**

Checked traps and processed 5 rats caught on glue and snap traps around coast. Left Late at 12pm and circled partly round island to west before heading to Vava'u at 1pm reaching Neifau at 9pm. Sequence of photos taken round coast.



**Late – departing from sheltered cove.**



**Late – final load departure off rocks.**



Map 2 – Late Island

## GPS work

GPS waypoints were obtained at intervals to locate trap sites and features on the maps. A computer folder with such points will be supplied separately.

**Device used:** Garmin GPSmap 60CSx

**Settings: Position format:** hddd°mm'ss.s"

**Map Datum:** WGS84.

# 1. Results

## 1.1 Bird Observations –Fonualei

### Tongan Megapode (Malau)

About forty birds were seen at each of two sites – the forested slopes above camp and the forested gully in the north of the island. At the first site birds were present from the coast up to waypoint 475 at 156m altitude when the understorey was becoming increasingly dominated by thick fern. At the second site birds there was a dense sequence of territories along the floor of the gully and apparently further territories up the slope. Several chicks were seen at the first site and one active nesting burrow located. No active burrows were found at the second site and there was no evidence of heat (or steam) at the surface here but very deep easily dug soils.

Shy Ground-Dove – common in forest and in open grassland near summit

Pacific Pigeon – surprisingly numerous in most habitats.

Spotless Crake – 1 seen and 1 caught on glue trap

Purple Swamphen – c6 pairs; one with two largechicks.

Brown Booby – 100+ birds with chicks at various stages from fluffy white to fledging

Red-footed Booby – less abundant than brown booby – nesting not noted

Great & Lesser Frigatebird – fewer than 100 with chicks in various stages; some males with red throats – generally not identified to species

Sooty Tern – 3 colonies along ridge west of crater with chicks flighted or close to flying – total population 5000-10,000.

White Tern – several hundred seen most in the gully forest

Red-tailed tropic bird – 1 seen

Brown Noddy – sizeable colonies with some sitting on nests in tall trees in gully forest (waypoints 487, 490)

Black Noddy – most noddies seen were identified as brown with small numbers of black present

Golden Plover – 5 flying near summit

Bristle-thighed curlew – 1 seen flying and calling near summit Turnstone – 3 flying near summit

Long-tailed cuckoo – 1 seen.

Wattled honeyeater – common throughout.

Polynesian starling – common throughout.

### Native Mammals

Tongan flying fox – 1 seen flying over coastal forest on Fonualei in evening. (None seen Late)

Humpback Whale – seen occasionally near the islands with several close to boat off Fonualei during night.

## 1.2 Bird Observations – Late

Shy Ground-Dove – common in lower forest areas Pacific Pigeon – heard throughout.

Spotless Crake – 1 caught on glue trap Brown Booby – few seen

Red-footed Booby – few seen

Frigatebird - few seen – nesting in mature forest

White Tern – good numbers seen in coastal areas and summit crater White-tailed tropic bird - a few flying in crater.

Brown Noddy, Black Noddy – hundreds seen on rocks/cliffs around coast from boat –not identified to species but according to Watling (2003) most would have been black

Tongan whistler – several seen/heard in more mature forest

Long-tailed cuckoo – 1 seen

Wattled honeyeater - common throughout.

Polynesian starling - common throughout.

Crimson-crowned fruit dove – heard regularly in more mature forest

Many-coloured fruit dove - small number heard

Kingfisher – several seen and heard at various altitudes.

White-rumped Swiftlet – few hawking around summit and coast in evening.

Barn Owl – 1 flew along coast in evening

Reed heron (white phase) – 1 seen on coast

Shining parrot – one squawk heard may have been from this species.

No megapodes were detected on Late.



Shy ground-dove (Tū)-male



Nestling frigatebird (Lofa, Helekosí)



Nestling brownbooby(Ngutulei)



Spotless crake (Moho) released from gluetraps



Purple swamphen & chick(kalae)



Sooty Tern fledgling('Ekiaki)

### 1.3 Reptiles

No reptiles were seen or caught in glue traps on Fonualei. The following were recorded on Late:

Oceanic gecko *Gehyra oceanica* – 3 found in timber and at night

Slender toed gecko – *Nactus pelagicus* – 1 found during day and 1 seen at night

Moth skink – *Lipinia noctua* - 1 found in day

Blue tail skink – *Emoia impar* - one caught in glue trap and 1 seen on coastal rocks during day

One unidentified skink was seen in rock and low scrub near the summit

Banded sea snake (*Laticauda colubrina*) – one seen ashore on rocks.

## 1.4 Rats

### Rat trapping

No rats were detected on Fonualei following 34 trap nights of glue trapping from the coast to the summit ridge and 30 trap nights of snap-trapping near the coast. No feeding sign was observed or animals seen during night-time searches. It is concluded that rats are probably absent from the island.

The first rat was seen on Late during the day walking from the boat to set up camp. Seven *Rattus exulans* were caught in glue and snap trapping sessions, 7 males, 1 female and 1 juvenile. Rat densities were not considered high as bait (roasted coconut and smears of peanut butter) remained intact on the majority of snap traps after being left out for two nights. All but two rats were caught in glue traps and two others also escaped from these leaving fur behind.

### Samples for DNA analysis

Tail samples were taken from each rat using the usual precautions to ensure no cross-contamination and stored in 95% ethanol. Examination identified that none of the males had prominent testes and the female was carrying no young and not lactating.

Samples obtained on the 8<sup>th</sup> were 2 labelled 'C' at the camp (waypoint 493 18°47'08.1" 174°39'05.0"), 1 labelled '3' 200m inland (waypoint 496 18°47'14.7" 174°39'07.7") and 1 '7' 600m inland (waypoint 500 18°47'27.4" 174°39'14.2"). Samples on the 9<sup>th</sup> came from sites along the coast from the camp (no waypoints).



Late – Viliami setting glue trap on Pandanus



Late - Rat on glue trap baited with roast coconut



Late - Rat insnaptrap

Late - Juvenile rat on gluetrap

## 2. Discussion

This report summarises the results of brief visits to the two islands with time ashore limited by the length of time taken to reach them and the need to leave Late a day early due to approaching bad weather. Several previous survey teams have been unable to reach the islands at all due to sea conditions. The overall results are similar to, and extend the findings of, previous surveys which provides more confidence that the conclusions are correct.

This discussion focusses first on the malau and includes information on the volcanic history of the two islands which may be relevant to their suitability for the species. It then considers biosecurity and the proposal to eradicate rats from Late.

### 2.1 Status of Tongan megapode -Malau

#### Fonualei Island

Malau are present in good numbers in the two areas of suitable forest habitat visited during the survey and are breeding successfully. Watling (2003) recorded 38-56 malau at the first site we visited and based on the proportion of island visited and the areas of suitable habitat he 'guesstimated' the population at 300-500. We have added a second site which alone would seem likely to hold over 100 birds. Based on our observations including the presence of malau up to almost 160m in altitude where the forest transitions to fern and scrub, it seems likely that the two areas defined in red on the map below offer suitable habitat for the species. Based on encountering c.40 malau in the two areas surveyed (in blue) the population in the northern area could be more than 600 birds. The southern area has not been visited but if birds were found there at similar densities it could hold 400. So I would conclude that there may be 600-1000 malau on Fonualei, significantly more than on Niuafo'ou.



**Fonualei Island showing forested areas that may be inhabited by malau**

### Late Island

No malau were detected on Late. This survey covered an area on the northern side of the island. This side has been the one traditionally visited by Tongans with areas used periodically for kava plantations and it has significant areas of coconuts. Judging by a circuit of much of the island by boat the habitats we surveyed from shore to summit were typical of the island as a whole.

Watling (2003 & pers. comm.) surveyed the eastern part of the island in 2003 (c. 1 day) and 2004 (c. 1 week) focussing on the area around the crater lake where malau eggs were initially buried in 1991-93. He also found no birds and no indications of their presence.

Combining our findings, I would conclude that malau are very unlikely to survive on Late. The 'release' area has been surveyed in detail and we have now added a transect through typical forest from another part of the island. There does not appear to be any different habitats that have not been surveyed with the possible exception of the floor of the summit crater (as photo below) where there was forest and some open, sandy-looking areas.



**Late – looking down into main crater**

Section 7.2 identifies that a volcanologist did detect some activity and steam on Late in the 1970s and it would be worth finding out whether this was in this area. It could theoretically be accessed from the south as the crater ‘breaks open’ in this direction, or more readily by helicopter if one is used for a rat eradication (see 7.3).

An obvious question is whether a further attempt to establish malau on Late is worthwhile, perhaps this time transferring adults and chicks as worked on Fonualei. It is suggested that this is not considered until rats are eradicated, and that a range of experts are consulted. Clearly Late has been volcanically less active than Fonualei over the last 200 years (section 7.3) and appears to provide less opportunity for eggs to be incubated through heat derived from such activity. However megapodes as a group have other incubation strategies including using the heat of the sun on exposed beaches or cinder fields, and using decompositional heat from plant matter in burrows between tree roots. I am uncertain whether the malau can use such strategies.

## **2.2 Volcanic history of the two islands**

Late clearly has a more mature, diverse vegetation cover than Fonualei and appears inert. However a volcanologist reports some minor activity there on his website: “In 1970’s weak solfataric activity was present in the crater. Steam was found in a fracture near the graben on the eastern side of the island. Lack of strong fumarolic activity and the thick jungle on the volcano, indicate no recent volcanic activity” (<http://www.volcanolive.com/late.html>). It is unclear which crater is referred to. Partial eruptions of Late were reported in 1790 and 1854 confined to the north-east flank of the island so most of the habitat on the island has had more than 220 years to develop, potentially many more.

In contrast, Fonualei was said to have been 'so shaken by an eruption in June, 1846, that canoes can now sail in and out of the crater' and the islet 'which until that year was covered with verdure and abounded with fruit, as reduced in August, 1847, to a huge mass of lava and burnt sand without one leaf or blade of grass of any kind. All things that had life had been utterly destroyed, the inhabitants having, however, warned by violent earthquakes which preceded the eruption, happily escaped previously to Vava'u.' (Rev Lawry in Spennemann 2004). So its forest had formed from bare lava over a period of only 160 years. Other more minor eruptions have been recorded on Fonualei in 1906, 1939, 1951, 1957 and 1974 (data of Global Volcanism Program, Department of Mineral Sciences, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, USA).

From a malau viewpoint, Late Island does not appear to currently offer the same opportunities for incubation of eggs through volcanic heat that Fonualei does. However it is noted that in 2006 a large raft of pumice rock was found on the sea surface near Late and a new volcanic island appeared to its south, so Late could go through another period of activity at any time.

## 2.3 Biosecurity

Any visit to islands significant for the conservation of native biodiversity need to address the biosecurity risk of introducing invasive species. Biosecurity precautions need to be taken prior to departure from home base and upon arrival on the islands. Ideally all food, equipment and personal effects would be packed in sealed containers before departure. In practice this was not possible with food and cooking pots bought loose on the last morning and root crops delivered to the boat just prior to departure. Photo ? shows stems of kape (giant taro) with roots covered in soil, and tops with spaces between leaf stems that could provide refuges for invertebrates or even reptiles. These were completely peeled before being taken on to the islands.



**Photo: Giant taro with soil – a high biosecurity risk**

Other root vegetables were delivered in sacks covered with soil and washed in the sea before being allowed onto Late.



**Washing taro in the sea at Late**

Upon arrival on Fonualei, all bags and boxes were opened on to a spread-out tarpaulin to check for any for any unwanted species. Ideally a can of fly spray should have been available to kill any insects that were found.

It was more difficult to ensure that insects were not taken from Fonualei to Late after tents had been erected and equipment set out on the first island. Given this it was important to visit Fonualei, the more remote and unmodified island, first. Any pest animals found on Fonualei would be likely to be present on Late, whereas the reverse was not true. As it happened sea water entered a number of the containers when leaving Fonualei and they were re-packed and checked for pests on the boat.

## 2.4 Information for planned rat eradication, Late

- An eradication of rats from Late had been identified as a priority before this survey, following a review of invasive species issues in Tonga. The following conclusions are offered in relation to this:
- There is no evidence of rats on Fonualei – if rats had been detected their eradication could be a higher priority than Late given the presence of the Tongan megapode
- The Pacific rat (*Rattus exulans*) is present on Late though not in particularly high density.
- Rats were not in breeding condition though a juvenile was trapped
- There are very few competitors for poison baits on Late – no land crabs were seen except a few Coconut crab (*Birgus latro*), there are few ants and there was no evidence of the presence of pigs (reported in the past).
- There are no significant non-target species at risk. Coconut crabs may be affected. Shy ground-doves.
- Fallen fruit was relatively abundant. Fruits were gathered up for the first photo below but the second was natural.



**Late – fruit on forest floor**

There are several caves on the island and large fissures in the crater. From a topographical and logistical viewpoint an aerial operation using a helicopter will be appropriate. Even if rats are living in caves, etc it seems likely that they will need to come to the surface to feed and thus be exposed to baits. The cliffs are relatively low but will need to be thoroughly treated, ideally in conditions of minimal wind.



**Late – coastal cave**

**Late – inlandcave**

A sequence of habitat photos were taken on the walk to the summit and a second sequence of views of the island taken from the boat during the partial circumnavigation. These will be made available for the feasibility study for the rat eradication.

## 2.5 Logistics and Safety

This survey was supported by a relatively slow fishing boat. This somewhat reduced time ashore but any disadvantage was outweighed by the benefits of having it anchored off the islands throughout the trip. This was very positive from a safety viewpoint. It also allowed us to be supplied with fresh fish, and water once our supply had run out. I supplied two-way radios that proved invaluable, allowing us to communicate daily with the boat from shore to organise our activities. An emergency locator beacon was also hired in New Zealand and kept with the field team at all times.

Volcanic islands, particularly active ones, can be dangerous places. There was a 'near miss' when a boulder dislodged by one of the party caused several very large ones to fall close to a following team member. Health and safety needs to be treated as a priority and people should at least work as pairs at all times.

## Acknowledgements

I thank Samiuela Pakileata, Senituli Finau and Viliami Hakaumotu for their energy, support and good humour throughout the fieldwork – it was a pleasure to share this experience with you. Filimone Moli, Ola and Eriki were also of significant assistance on Late. Vili and Eriki skilfully ferried us to, and on and off, the islands and everyone took care to make the trip a safe and enjoyable one.

Ana Fekau undertook all the organisation for the project and dealt with the challenges of changing flight schedules and boat availability very efficiently. It feels good to be delivering you results that will be valuable for bird conservation in Tonga to repay your support. I appreciated the assistance provided on Vava'u by Winnie Laumanu.

Ann Goeth and Huw Lloyd generously shared their knowledge and experience of the malau. Dick Watling provided invaluable detailed advice about previous visits to Fonualei and Late that helped with the design of the present survey and allowed us to make maximum use of the time available. All three showed a strong commitment to the conservation of the bird and these special places.

Gianluca Serra, Easter Galuvao and Bruce Jefferies at SPREP provided support and advice throughout the planning of this work and it was a pleasure to share time with the last on Vava'u. David Moverley (SPREP) and Richard Griffiths advised on invasives issues.

Rhys Buckingham of Wildlife Surveys provided recording and playback equipment and Les Moran kindly organised the loan of cases and dry bags from colleagues at the New Zealand Department of Conservation.

The natural drama of Fonualei in particular, with steam issuing from many vents and fissures after rain and grass too hot to sit on, made the expedition a very special experience. It was a privilege to be given this opportunity and I thank all those who made it possible.

## References

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## Fonualei Images



Malau nesting ground with steam in background



Malau nesting burrow with 1 egg  
(waypoint466)



Brown booby on crater rim with steaming slopes



MainCrater

## Late Images

