

THE CAPTURE OF EIGHT MONTSERRAT ORIOLES AND THEIR SUBSEQUENT ESTABLISHMENT AND BREEDING AT JERSEY ZOO

by Andrew Owen

Introduction

The small island of Montserrat in the eastern Caribbean has experienced volcanic activity from the Soufrière Hills volcano since July 1995. Irregular eruptions, heavy ash falls and pyroclastic flows have caused severe damage to the infrastructure of the island and to much of its remaining forest (Arendt et al. 1999)

The island's only endemic bird species is the Montserrat Oriole *Icterus oberi*, whose primary habitat before 1995 was in the mountain forests and gullies (ghauts) in the south of the island. The majority of this forest has been destroyed by the volcanic activity. Following research undertaken by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and staff from the Montserrat Forestry Department, it was found that the oriole still survived in remaining forested areas and that its numbers were still reasonably high, within the region of several thousand birds.

Despite the relatively high number of birds still surviving at the time and the reduced activity from the volcano, the Montserrat Alliance (a working group comprising members of the Montserrat Ministry of Agriculture, Trade and the Environment (MATE), Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Fauna and Flora International (FFI) and The Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew), decided that because of the unpredictable nature of the volcano, it would be prudent to collect from the wild a small number of orioles. Therefore, an expedition was mounted to collect four pairs and establish them at Jersey Zoo, in order to carry out trials into the husbandry and captive breeding requirements of this aviculturally unknown species.

The Montserrat Oriole

The Montserrat Oriole was first described by G. N. Lawrence in 1880 (Jaramillo and Burke, 1999). It was declared the national bird of Montserrat in 1982. It is a member of the family Icteridae, which comprises some 103 species, 49 of which belong to the genus *Icterus*, the New World Orioles.

Description

Adult male, 20cm-22cm (approx. 8in-8½in). The eyes are dark reddish-brown and the bill is black with the base of the lower mandible pale grey. The head, mantle, breast and wings are black. The black breast ends abruptly,



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Male Montserrat Oriole captured at Woodlands, Centre Hills.



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Female Montserrat Oriole captured at Blackwood Allen, Centre Hills.

the lower breast and belly to the vent being a rich yellow colour; these feathers being faintly tinged with tawny brown. The lower back, rump and upper tail-coverts are lemon yellow. The tail is black. The legs and feet are bluish grey and the claws are black.

Adult female, 20cm-22cm (approx. 8in-8½in). The eyes, bill, legs and feet are the same colours as those of the male. The crown is yellow-olive, becoming olive on the nape and mantle. The rump is olive with a yellow wash. The lores are black and the face is yellowish with a chestnut wash on the cheeks. The underparts are entirely olive-yellow. The wings are olive-brown. The greater wing-coverts, tertials, secondaries and primaries are edged with tawny. The lesser and median wing-coverts are tipped olive-yellow, and the tail is olive with a yellowish wash.

Distribution and status

The species is sedentary and, prior to 1995, was widely distributed in suitable habitat (moist tropical forest and bamboo forest) across the island's three main interior mountain ranges, the Soufrière Hills, the South Soufrière Hills and the Centre Hills. Since 1995 the oriole and its habitat in the Soufrière and South Soufrière Hills has been lost (Arendt et al. 1999).

The species was previously considered Near Threatened (Collar et al. 1994) but as half to two-thirds of its former range has now been lost, Arendt et al. (1999) recommended that it be classified as Globally Threatened (endangered) due to the loss of breeding habitat since 1995.

Capture and maintenance of orioles on Montserrat

Construction of holding aviaries

On arrival in Montserrat the first task was to find a suitable site for the establishment of temporary holding cages or aviaries for the birds that were to be trapped. On the advice of ministry personnel, a site was chosen at the Ministry of Agriculture's plant nursery in St Peters. This location offered shade and seclusion for the birds, and was situated relatively close to areas of forest in which the trapping would take place, and was within walking distance of my accommodation.

Two possible sites were available in the plant nursery. The first, a range of low chainlink cages which had been used to house dogs prior to their evacuation from the island, was dismissed immediately as the cages would require a large amount of modification before they would be suitable for accommodating small passerines. Furthermore, the cages were being used by a local farmer to house pigs and chickens and hygiene standards were very poor. Therefore, we chose to build the holding aviaries in a large wooden-framed structure, which was being used for growing local forest plants.



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