



Anton and BirdLife Global Seabird Scientist Susan Waugh join forces with local communities to help save seabirds.

## Rugby hero makes mark in island conservation

WRESTLING with snakes, tussling with giant coconut crabs and clambering up sheer rock faces to study endangered Pacific seabirds is all in a day's work for former All Black Anton Oliver.

It's hardly been a quiet life since retiring from professional rugby last year and starting study for a Masters degree in biodiversity, conservation and management at Britain's Oxford University.

In July I spent four weeks in Fiji working alongside locals on a BirdLife International project to rid seven small islands of rats. My thesis investigates the interaction between poverty and conservation, and I spent two weeks living with a subsistence community, helping BirdLife's preparation for a helicopter bait drop and interviewing the locals and observing their needs and wants.

Ringgolds Island was so badly overrun with rats that seabird numbers were rapidly declining as the rodents ate eggs and chicks, and crops could not be harvested before rats devoured them.

I studied other conservation projects in Fiji with BirdLife Global Seabird Scientist Susan Waugh, who is based at Forest & Bird in New Zealand, and BirdLife staff based in Fiji.

The Ringgolds rat-eradication project, which cost more than \$US200,000, will dramatically improve habitat for seabirds, including brown and red-footed boobies and black noddies. People from the island are

overjoyed that they will be able to harvest crops for the first time in years now that rats are gone.

On another island, Vatu-i-ra, which had its rats eradicated in 2006, we looked at how bird colonies are recovering from the earlier rat infestation. We checked bait monitoring stations, which showed no new rat arrivals on the three-hectare island. Without rats eating their young, the number of ground-nesting birds, including brown boobies and bridled and black-naped terns, is growing. Crested terns have been spotted for the first time.

Fijians were welcoming – and not just because of my conservation efforts. I held media conferences and appeared on three TV shows in the rugby-mad country. I thought now that I've hung up my rugby boots I wouldn't get noticed but it wasn't so in Fiji.

I'm still waiting to get my questionnaires translated into English so I can't yet say what the rat eradication means to the locals. However, it is clear that the reasons BirdLife would like the rats off the islands and the locals' motives have nothing in common – and that lies at the heart of my thesis.

Anton Oliver

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