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# Montserrat Ridge to Reef Conservation Project (MRRCP)

## Monthly Project Update

January 2015

**Location:**

The Taj, Old Towne, Montserrat

**Project Scientist:** Shawn Daniel

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## MRRCP Project Aim

The Montserrat Ridge to Reef Conservation Project (MRRCP) is a collaborative project to support the sustainable use of Montserrat's natural resources. The programme encompasses scientific surveys of coral reefs and other marine resources, as well as terrestrial species and habitats focussed primarily in the Centre Hills. The MRRCP provides training and conservation education opportunities for local Montserratians, as part of an integrated programme to develop local capacity and ensure the long-term protection and sustainable use of natural resources throughout the country. Coral Cay Conservation (CCC) is working at the invitation of and in partnership with the Government of Montserrat and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Coral Cay Conservation provides the resources to help sustain livelihoods and alleviate poverty through the protection, restoration and management of coral reefs and tropical forests.

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## Latest News

Christmas break is over for the CCC Montserrat team, with some team members having spent it back in the winter wonderland of the UK and others enjoying it right here on the Emerald Isle of the Caribbean. It's a little hard to believe that 2014 is over and we're already a month into a brand new year! After the energetic and vibrant atmosphere of Montserrat Annual Festival 2014, January has been considerably quieter for us.

As the project is not open to volunteers over January, there's just been a core team of 4 staff (plus our resident guard dog, Annie!) on island for this month. We temporarily moved into a different



*The view from Loblolly villa – our base for January. [Image courtesy of Shawn Daniel]*

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house in Old Towne as the landlords of the Taj Mahal were spending their annual holiday on Montserrat. Fortunately, our new base, Loblolly Villa, was only a few doors down from the Taj and just as convenient and functional as a site base. The view wasn't too shabby, either!

This month our Project Scientist (PS) Shawn Daniel and Field Base Manager (FBM) Claire were also lucky to be invited to a workshop on Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) organised by the United Kingdom Overseas Territories Conservation Forum (UKOTCF), Montserrat National Trust and Government of Montserrat. This two day event at the National Trust Botanical Gardens in Salem helped educate attendees about the role and importance of EIAs in assessing and managing real and potential risks of development without proper planning – focussing especially on how these can impact the environment. This workshop was delivered by Dr Jo Treweek, a specialist in biodiversity-inclusive EIAs with extensive global experience in the field at both project and strategic levels. With Montserrat looking to the future and increased development undoubtedly necessary for the country to boost its economy, this was a hugely useful event for attendees which included the Honourable Premiere of Montserrat Donaldson Romeo, Honourable Minister of MALHE Claude Hogan, as well as other representatives from Government of Montserrat, land owners and non governmental organisations.

### Story of the Month

Just one of the amazing things about Montserrat is that sometimes we're rewarded with sightings of fantastic marine life without having to even get in the water! Earlier this month, while doing a shore bird survey in Isles Bay, Science Officers (SOs) Jack and Hazel were thrilled when they spotted two Humpback Whales (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) cruising along the shore. After a frantic call back to base to inform the rest of the team, FBM Claire was also able to get a great view of both whales through a telescope from Old Towne. The mother and calf pair ventured quite close to shore, coming within a few hundred metres of the beach and passed right next the buoy in Isles Bay where our boat is normally moored. After leisurely swimming north into Old Road Bay, they moved out of view after rounding the bluff, but not before they had made everyone's day by putting in such a spectacular appearance!

This was the first time this year that the team had seen whales in Montserratian waters. Northern hemisphere populations of Humpbacks spend winter in warmer waters closer to the tropics, then migrate north through the Caribbean on their way to feeding grounds nearer the polar regions. Southern hemisphere populations do the same thing, but instead head south to feed and north to breed. Due to the seasons being reversed in the two hemispheres, northern and southern populations of these whales probably never meet as they are always travelling to different places. The next few months should hopefully provide plenty more viewing opportunities for these whales so keep your eyes peeled! Last year several team members even heard these creatures with incredible clarity on numerous occasions while SCUBA diving!

### Survey Update

*Survey background: The only comprehensive survey of Montserrat's coral reefs and other marine resources to date was carried out prior to the eruption of the Soufrière Hills volcano. CCC will be conducting enhanced Reef Check surveys around the island to provide an overview of the current status of the coral reefs of Montserrat and map marine habitats. Terrestrial survey work will build on*

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research carried out during the Centre Hills Project (2005-2008) and focus on three main areas: 1) mapping invasive plant species; 2) surveys of resident and migrant birds; 3) reptile and amphibian surveys. If you would like more information on our surveying please contact our Project Scientist.

### Marine Surveys

Our marine survey work is currently on hold as sea conditions over the winter months are generally quite changeable and fairly rough. Instead, we are using this time to do some necessary maintenance work on our boat and outboard engines. When our next marine volunteers arrive in the spring, we should be raring to go once again! In the mean time, when conditions have permitted we've been enjoying the occasional recreational dive and snorkel which is never dull.



*A colony of critically endangered Elkhorn Coral (Acropora palmata) on the reef off Rendezvous Bay. [Image courtesy of Shawn Daniel]*

### Terrestrial Surveys

With marine survey work taking a back seat for the next couple of months, our main focus has been on the terrestrial side of things. With fewer personnel available on site, our surveys of invasive plants and herptiles (which require more manpower) have unfortunately not been as regular as our bird surveys. Winter migrant birds seen by our team this month include Belted Kingfishers (*Megasceryle alcyon*), Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) and Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus*).

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Shawn Daniel

*A female Belted Kingfisher (Megasceryle alcyon) kindly poses for a photograph near Carr's Bay. [Image courtesy of Shawn Daniel]*



*How does your wingspan compare to that of a Wedge-Tailed Eagle?*  
session.

## Education and Community Projects

Our fortnightly workshops at Brades Public Library also resumed this month following a hiatus for the island's Christmas celebrations. To start the New Year off in style, focus turned to the fascinating world of raptors (birds of prey). SO, Hazel led the session with the help of fellow SO Jack Copland and PS Shawn, with local children getting involved in the interactive nature of the

Children learnt attention-grabbing facts about individual birds of prey from all over the world including; Australia's Wedge-Tailed Eagle (*Aquila audax*), Africa's Ruppell's Vulture (*Gyps rueppellii*) and the cosmopolitan Osprey. With these regal raptors in mind, we discussed the specific adaptations raptors have evolved in relation to their prey, illustrating how strong talons, sharp beaks,

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a large wingspan and keen eyesight are key. We then spoke about the raptors of Montserrat and the importance of both marine and terrestrial food chains to maintain the populations of American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*) and Ospreys on the island. Following this, it was time for a much needed colouring-in session where the kids got a chance to make their own raptor food chain mobile. Many inventive colours were used to spice up the plumage of these birds of prey, which led to the rare 'Rainbow Raptor' making an appearance!

Our second session this month focused on the incredibly important and relevant topic of marine litter. This is unfortunately as much of a problem in Montserrat as it is in the rest of the world. SO Jack led this presentation with assistance from Hazel and Shawn, and the team enlightened the future of Montserrat on what could potentially happen to their Lego when they lose it down the toilet – as only children of 5-10 years old can!



*The Rainbow Raptor – just one example of how creative our audience is!*

Children learnt the meaning of litter and how it can



*Some incredible facts about litter can be found on this neat little poster designed by our Science Officer, Hazel Thornton.*

end up in the oceans, as well as its durability in the environment and the drastic effects it has on

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both marine life and people. We tested our students' imaginations with the image of a garbage patch floating in the North Pacific that is 5,000 times the size of the island they live on! Once they had learnt the effect that litter has on the oceans, they did their bit to spread the word by creating their own 'Respect the Reef' posters, filled with facts and illustrations.

We look forward to seeing all of the children who turned up for these workshops when we return to Brades library again every 2 weeks. As ever, we would like to thank the staff at the Public Library for hosting us, as well as Rose Willock and Basil Chambers from ZJB Radio for helping to spread the word about our workshops through the airwaves.



*Remember guys: Respect the reef and put your litter in the bin!*

## Scholarship News

*Each month CCC offers Montserratian nationals who display an ambition to study and protect the vital natural ecosystems of Montserrat an opportunity to take part in one of our Conservation Scholarships. The programmes last for one month and involve training the student in SCUBA diving or jungle skills. They then take part in an intensive Skills Development Programme giving them the knowledge and expertise to conduct ecological surveys.*

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Although our marine programme is presently on hold, we are still welcoming applications for our local scholars' programme to start later this year. This is a great opportunity for young Montserratians with an interest in conservation to learn how to SCUBA dive and help study and conserve this island's beautiful marine ecosystems. Alternatively, if you're more of a land loving individual, we also welcome applications to join our terrestrial conservation programme and learn about the birds, reptiles, amphibians and invasive plants of the Centre Hills! Get in touch with our Project Scientist at [montserrat@coralcay.org](mailto:montserrat@coralcay.org) if you would like to learn more.



*The wonders of the underwater world are truly neverending. This Christmas Tree Worm (Spirobranchus giganteus) is just one of thousands of amazing marine creatures that makes its home in the reefs of Montserrat. Joining our Local Scholars Programme gives young Montserratians the opportunity to learn how to SCUBA dive and conduct surveys of marine biodiversity which contributes towards valuable conservation research. [Image courtesy of Shawn Daniel]*

## Creature of the Month!

This month's Creature of the Month is the record breaking Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*), which is one of the world's most widely distributed bird species; found on every continent except Antarctica. It is a large falcon, with a wing span of just over a meter and like all raptors it has excellent eyesight, enabling it to spot medium sized birds and ducks, which make up the majority of its prey. Across the world it is estimated that one fifth of the world's bird species are predated upon by these falcons. It is predominantly an aerial hunter and uses its unique flying strategy called a 'stoop' to reach speeds of 242 mph (389 kmph), making it the fastest animal in the world. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Peregrines were virtually eradicated from North America by the use of pesticides such as DDT. However, following significant conservation efforts this spectacular bird has made an incredible recovery.

This beautiful individual was photographed right here on Montserrat by Project Scientist Shawn Daniel. Peregrines travel here from colder climates during the winter for feeding and will depart around April. In the meantime, the Montserrat team have been enjoying watching this species hunting around the Belham Valley.



*A majestic Peregrine Falcon (Falco peregrinus) in Old Towne. [Image courtesy of Shawn Daniel]*

### Learn More!

To learn more about the MRRCP, to join the expedition, or to find out about local Scholarships, visit [www.coralcay.org](http://www.coralcay.org).

For news and updates from our projects around the world visit us on Facebook:  
[www.facebook.com/pages/Coral-Cay-Conservation-The-Official-Site/274436156676](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Coral-Cay-Conservation-The-Official-Site/274436156676)