
Montserrat Ridge to Reef Conservation Project (MRRCP)

Monthly Project Update

February 2015

Location:

The Taj, Old Towne, Montserrat

Project Scientist: Shawn Daniel



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

It feels like February has gone by very quickly here at the Taj, and not just because it's the shortest month of the year! Being back in the full swing of things with our terrestrial programme, complete with new volunteers on the team, we've been so preoccupied with work we haven't noticed the time flying by. Given that sea conditions are still quite variable, our focus has once again been on land-based activities though we have managed to get a couple of recreational dives in when the visibility and swell have permitted.

This month CCC was happy to organise and deliver a workshop for employees of the Montserrat Tourist Department. A recent restructuring and merger of the Tourist board with the Montserrat Development Corporation



The Centre Hills of Montserrat (background) as viewed from the Silver Hills in the north

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(MDC), and the launch of a new website has seen increased attempts to market Montserrat as an “off the beaten track” destination for holidaymakers. With this in mind, Director of the Tourist Department Anita Nightingale asked CCC to deliver a presentation to her and her employees to introduce some of the marine and terrestrial biodiversity of Montserrat.

Project Scientist (PS) Shawn Daniel gave an interactive presentation, during which the audience was asked questions and invited to answer questions posed on a range of topics, including current and future conservation issues on Montserrat, endemic species, different ecosystems present on the island, as well as coral biology and ecology.



The Montserrat Tourist department team were eager to learn more about the island's biodiversity!

By continuing to liaise with the Tourist department in this way, hopefully we can help educate a wider audience on the thriving and vibrant biodiversity on the island, as well as how to protect it from the threats being faced. This sort of work goes a long way towards helping to achieve one of the key aims of the MRRCP: to enhance ecotourism on Montserrat.

Story of the Month

With solely terrestrial survey work to focus on, we thought that this month would be a good opportunity to spend some time exploring a bit of the Centre Hills forests which we wouldn't normally visit on a regular basis. PS Shawn, and Science Officers (SOs) Jack and Hazel joined a few of our local friends for a cross island hike, starting at Jack Boy Hill on the eastern side of the island, and ending up at the helipad at the Montserrat Volcano Observatory (MVO) in Flemmings.

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The panoramic view of the Soufriere Hills from the top of Katy Hill south is spectacular

This fairly mammoth hike took us a mere 5 hours and 15 minutes, but gave us a chance to see more of the wet forest and elfin woodland in the higher parts of the Centre Hills such as Katy Hill, which provided some truly awe inspiring views of the south of the island. Everyone did their best to avoid slipping and sliding around in the mud as a little morning rain didn't help our cause! After reaching the MVO we decided that it was only fitting to enjoy a relaxing and hard earned Sunday lunch and cold drink down in Salem.



Hiking is hungry work, so we decided to have lunch on the old helipad on top of Katy Hill!

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 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.

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Marine Surveys

Just because we haven't been out doing marine surveys doesn't mean we haven't been out in the water! We've had a couple of days of pretty good diving weather this month which has allowed us to get back into the sea. We decided to do our first recreational dive in Lime Kiln Bay this year, and we weren't disappointed. Great visibility, plenty of fish and numerous opportunities for great photographs! Although we did come across a few Lionfish, Jack and Shawn went back the next day with their masks, snorkels and a borrowed speargun to remove these invasive animals from the reef.



*This juvenile Queen Angelfish (*Holocanthus ciliaris*, left) and unidentified Black Coral (right) are just some of the colourful and beautiful creatures spotted on our most recent recreational dive. [Images courtesy of Shawn Daniel]*

Terrestrial Surveys

With our first terrestrial volunteers of the year raring to learn about the flora and fauna found in the forests of Montserrat, we've had plenty of survey work in the hills to keep us busy this month. The extra pairs of hands on site has also made our herptile and invasive plant surveys considerably quicker, enabling us to boost these survey numbers this month. Also, with spring just around the corner we've noticed a number of local bird species becoming more vocal in preparation for the breeding season. It's also nice to have our patience rewarded once in a while with some decent photographs after a long morning of hiking and surveying!

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This nesting Red-Billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*) was spotted in the Silver Hills. [Image courtesy of Shawn Daniel]

Education and Community Projects

After last month's fairly serious topic of marine litter, we decided to lighten the mood during our first workshop at Brades Public Library this month and looked at the incredible ability of marine mammals to dive deep into the depths of the oceans. A presentation filled with fun facts, was given by SO Hazel and aided by fellow SO Jack, Field Base Manager (FBM) Claire Ogg and volunteers Charlotte Khan and Tracy Hall.

The children were hooked from the start, learning facts about Cuvier's Beaked Whale (*Ziphius cavirostris*) that can dive for a record breaking 138 minutes, down to record breaking depths of up to 3000m. This led on to learning about why these animals, ranging from Sperm Whales (*Physeter macrocephalus*) to Weddel Seals (*Leptonychotes weddellii*), need to dive so deep for so long, how their bodies are adapted to perform these endeavours and the risks they face when coming into contact with boat noise and deep sea fishing nets. The children then got to show off their own lung capabilities by bubble painting and decorating fun fact filled posters! It was great to see a good turnout of children, and to see them having such fun during the craft session which was especially messy with paint involved!

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Craft sessions at the library workshops never seem to bore the children!

Hummingbird (*Orthorhynchus cristatus*) and Montserrat's only nectarivorous mammal, the Long-Tongued Bat (*Monophyllus plethodon*).

After much discussion amongst the children as to whether a hummingbird could become diabetic from eating too much sugar we changed focus to discuss how people could help the 3 species of hummingbird avoid the threat of habitat loss by planting lots of flowering plants in their gardens and putting up nectar-feeders. During the craft session, children got the chance to decorate their very own home-made nectar-feeders which Jack, Shawn and Hazel had previously created from straws, string and recycled plastic bottles. This was a great success and lots of red, yellow and bright pink paints were used to attract these beautiful birds to Montserratian gardens.

The number of children attending our fortnightly workshops continues to steadily grow. As always, thanks goes to ZJB Radio and the local staff at the Brades Public Library for their continued assistance, time and enthusiasm.



The prospect of making nectar feeders for hummingbirds in their own back gardens really got the children going!

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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.

Our Local Scholars Programme is still open to young citizens of Montserrat who wish to join our project. With our Scuba Instructor (SI) arriving next month and our marine Skills Development Programme (SDP) set to resume soon when sea conditions improve, there's no better time to apply to join our project as a local scholar! Whether you'd like to join the programme to help out with our marine surveys, or to get stuck in and help with our terrestrial work in the Montserratian forests, we'd love to hear from you so please get in touch if you'd like to know more.



Exploring the underwater world as a diver is an incredible experience – just ask Jack, one of our resident Divemasters! CCC scholars who join our marine programme are trained up to PADI Advanced Open Water level and then taught survey skills so that they can help collect data for our project during diving surveys.

Creature of the Month!

Our creature of the month is a fish which isn't seen in Montserratian waters very often, the Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*)! Given its relative rarity, when our science staff recently spotted this enigmatic individual whilst snorkelling in the shallow reefs of Isles Bay we thought it was a great chance to highlight this endangered predator! Found within tropical waters of the western Atlantic Ocean, Nassau groupers are the most important grouper for commercial fishing in the West Indies. However, a combination of unsustainable fishing practices, loss of suitable habitat and a slow breeding rate have led to a 60% decline in numbers over the past 30 years, reducing populations to around 10,000 mature individuals and even being considered commercially extinct in some areas, and Endangered globally (as per the IUCN Red List).



A Nassau Grouper (Epinephelus striatus) in Isles Bay. [Image courtesy of Shawn Daniel]

Growing up to a maximum of 4 feet (1.2 m), their large mouths enables these fish to “inhale” their food, using strong, slender teeth to prevent their prey, which includes fish and small crustaceans, from escaping. Their colouration varies depending on water depth, changing from tawny in the shallows to reddish pink in deeper waters. However, all Nassau groupers are characterised by five irregular dark brown vertical bars on each side of the body and a tuning fork-shaped mark on the forehead. They are less shy than other groupers and can be easily approached by snorkellers or divers so the next time you're in the Caribbean make sure you look around for this impressive fish!

Learn More!

To learn more about the MRRCP, to join the expedition, or to find out about local Scholarships, visit 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