

Bermuda says rare national bird born on reserve

April 17 2009, By DAVID McFADDEN , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- A fuzzy fledgling of Bermuda's national bird, spotted on a secluded offshore sanctuary this week, may help bring the rare creature back from the brink of extinction.

The baby bird - found nestled in an artificial concrete burrow on protected Nonsuch Island by scientists - is the first recorded Bermuda petrel chick seen on the 16-acre (6-hectare) site for centuries, Bermuda's Department of Conservation said Thursday.

Just 300 of the endangered [birds](#), commonly known as Cahows, exist in and around Bermuda. They breed nowhere else in the world.

Jeremy Madeiros, the conservation officer who has been overseeing efforts to revive the bird species for nine years, could barely contain his relief that mating had been successful.

"I'm just beyond thrilled," Madeiros said during a phone interview on Thursday. "To have a nesting pair produce a chick so soon is just such a big surprise."

The Cahow lives almost all of its life out on the open ocean, hunting squid, krill and anchovies in the Gulf Stream and beyond, he said. It returns to its Bermuda home only to mate, and no invasive predators are left there to threaten the species.

The adult bird, with its blackish-grey head, white belly and eerie,

moaning cry, was once very common in Bermuda, numbering about a million before Spanish explorers discovered the islands in the early 1500s.

But pigs brought to Bermuda by Spanish sailors and rats, cats and dogs brought by early British settlers devastated the population, along with hunting by settlers. The bird was thought to be extinct by the 1620s, yet a few breeding pairs were found nesting on craggy islands off the British Atlantic territory's east end in 1951.

Retired conservation officer David Wingate helped create the Nonsuch reserve as a safe breeding ground for the Cahow. About two miles off Bermuda's main island, it is now a living museum of [flora](#) and [fauna](#) found by Bermuda's first settlers 400 years ago.

Wingate said he could "not think of a more perfect success story" to commemorate the settlement's 400th anniversary than this chick's hatching about a month ago.

The little bird was nicknamed "Somers" in honor of Sir George Somers, whose shipwreck marked the beginning of Bermuda's permanent settlement. It is expected to leave Nonsuch within nine weeks and will then spend three to four years at sea before returning to the exact spot from where it left to select a mate and build a nest.

"I'm hopeful that next year we will see more chicks born on Nonsuch," Madeiros said. "We will then truly have secured a major victory in ensuring the future survival of this most extraordinary bird."

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