# Researchers help track mysterious, endangered 'little devil'

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This black-capped petrel is equipped with a solar-powered satellite transmitter. Credit: Tazio Taveres

Clemson University's South Carolina Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit joined with Grupo Jaragua and the American Bird Conservancy to lead the first-ever effort to track via satellite the black-capped petrel, an endangered North Atlantic seabird known for its haunting call and mysterious nighttime habits.

There are only 13 known breeding colonies and an estimated 600 to 2,000 breeding pairs, all located in the remote areas of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

The birds, which come to land only to breed, are known in their home range as "daiblotin" or "little devil" because of their eerie call and the sound produced by air moving over their wings during nocturnal flights.

Researchers recently affixed small solar-powered satellite transmitters to three birds raising chicks in the isolated mountains along the border region of Haiti and Dominican Republic.

The three birds have now headed out to sea in search of food. Their travels can be followed at black-capped petrel journeys.

Black-capped petrels are known to visit waters off the U.S. East Coast and have been seen in the Southeast as far north as Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

"We are already seeing unique, real-time data that is adding to our understanding of the ecology of this species," said Patrick Jodice, leader of the Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and professor in Clemson's School of Agricultural, Forest and Environmental Sciences. "The satellite transmitters are allowing us to document 24-hour flights of 400 to 500 miles, and they are foraging in parts of the southern Caribbean Sea that were somewhat unexpected."

Black-capped petrel nests are under threat by Haitian communities dependent on land for farming and wood for cooking. The species is also believed to be threatened by losses from collisions with power lines and communications towers, wildfires and invasive predators, such as rats and cats.

Data from the satellite transmitters will deepen scientists' understanding of the birds' ecology at sea and help determine how best to improve the species' conservation status.

"This is a pioneering effort for this species that will yield unique information about the petrels' travel routes and foraging locations while breeding, the rate at which the birds feed their chicks over the course of the breeding season and, we hope, their dispersal following breeding," Jodice said.

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