

All in a flap: Seychelles fears foreign bird invader

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A beach on Praslin island in the Seychelles pictured in March 2012. Environmentalists fear a foreign invading bird is threatening the national parrot

It was just a feather: but in the tropical paradise of the Seychelles, the discovery of parakeet plumage has put environmentalists in a flutter, with a foreign invading bird threatening the national parrot.

In the steamy and thick jungles of Praslin, one of 115 islands in the

Indian Ocean archipelago of white sand beaches ringed by palms, the authorities are worried after the warning sign of a green feather from a ring-necked parakeet was discovered.

If not stopped, it threatens to wipe out the country's endangered black parrot, listed as "vulnerable to extinction" on the Red List of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

"Based on the characteristics that I could see, the size and specifics... it is indeed a feather from the ring-necked parakeet," said Vilna Accouche, a scientist with the Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF), which helps conserve the palm-filled Vallee de Mai national park, a UNESCO-listed World Heritage Site and main home to the parrots.

The vivid green parakeet with a bright red beak, originally a domestic bird from India but which escaped its cages in the 1970s and now breeds in the wild on the main island of Mahe, may appear harmless.

But it is a direct rival to the endemic black parrot, the "most noteworthy species" in the park and which is "totally dependent" on the palm forest there, according to UNESCO.

- 'Innocent looking - but destructive' -

The black parrots live on Praslin, some 45 kilometres (27 miles) northeast of Mahe, and previously hoped too far to fly for the parakeet.

That isolation has left the parrots unused to competition, and vulnerable to infections from outside.

Rats, a major pest, as well as cats have until now been its main threat, with some nest boxes protected by rat traps.



Palm trees on Praslin island in the Seychelles. Environmentalists fear a foreign bird is threatening the national black parrot

But now the green parakeet appears to have flown the island divide and is threatening the parrot too.

As well as munching the same food as the parrots, the parakeets could bring with them diseases.

"The biggest danger posed by the arrival of the ring-necked parakeet on Praslin is that it could carry beak and feather disease, and spread them to the black parrot," said Accouche.

For the tropical islands, where tourism is the mainstay of the economy, preserving its unique nature is vital.

Less than 900 left

The small black parrots, isolated on the Indian Ocean island from competing species, could "disappear" if exposed to disease, she added.

There are only between 500-900 black parrots, according to SIF estimates, most living in the "primeval palm forest" in the Vallee de Mai, with endemic trees including the famous Coco de Mer palm, that produces a giant bottom shaped nut, the world's largest.

"The ring-necked parakeet will be in direct competition with the local population of the black parrot, as they have similar foliage environment, nesting habits and feeds on the same type of food," SIF ranger Terrence Payet told Seychelles News Agency.



A Bulbul sits on a branch at a nature reserve on Praslin island in the Seychelles. Another bird, the black parrot, is feared to be under threat from parakeets

The authorities have tried to stop the green bird before. In the last campaign, in 2011, 327 birds were culled.

Authorities have issued "wanted" posters with images of the small green parakeet, titled: "have you seen this bird?"

Seychelles News agency calls the parakeet an "innocent looking but destructive bird", that has left the black parrot fate "hanging in the balance."

Environmentalists are on alert. Three years ago a parakeet was spotted on the small island, but it was killed by a resident who shot it.

SIF director Frauke Dogley cautions that at present, the only evidence still just remains the single green feather.

But it is enough to keep the environmentalists hunting.

"We must find the bird," he said.

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