

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release



Songster provides hope for rarest bird in Galapagos

With an estimated population of 100 individuals, saving the mangrove finch from extinction is not an easy task. However, thanks to funding by the Galapagos Conservation Trust and three years of intensive conservation management of the species in the Galapagos Islands by the Charles Darwin Foundation, the Galapagos National Park Directorate and San Diego Zoo Global, an individual singing male could be the evidence that it has all been worth it.

The Mangrove Finch Project is working in the Galapagos Islands to save the Critically Endangered mangrove finch, whose global population consists of only around 100 individuals. The tiny population is still at risk, as it is affected by low nesting success due to the parasitism of nestlings by the introduced parasitic fly, *Philornis downsi* and predation by invasive rats. To try and counteract these effects, in 2014 a multi-institutional project led by the Charles Darwin Foundation and Galapagos National Park began to head-start mangrove finches by collecting eggs from the wild, captive-rearing the chicks and releasing the fledglings back to their natural habitat. The wild parents are able to lay again, so this can double the chance of breeding success.



2014 captive-reared male © D Anchundia

Over the last three years, 36 individuals have been head-started and released back into the wild, a huge increase for such a small population. This is great progress for the project, but even more excitingly, in February and September 2016, a captive-reared male that had been released in 2014 was observed singing. These sightings represent the first of any of the captive-reared birds to have been seen exhibiting breeding behaviour and is a key milestone for the project.

Francesca Cunninghame, Mangrove Finch Project Coordinator of the Charles Darwin Foundation, said, *“It is extremely encouraging for the Mangrove Finch Project to have confirmation of a captive-reared male exhibiting territorial behaviour two and a half years following his release back into the wild. This observation shows that not only are the captive-reared birds capable of surviving long term in their natural habitat, but additionally they are likely to form part of, and increase, the mangrove finch breeding population - which is the goal of the head-starting program. Although the individual observed is still fairly young and may not breed this coming season, his behaviour suggests that he is likely to do so in following years.”*

Sharon Johnson, Chief Executive of the Galapagos Conservation Trust, commented, *“Galapagos Conservation Trust has been the principal funder of the Mangrove Finch Project head-starting since 2015, thanks to the generosity of our supporters, so it’s exciting for us to see results like these. However, we are aware that there is much more that needs to be done to ensure this species survives into the future.”*

This show of breeding behaviour is positive sign for the species’ recovery, and with several birds now at breeding age, the team are hopeful that they will see established territories in the 2017 breeding season, which, even if the individuals do not nest, would be a massive step forward in the battle save this extremely rare bird.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

- The current **Mangrove Finch** (*Camarhynchus heliobates*) population is around 100 individuals. They are endemic to the Galapagos Islands where the entire population exists in just 32 hectares of mangrove forest on the North West coast of Isabela, the largest island in the Archipelago. They are one of fifteen species collectively known as “Darwin’s finches”, so named because of their association with the development of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection.
- The **Mangrove Finch Project** is a bi-institutional project carried out by the Charles Darwin Foundation and Galapagos National Park Directorate in collaboration with San Diego Zoo Global and Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust. The principal funder for the project in 2016 was the Galapagos Conservation Trust, with additional support from The Friends of Galapagos Switzerland (FOGO Suiza), Foundation Ensemble, Marguerite Griffith-Jones, GESS Charitable Trust, Decoroom Limited, and Holbeck Charitable Trust, The Prince Bernhard Nature Fund, the British Embassy in Quito and several individual donors via the International Community Foundation.
- The **Galapagos Conservation Trust** (GCT) is the only UK charity to focus exclusively on the conservation and sustainability of the Galapagos Islands. Established in 1995 at the Royal Society, GCT raises funding and awareness for projects in Galapagos, which focus on science, conservation, education and sustainability.
- The **Charles Darwin Foundation** (CDF) is a non-profit organisation that has been in operation for over 50 years. Since their inception in 1959, CDF has been the principal scientific advisor to the Government of Ecuador and the Galapagos National Park Directorate on conservation matters within the Archipelago
- Images available on request

Contact:

Clare Simm, Communications Officer, Galapagos Conservation Trust

Office: 020 7399 7440

Email: clare@gct.org