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VANUATU ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE SOCIETY

Threatened Species Factsheet No. 15

VANUATU MEGAPODE

What are they called?

Scientific:
Megapodius layardi

English: Vanuatu megapode or scrubfowl, Incubator Bird

French: Mégapode de Layard

Bislama: Skraptak or Namalau

Vernacular (local name):

A little bit about them:

The Vanuatu megapode is a ground bird that lives on moist lowland forests. They can fly but spend most of their time on the forest floor scratching around for food. They can be found on most islands of Vanuatu, but appear to be extinct on Tanna.

Their diet is a mixture of fruits, seeds, worms and insects, usually found by racking and mixing the dead matter on the forest floor.

They do not sit on their eggs but bury them in large nest mounds they build from soil, leaves and organic matter in lowland forests. The fermenting vegetable matter heats their eggs.

What do they look like?

These are large dark blackish-brown birds that can grow up to 34 cm. Their forehead and face are covered with bright red bare skin. They have yellow legs and large feet.
The females are similar to the males but slightly smaller. Chicks are dark brown, with paler cheeks and brown legs.

Source: Dubi Shapiro Photography

Did you know?

- Megapode means “Large Feet”.
- Some Vanuatu Megapodes bury their eggs near volcanoes with heat vents and active craters to heat their eggs for them!

Vanuatu Megapodes are classified as Vulnerable (VU) on the IUCN Red List.

Why are they threatened?

- Overexploitation of the birds through hunting and collection of their eggs.
- Predation by invasive species such as rats, cats, dogs and pigs.
- Breeding sites are continuously cleared for agriculture, cattle ranching and logging.
- Fire, heavy rain and cyclones damage their breeding mounds and either buries the chicks inside or exposes them to predators.

What can we do for them?

- ✓ Increase awareness of the threats to this species and discourage hunting through community based taboos and workshops.
- ✓ Castrate and spay pet cats and dogs to reduce feral animals preying on adults, chicks and eggs. As they are not native to Vanuatu, birds have no natural defense against them.

What do they do for us:

- When scratching the ground for food, they mix the soil with dead leaves, logs, fruit etc helping to cycle nutrients.
- They control pest species by eating many insect species.
- They are an iconic bird for Vanuatu because they are not found anywhere else.
- Create eco-tourism opportunities through bird watching tours.

Source: Kirk Zufelt

Want to know more?

- Check out their profile in the Book: **Birds of Melanesia** by Guy Dutson
- IUCN website: www.iucnredlist.org

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