

AUDUBON'S SHEARWATER (*PUFFINUS LHERMINIERI*),
A NEW BREEDING SPECIES ON ST. LUCIA

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Abstract: On 25 May 2003 I observed, captured, and examined a recently fledged Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*) swimming in the shallow, sheltered waters of Praslin Bay near Praslin Harbor, on the Atlantic coast of St. Lucia (13°52' N, 60°54' W). This observation provides the first evidence for breeding on St. Lucia, presumably on a nearby offshore islet.

Key words: Audubon's Shearwater, breeding, Lesser Antilles, *Puffinus lherminieri*, St. Lucia

Resumen: PAMPERO DE AUDUBÓN (*PUFFINUS LHERMINIERI*), UNA NUEVA ESPECIE NIDIFICANDO EN SAN LUCIA. El 25 de mayo del 2003 observé, capturé y examiné un pichón de Pampero de Audubón (*Puffinus lherminieri*), que nadaba en la franja de aguas someras de la bahía Praslin cerca de Praslin Harbor, en la costa atlántica de Santa Lucía (13°52' N, 60°54' O). Esta observación constituye la primera evidencia reproductiva de esta especie para Santa Lucía, presumiblemente ocurrida en un cayo cercano.

Palabras clave: Antillas, Pampero de Audubón, *Puffinus lherminieri*, reproducción, Santa Lucía

Résumé : LE PUFFIN D'AUDUBON (*PUFFINUS LHERMINIERI*), NOUVELLE ESPECE NICHEUSE A SAINTE-LUCIE. J'ai observé, capturé et examiné le 25 mai 2003 un Puffin d'Audubon (*Puffinus lherminieri*) récemment émancipé nageant dans les eaux abrités et peu profondes de la baie de Praslin près de Praslin Harbor, sur la côte atlantique de Sainte-Lucie (13°52'N, 60°54'W). Il s'agit de la première évidence de nidification pour Sainte-Lucie, probablement sur un îlot proche.

Mots-clés : nidification, Petites Antilles, Puffin d'Audubon, *Puffinus lherminieri*, Sainte-Lucie

THE AUDUBON'S SHEARWATER (*Puffinus lherminieri*) is widely distributed in the tropical Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. It ranges throughout the West Indies but breeds only locally (Lee 2000). There is only one previous record for St. Lucia: one seen "about a mile and a half west of Castries" (on the north-west coast) on 19 June 1931 (Danforth 1935). More recently, Wells and Wells (2000) observed one somewhere between St. Lucia and St. Vincent on 4 December 2000. In this note I document the first evidence for breeding of the Audubon's Shearwater on St. Lucia.

OBSERVATION

At 12:30 hr on 25 May 2003, 2 d after the full moon, I observed a shearwater swimming in the shallow, sheltered waters of Praslin Bay, approximately 100 m from Praslin Harbor, on the Atlantic coast of St. Lucia (13°52' N, 60°54' W). The bird was having difficulty maintaining buoyancy; both wings were held away from the body and it occasionally flapped weakly. When Christopher S. Samuels and I approached in a kayak it made no attempt to escape. We examined the bird in hand for approximately 10 min and identified it as an Audubon's Shearwater which had recently fledged, per-

haps prematurely. Most flight feathers were fully developed; however, some remains of natal down were present on the vent and nape. The bases of many body feathers and all tail feathers were partly enclosed within sheaths, and the legs were soft and fleshy in texture. The bird's plumage and small size clearly distinguished it from other shearwater species. After examination the bird was released into nearby mangroves.

DISCUSSION

On the evening of 28 May, 5 d after the full moon, Christopher S. Samuels, Helen J. Temple, and I went to Praslin Island, in the center of Praslin Bay. Despite regular patrols between 18:30 and 23:30 hr, and several subsequent daytime visits, we found no evidence for the presence of shearwaters on the island. The island is 1.2 ha in size and reaches approximately 10 m above sea level at the highest point. It is vegetated with low woodland and scrub, and I cannot discount the possibility that the chick originated from here. However, a more likely candidate is Frigate Island, 50 m east of the northern tip of Praslin Bay, and inaccessible to boats. This island is steep-sided, vegetated with low scrub, and covers an area of 0.2 ha. It is home to up to 100

Magnificent Frigatebirds (*Fregata magnificens*) during the breeding season (R. Wayne Burke in Keith 1997), and superficially appears to be suitable for nesting shearwaters.

With only partially-developed plumage, and in prevailing easterly trade-winds, it is almost certain that the chick must have originated from one of the two islands in Praslin Bay. However, future studies may reveal that Audubon's Shearwater also breeds elsewhere on St. Lucia. There are an additional 18 small islands and rocks that lie within 5 km of St. Lucia's coastline, with a total area of 18.7 ha. All islands are of volcanic origin, with larger islands tending to be more vegetated, although vegetation is typically no more than dry scrub. Nearly all are low-lying, the exceptions being Dennery and Maria Major Islands, with elevations of 23 m and 92 m, respectively. All but one of the islands are under the jurisdiction of the St. Lucia National Trust and are protected as nature reserves or bird sanctuaries (Towle and Towle 1991; Praslin Island Warden Stephen Lesmond, pers comm). Praslin Island was only recently designated for protection, and now has a part-time warden based in Praslin. It is also possible that shearwaters nest on the main island.

Keith (1997) described Audubon's Shearwater as "probably overlooked" in St. Lucia "and likely to occur regularly offshore, March-October." Local people have reported seeing large-winged silhouettes flying at dusk around the sea cliffs of Cape Moule à Chique, at the island's southern-most tip. These may have been bats but equally may have been petrels or shearwaters. Audubon's Shearwater is considered by Keith (1997) to be a likely candidate. Audubon's Shearwater has recently been recorded breeding on the Grenadines and on Martinique and Guadeloupe (Halewyn and Norton 1984, Lee 2000) and on an islet off Barbados (Lee 2000, Buckley *et al.* 2006), and there have been recent sightings from St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Wells and Wells 2000) where it formerly bred (Hayes 2002) and possibly still breeds. Therefore it is not surprising that one or more breeding colonies exist on St. Lucia or its offshore islets.

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