

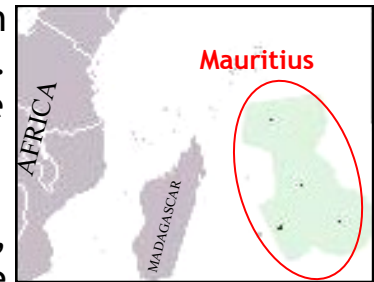
EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#16 MAURITIUS BLUE PIGEON



1907 illustration by
John Gerrard Keulemans
From Rothschilds
Extinct Birds

The Mauritius Blue Pigeon, sometimes known as the Pigeon Hollandais, *Alectroenas nitidissima*, is an extinct species of pigeon formerly endemic to Mauritius. Its second common name derives from the species' colouration of tri-coloured white, dark blue and red, which reminded Pierre Sonnerat, who brought it to the attention of the scientific world, of the Dutch flag.



Map: "Vardion"

Although the species was well known to the island's inhabitants, it was not the subject of dedicated scientific research. Most details of its life are somewhat dubious, such as it being terrestrial in habit (unlike its congeners, which are arboreal) and the claim that it often fed on river mussels; while this cannot be discounted, fruits are more likely to have been the mainstay of its diet (although wild fruit on Mauritius varies greatly from season to season). The crop and stomach contents of one bird contained 4 "nuts" (capsules or seeds) of *Calophyllum tacamahaca* (tribe Calophylleae). A single captive specimen survived for a few months in the menagerie of William V, Prince of Orange in 1790, the voice of this bird was said to be a dove-like cooing. Only three extant specimens are known. The type specimen is in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris, another, apparently taken some time before 1819, is in the Royal Museum, Edinburgh and one, the last recorded, is in the Mauritius Natural History Museum in Port Louis. There are some paintings of specimens, including two fine sketches of a freshly killed bird made by a Dutch sailor made in 1603, and two pictures of a captive bird, probably the one in the menagerie of the Prince of Orange.

Given the rich fossil record of other extinct Mauritian species, it is somewhat surprising that the first bones of this bird were only recovered in 2006 by the expedition of the Mauritian-European Dodo Research Programme. However, this may indicate that the Mauritius Blue Pigeon only inhabited dense forest, as paleontological research on Mauritius has been largely confined to the coastal areas and caves. These bones seem to be of a bird that was killed and washed to the area in which they were found by a flash flood or similar occurrence.

No unambiguous written records exist of the Mauritius Blue Pigeon before 1755, apart from one brief mention by *François* Cauche in 1651 of similar *Alectroenas* species encountered on Mauritius and Madagascar in 1640. In 1755, *Joseph Charpentier de Cossigny* gave a more detailed



MAURITIUS PINK PIGEON

Columba mayeri

Photo: Trisha M Shears

description of the bird, noting that it had been becoming rare since the 1730s. He attributed the decline to deforestation and hunting by escaped slaves, and unlike the Pink Pigeon, which survives until today, the Mauritius Blue Pigeon was not seasonally poisonous or unpalatable. However, in 1801 Jacques Gérard Milbert was still able to procure several for food, but he could only find it in the

woods of the river gorges.

The last specimen was taken in 1826 in the forests of the Savanne district, an 1832 report by Julien Desjardins suggested that in 1830, birds could still be found in the remaining patches of forest around the Mare aux Vacoas. But after that there are no reliable sightings of the species. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Mauritius Blue Pigeon became extinct in the 1830s.

Apart from habitat destruction and hunting, introduced predators, such as the Crab-eating Macaque, were probably also responsible for the birds' demise.



CRAB-EATING MACAQUE

Macaca fascicularis

Photo: Andrew Lih

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia