

EXTINCT BIRDS OF THE WORLD

#26 REUNION KESTREL



Illustration: Julian Hume

The Réunion Kestrel, *Falco duboisi*, is an extinct bird of prey belonging to the falcon family. It inhabited the Mascarene island of Réunion and was part of the Western Indian Ocean radiation of kestrels.

It is only known from subfossil bones and the writings of Le sieur Dubois published in 1674, this bird was larger than its relative *F. punctatus* on Mauritius, being about the size of a Common Kestrel, or around 35cm from head to tail, with males being noticeably smaller than females. It is most probable that the species was the same generally brownish colouration of its closest relatives, with lighter undersides and darker spots or stipples, the tail, could have been brown or more probably grey, banded and tipped black. The feet would have been yellow and



large relative to the bird's overall size. The wingspan 60-70 cm, with the wings being more rounded than those of the Common Kestrel (as in the Mauritius species) for increased manoeuvrability when hunting in the forest. It is probable, but not certain, that the only difference between the sexes was their size. Their diet was mainly small birds, but also included insects and the local Day Gecko. Dubois noted that despite their small size they were able to prey on



Reunion Island Day Gecko
Phelsuma borbonica borbonica
Photo: "Tikouet"

(presumably half-grown) domestic chickens. Dubois wrote of three birds of prey occurring on Réunion in the early 1670s. In order of decreasing size these were: *papangues* (the local Marsh Harrier, *C. Maillardi*, which still exists), *pieds jaunes* ("yellow-feet") and *émerillons* (a term for small falcons like the Merlin, *Falco columbarius*). It is not quite clear which of these refers to the Réunion Kestrel. Examination of the evidence suggests it was most probably the *émerillon*, with the *pieds jaunes* being either migrant falcons (the only species that might occur in the area, the Sooty Falcon, *Falco concolor*, Eleonora's Falcon, *Falco eleonora*, and the Peregrine Falcon, *Falco peregrines*, are larger than *F. duboisi* was, if not in overall length, then at least in wingspan) or the juveniles of the marsh harrier, which are distinctly coloured and also have yellow feet. The latter explanation seems more likely as the name was unequivocally applied to young marsh harriers

in the late 19th century. However, it is remotely possible that the sexes of the Réunion Falcon were not only of different size, but also of distinct colouration. If this was the case, the males would be the *émerillons* and the females the *pieds jaunes*.



Illustration:
Julian Hume

However, this seems unlikely, as Feuilley, writing in 1705, only mentions *papanges* and *pieds jaunes* present at that time. By 1700 the Réunion Kestrel seems to have been extinct. How this came about is something of a mystery, as was that of the Réunion Owl, *Mascarenotus grucheti*. Introduced predators were not present in large numbers until some time after the specie's extinction. Rats were present, but probably would not have been much of a problem for the birds. Réunion Kestrels were considered a pest as they preyed on poultry, but hunting is unlikely to have caused a large reduction of the population at such an early time, as evidenced by the continuous survival of the Marsh Harrier, which has been heavily persecuted for centuries for the same reason.

R.V.C. with help from Wikipedia