



# Durrell News

## Safety net cast for mountain chicken

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### **Abstract:**

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### **Body:**

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Experts from Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust have been working with the Montserrat Department of Environment after the devastating outbreak of the fungal disease (Chytridomycosis) around the island, which has killed many hundreds of the frogs over the last few weeks.

In the face of the rapid spread of this disease the first priority was to remove as many frogs from the affected area as possible. This has been led by a strong collaborative response from three institutions, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and Parken Zoo in Stockholm. Last week, 12 Montserrat mountain chickens (*Leptodactylus fallax*) arrived safely at Durrell's headquarters in Jersey and have been placed in a bio-secure unit in the Reptile House. Another 12 have gone to London Zoo and a further 26 to Parken Zoo.

Durrell has been working in Montserrat since the early 1990's to support the Montserrat government in the protection of its biodiversity. The mountain chicken has been an important species for Durrell and the Trust has managed and bred the frogs for the last 14 years. Through collaboration with ZSL, it was known that in 2005 the island was chytrid free and it is now thought that the disease entered late 2008 or early 2009.

Durrell's Head of Herpetology, Gerardo Garcia and the Trust's Veterinary Department Head, Javier López, who have worked with the species for a number of years, led a small team to collect the animals for export and to study the spread of the disease in the wild. The decision was taken to do this following grave concerns about the speed at which it was spreading across the island. During the visit, Durrell's team worked with Department of Forestry staff to survey a number of the

known areas for mountain chickens around the island. Currently, only one area appears to have remained unaffected by the disease. Thankfully this is an area with a high number of mountain chickens, but given the rapid spread of the disease it is only a matter of time before this final population is also affected.

Setting up an ex-situ captive breeding programme for this species was identified as the only viable option in the short-term, primarily because these frogs are difficult to keep in captivity. They have a voracious appetite and consume a great deal of food. Experts believed these individuals could be better cared for within institutions that already have the knowledge and facilities to treat and breed them.

Durrell's Head of Herpetology, Gerardo García, said, "I remember being surrounded by calling frogs in Montserrat and the effect of the sound echoing off the sides of the valleys was magical. It has been very sad to return to these valleys and see them either empty or full of dead and dying frogs. The one positive aspect was that we were able to get to the main population in a place called Fairy Walk before the disease, and now these animals form the basis of our rescue efforts".

Chytrid is currently one of the main causes of decline for amphibians globally, with over 100 species affected and it is thought to be the cause of the extinction of several species. Durrell believes that the effects of the disease are being exacerbated by habitat destruction and climate change around the world. The globally recognised Amphibian Conservation Action Plan and the Amphibian Ark initiative led by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), highlight that zoological institutions have a leading role in combating the threats of chytrid.

Quentin Bloxam, Durrell's Director of Conservation Management, said, "As we see from elsewhere in the world, chytrid has spread to Montserrat with devastating effect. We now have a strong collaboration between institutions that are well placed to lead this effort. The captive populations form a crucial part in protecting this species from extinction."

In Jersey, a fundraising campaign is underway to support the creation of an additional bio-secure facility so that a greater number can be accommodated at Durrell's wildlife park. This will form the central component of the captive breeding response and will be coordinated with efforts to study the frog, the impact of the disease in the wild and the means for reducing it. In the meantime, existing facilities at Durrell, previously used to breed the captive population of mountain chickens, have been converted to ensure these imported frogs never come into contact with any other amphibians or reptiles.

### **Additional information:**

This giant frog, once common across six islands, can now only be found on Dominica and Montserrat. In 2002 chytrid fungus hit the Dominican population wiping out the vast majority of mountain chickens found there. This left the Montserrat population as the only global stronghold for this species but still very vulnerable to this quick spreading disease.

The mountain chicken is also threatened by a high volume of invasive species to the island such as rats, as well as the affects of Montserrat's active volcano that erupted in 1995 causing widespread devastation. The uncontrolled hunting for food, hence the frog's unusual name, and the presence of alien predators like rats have also had a big impact on the mountain chickens numbers.

Please help us to pull this species back from the brink of extinction. By making a donation today and supporting our initial efforts in Montserrat and Jersey you will be helping us protect the future of this species. Donate online at [www.durrell.org/donate](http://www.durrell.org/donate) or call Natalie Ranise on 01534 860013.



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**Note to editors:**

The Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust was founded by author and naturalist Gerald Durrell fifty years ago with a mission to save species worldwide, and it has a proven track record of doing just that. Species that have been pulled back from the brink include the Mauritius kestrel, pink pigeon, echo parakeet and Mallorcan midwife toad, and our dedicated conservationists are hard at work in threatened habitats around the world continuing the battle to protect and conserve many more.

With its international headquarters in Jersey, the Trust has built up a worldwide reputation for its pioneering conservation techniques, developed under the leadership of its founder, the late renowned author and naturalist Gerald Durrell. Today, Durrell Wildlife is continuing to develop its overseas work in new areas of the world, with a particular focus on vulnerable communities of endemic animals, which make such a valuable contribution to global biodiversity.

"When asked, as I frequently am, why I should concern myself so deeply with the conservation of animal life, I reply that I have been very lucky and that throughout my life the world has given me the most enormous pleasure. But the world is as delicate and as complicated as a spider's web. If you touch one thread you send shudders running through all the other threads. We are not just touching the web we are tearing great holes in it." **Gerald Durrell 1925-1995.**