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A new plan to save the endangered Black-capped Petrel is released along with the first-ever images of a chick in the nest.

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## Good News for a Bad-luck Bird

*First photos of petrel chick renew hope for endangered seabird*

**For release:** January 12, 2012

*Ithaca, NY*--Friday the 13th is turning out to be a lucky day for a Caribbean seabird whose eerie night-time calls have long haunted visitors to its cliff-top breeding grounds. Today a crew of researchers is launching an expedition to search for additional nesting sites in the Dominican Republic. The expedition caps a headline year for the endangered Black-capped Petrel. First, scientists working in Haiti obtained the first-ever photos of a chick—a fist-sized ball of gray fluff that was discovered at a nest inside a mountaintop cave. Then the [International Black-capped Petrel](#)



*One of the first-ever images of a Black-capped Petrel chick in the nest. Photo by J. Volquez, Grupo Jaragua.*

[Conservation Group](#) brought together participants from 12 countries to produce the first comprehensive [conservation action plan](#) for the species.

The Black-capped Petrel is known as the diabloteín, or “little devil” in Spanish, probably because of its spooky cries. Best estimates suggest that fewer than 2,000 breeding

Black-capped Petrel pairs remain. The crow-sized birds nest only in the Caribbean but feed as far away as Gulf Stream waters off the Mid-Atlantic United States.

“Finding this nest shows both that gems of biodiversity are yet to be found in Haiti, despite its environmental and economic troubles, and that there’s still time to save rare species if we act swiftly,” said James Goetz, a [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) graduate student who has helped lead the project.

The nest, containing a single egg and an incubating adult petrel, was discovered on March 3, 2011, by Jairo Arache of [Grupo Jaragua](#). On return visits in April, May, and June researchers photographed but did not handle the growing chick as it waited for its parents to return with food. An automatic camera showed that adults visited the nest for an average of 80 minutes every couple of nights, typically between 9 p.m. and midnight.

Upon finding the nest, the researchers set up a motion-activated camera at the entrance to the cave. Over the course of four months, the camera caught images of the parents arriving to feed the chick, as well as visits by rats and a dog, two introduced predators that are known to destroy petrel nests. Nevertheless, in early July the camera photographed the chick waddling to the edge of the cave in preparation for its first flight. Grupo Jaragua's [time-lapse video](#) of the chick's development will be available Friday, January 13.

“All indications point to the bird having fledged successfully,” said Ernst Rupp of the Dominican nonprofit Grupo Jaragua, which found the nest. “It’s amazing to think that the tiny creature we discovered could now be thousands of miles away.”

Black-capped Petrels are one of the least-known bird species of the Caribbean. Historically abundant, they fell victim to overharvest, habitat loss and introduced predators such as rats, cats, dogs, and mongooses. By about 1850 they were thought extinct—until scattered at-sea sightings, and the 1963 discovery of nesting sites in Haiti rekindled hopes for the species.



*In this image, the chick has grown and will leave the nest soon.  
Photo by James Goetz, Cornell Lab of Ornithology.*

The ensuing five decades have turned up few clues about a bird that spends most of its life at sea, returning to land only a few dozen nights per year to visit nests in treacherously steep cloud forests. Once common on several Caribbean islands, only three known nesting areas remain: two in Haiti and one straddling the Dominican Republic–Haiti border. In 2004, a team of researchers spotted about 40 Black-capped Petrels along the coast of eastern Cuba, which could mean the bird is also nesting there. Researchers hope that will soon change, as a team of biologists, including the original participants from Grupo Jaragua and Cornell Lab of Ornithology, are joining Adam Brown of [Environmental Protection in the Caribbean](#), to search the island of Hispaniola and Cuba for additional nesting sites.

Haiti and, to a lesser extent, the Dominican Republic are economically poor but rich in biodiversity, which creates intense pressure on their natural resources. In Haiti, agricultural clearings reach to the tops of most mountains, no matter how steep. This severe loss of habitat threatens more than a dozen endemic Hispaniolan species, as well as wintering North American birds such as Bicknell's Thrushes, American Redstarts, and others.

Lessons learned from studying the first chick will help inform new efforts to discover nesting areas on Hispaniola and other islands. Until now, researchers have had to draw on details of better-known relatives such as the Bermuda Petrel and Hawaiian Petrel. “For such a poorly known species, every new scrap of information helps us gain ground in learning how to make conservation work for it,” Goetz said.

Among those funding ongoing research on the Black-capped Petrel are the [American Bird Conservancy](#), [BirdLife International](#), [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#), [Grupo Jaragua](#), the [MacArthur Foundation](#) and the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#).

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