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Hundreds of Dodo Bones

An astounding new discovery in Mauritius

The dodo bird had lived on Mauritius, an island in the Indian Ocean. In the 17th century, less than one hundred years from the arrival of Portuguese and Dutch explorers on the island, it went extinct. The bird, that was bigger than a turkey, was irresponsibly fearless of humans and its inability to fly wasn't helpful either. However, contrary to the prevailing myth, the bird was not hunted by the Portuguese and Dutch explorers for food. In fact, the Dutch called it "Walgvogel" meaning "the disgusting bird", due to the unpleasant taste and texture of its meat. The bird's extinction was caused by the introduction of foreign animals such as dogs, pigs, rats and monkeys that plundered the nests of dodos. Dodo's extinction was thus mostly due to the fact that it laid its eggs on the ground, and not by its slowness (one myth about dodo says that it was so fat that it could hardly run from attackers). It is interesting to note that other bird species such as the American eagle are also under threat due to similar reasons. Insofar, scientists had very scarce data about the dodo bird, having at their disposal only very few bone remains. Nevertheless, in 2002 an Oxford team managed to analyze the DNA extracted from a dodo claw. Although the DNA was damaged, the scientists succeeded deducing that the bird appeared around 25 million years ago, before Mauritius became an island. Its ancestor is a bird which still exists, called the Rodrigues Solitaire. In this context, the discovery of a Dutch-Mauritian team of hundreds of dodo skeletons is extremely exciting. The team uncovered an entire layer of animal remains and botanical materials, and so far more than 700 bones had been dug up. The dodo specialists are particularly interested in the finding of a very rare part of the bird's beak. It is estimated that the bones date from around 2 or 3 thousand years ago and thus, it is expected that, once interpreted, they would give a detailed picture of how the life went on the island before the arrival of humans. In addition to the dodo remains, the team has found bones of various other extinct bird species, indigenous giant tortoise species, and a baby giant tortoise, as well as a large number of seeds and remains of (partly) extinct trees and plants. One strange thing about this discovery is that all the remains were found in a single layer, and that there were numerous skeletons of dodo chicks. This suggests that the entire area is a mass grave but additional studies are required to determine whether they all died en-masse due to some natural disaster. Such a study will have to consider wider questions about the island ecology and geology. Due to the scale of the discovery and for assuring an accurate systematic study of the site an international team is now being assembled. This includes local botanists from Mauritius as well as scientists from European institutes (the Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum Naturalis from Leiden, Netherlands, the London Natural History Museum and TNO's Geological Survey of the Netherlands). *Photocredit: PieterFloore*