

The illustration is a watercolor-style drawing. At the top, several white birds with pinkish-orange wings and tails are flying against a light pink background. Below them, a dark, rocky horizon line separates the sky from the ground. In the middle section, several black bats with large wings are flying over a landscape. The ground is depicted with purple and brown tones, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. A large, bright yellow sun is visible on the horizon. The title 'GOLDEN BATS AND PINK PIGEONS' is written in a stylized, purple font across the middle of the illustration. At the bottom, the author's name 'Gerald Durrell' is written in a cursive, purple font on a white, rounded rectangular background.

GOLDEN BATS  
AND  
PINK PIGEONS

Gerald Durrell

## GOLDEN BATS AND PINK PIGEONS

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This is for Farida and Wahab  
whose kindness and hospitality  
sum up the whole charm of  
Mauritius



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# FOREWORD

by Lee Durrell

It's no wonder that Mauritius attracted Gerald Durrell like a magnet. It was the home of that large flightless bird, the dodo, the definitive symbol of extinction. Gerry had established his animal sanctuary in Jersey, now called the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust or 'Durrell' for short, to turn the tide of species extinctions. He started by breeding rare animals so that their kind were not lost forever, but in time he focussed on ensuring the survival of certain key species in the wild.

The Mascarenes, a complex of islands in the western Indian Ocean, including Mauritius, its offshore islets and Rodrigues, were the scene of the Trust's first sustained overseas conservation efforts, where the initial steps were taken with the ultimate goal in sight. *Golden Bats and Pink Pigeons* records the highlights of this journey, often hilarious, sometimes moving, and animated with great characters, both human and non-human, always described in Gerry's inimitable style.

Gerry and his assistant, John Hartley (later to become the Trust's Conservation Programme Director), set out to learn for themselves the plight of various creatures unique to the islands – from the snakes and lizards of Round Island, to the fruit bats of Rodrigues, to the pigeons and kestrels of Mauritius itself

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– and to see what could be done to save them. The strategy involved setting up breeding programmes not only in Jersey, but also in Mauritius, at a facility which is now named the Gerald Durrell Endemic Wildlife Sanctuary.

Gerry wanted the first ever student at the Trust's training centre to come from the land of the dodo, so he was on the lookout for promising candidates during those early trips. In fact, the training centre was only a twinkle in his eye at that point, but he had long been convinced that the breeding of endangered species should be done in the country of origin of the species concerned. Thus he intended for the animal sanctuary in Jersey to become a 'mini-university' for conservation, whose graduates would return to their homes and put what they had learned into practice.

Mauritius, not surprisingly, is the scene of our first unequivocal conservation successes. The work started by Gerry and John some thirty years ago evolved into full-scale species recovery programmes, and now Durrell is credited with saving more species of bird from extinction than any other organisation.

You will read more about these achievements in the excellent afterword by Toni Hickey, Senior Bird Keeper at Durrell, which brings me neatly to my final thought here. It is about the remarkable commitment and selfless hard work that our staff, like Toni and her colleagues, undertake to follow Gerald Durrell's dream.

These men and women, plus the graduates of our International Training Centre – yes, Gerry did indeed set up his training centre – are collectively referred to as Durrell's.

## A WORD IN ADVANCE

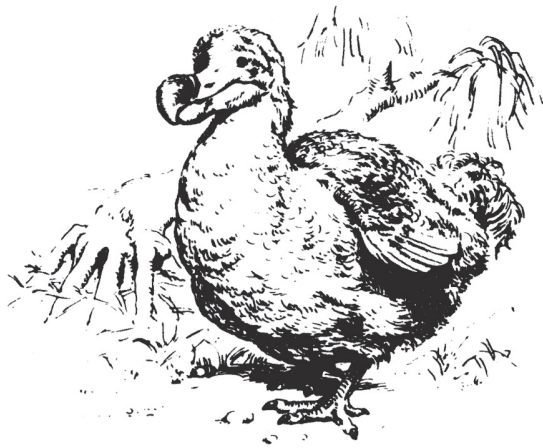
I think a brief explanation of this book is called for. It describes two separate trips that I, my assistant John Hartley and my secretary Ann Peters made to the enchanting island of Mauritius. My reasons for going there were twofold.

I established the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust some years ago to help endangered species by breeding them in captivity. This we have done with great success, but it became obvious to me that really the animals in question should be bred in their country of origin. The problem was that in most of these countries there were no personnel trained in the delicate art of wild animal husbandry. The trust, therefore, set up a scholarship scheme whereby we give financial assistance to students to come to us for training and then return to their countries to set up captive breeding programmes. To inaugurate the scholarship scheme, as the Dodo was our symbol, it seemed appropriate that a Mauritian student should be the first to benefit. I therefore went out to discuss this whole business with the Mauritian Government. At the same time, I wished to see some of the endangered birds, mammals and reptiles and to find out if we could in any way help the Mauritian Government in their efforts to save them. This is the story of how we set about it.



## CHAPTER ONE

# MACABEE AND THE DODO TREE



**W**hen you are venturing into a new area of the world for the first time, it is essential – especially if you are an animal collector – that you do two things. One is to get as many personal introductions as you can to people on the spot; the second to amass as much information as possible, no matter how esoteric or apparently useless, about the place that you are going to. One of the ways you accomplish this latter

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is by contacting the London Embassy or High Commission of the country concerned. In many cases, this yields excellent results and you are inundated with maps and vividly coloured literature containing many interesting facts and much misinformation. In other cases, the response is not quite so uplifting. I am, for example, still waiting for all the information promised me by a charming Malay gentleman in the London High Commission when I was going to that country. My trip there was eight years ago. However, the response you get from the Embassy or High Commission generally gives you some sort of a clue as to the general attitude prevailing towards life in the country concerned.

Bearing this in mind, I hopefully rang up the Mauritian High Commission in London when it was finally decided we were going there. The phone was answered by a charming young lady with a most attractive Asian accent.

‘Hallo,’ she said, with interest, but cautiously, not divulging her phone number or identity.

‘Is that the Mauritian High Commission?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she admitted at last, rather reluctantly, ‘that’s right.’

‘The Mauritian High Commission?’ I repeated, making sure.

‘Yes,’ she said, more certainly this time, ‘Mauritian.’

‘Oh, good.’ I said, ‘I was hoping you could give me some information as I am very much hoping to go there soon.’

‘Go *where?*’ she asked at length.

I knew that Mauritius was fairly remote but this, I felt, was too much. However, this was my first introduction to the charming illogicality of the Mauritian way of life. Eventually I did receive from the High Commission a small booklet containing, amongst other things, slightly out-of-focus pictures of Miss Mauritius 1967 lying about on beaches which could have been

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situated in Bognor or Bournemouth, for all the evidence to the contrary. Reluctantly I went back to the books of the early naturalists and more up-to-date zoological and geographical tomes for my information.

The Mascarene Islands, of which Mauritius is the second largest, lie embedded in the Indian Ocean, east of Madagascar. Forty miles by twenty, Mauritius gleams in a million tropical greens, from the greens of dragon wing and emerald, to delicate dawn greens and the creamy greens of bamboo shoot. All this is encrusted with a rainbow of flowers from the great trees that flame like magic bonfires of fragile violet-shaped magenta blooms, lying like a thousand shed butterfly wings among the grass, which itself can be green or yellow, or as pink as the sunset.

In the dawn of the world, Mauritius was formed – when the great volcano pustules were still bursting and spilling out fire and lava. In a series of cataclysmic convulsions, the island was wrenched from the sea bed and lifted skywards, the hot rocks glowing and melting so that cyclone and tidal wave, hot wind and great rains, moulded and fretted it, and tremendous earth shudders shook it and lifted it into strange mountain ranges, churning the tender rocks as a chef whips egg whites until they become stiff and form weird peaks when lifted up on a fork tip. So the strange-shaped mountains of Mauritius grew; miniature mountains all under 3,000 feet, but as distinctive, unique and Daliesque, as if carefully designed for a stage backdrop. A multitude of coral polyps, as numerous as stars, then formed a protecting roof round it and contained the lagoon, which encircled the island as a moat encircles a fortress.

Gradually, as the earth formed, seeds arrived, either sea or air-borne, to send their roots into the volcanic soil, now soft and rich, watered by many bright rivers. Following, came

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birds and bats carried by errant winds, tortoises and lizards like shipwrecked mariners on rafts of branches and creepers from other lands. These settled and prospered and gradually, over millions of years, their progeny evolved along their own lines, unique to the islands.

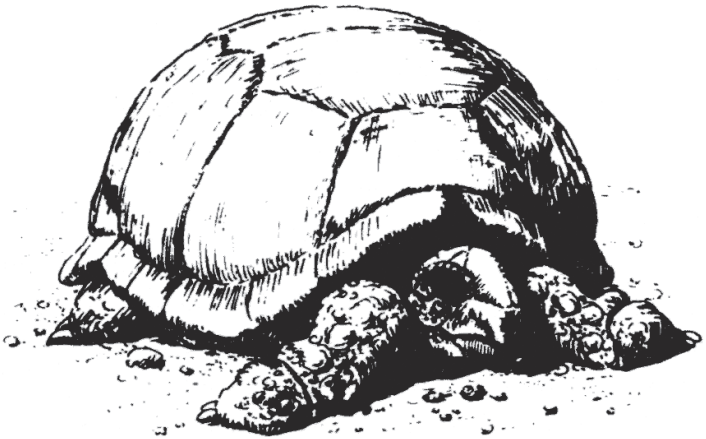
So the Dodo came into being; and the big, black, flightless parrot. The tortoises grew larger and larger until they were the size of an armchair and weighed over two thousand pounds, and the lizards vied with each other in evolving strange shapes and rainbow colours. There being no major predators except an owl and a small kestrel, the creatures evolved without defence. The Dodo became flightless, fat and waddling, nesting on the ground in safety, as did the parrot. There was nothing to harass the slow, antediluvian life of the tortoise; only the quick, glittering lizards and the golden-eyed geckos needed to fear the hawk and the owl.

There, on this speck of volcanic soil in the middle of a vast sea, a complete, unique and peaceful world was created slowly and carefully. It waited there for hundreds of thousands of years for an annihilating invasion of voracious animals for which it was totally unprepared, a cohort of rapacious beasts led by the worst predator in the world, *Homo sapiens*. With man, of course, came all his familiars: the dog, the rat, the pig, and, in this instance, probably one of the worst predators next to man, the monkey.

In an incredibly short space of time, a number of unique species had vanished – the Dodo; the giant, black, flightless parrot; the giant Mauritian tortoise, rapidly followed by the Rodrigues tortoise; and that strange bird, the Solitaire. The dugong, which used to throng the reefs, vanished and all that was left of a unique and harmless fauna was a handful of birds and lizards. These, together with what is left of the native forest,

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face enormous pressures. Not only is Mauritius one of the most densely populated parts of the globe, but as well as dogs, cats, rats and monkeys, a number of other things have been introduced in that dangerous, unthinking way that man has. There are, for example, 20 introduced species of bird, which include the ever-present house sparrow and the swaggering, dominating mynah. There is the sleek and deadly mongoose and less damaging but still out of place, the hedgehog-like tenrec from Madagascar. Then there are the introduced plants and trees, so that the native vegetation is jostled and strangled by Chinese guava, wild raspberries, privet and a host of other things. In the face of all this, the indigenous flora and fauna of Mauritius can be said to be hanging on to its existence by its finger nails.



## GOLDEN BATS AND PINK PIGEONS

In spite of my misgivings after my exchange with the High Commission, I found Mauritius, although indeed remote, was neither unknown nor inaccessible. Within a few days, Air France, who wonderfully stage-managed the entire trip, wafted us halfway across the world in the lap of luxury, our every want catered for by voluptuous air hostesses; so much so, that John Hartley and I felt we would be reluctant to leave the plane and brave the outside world again. But when the island came into view, we were seized with the excitement that always engulfs one when a new country suddenly presents itself to be explored. It lay, green and smouldering, mountains smudged blue and purple, like some monstrous precious stone in a butterfly-blue enamel setting, ringed with the white foamed reef and displayed, as a jewel is displayed on velvet, on the dark blue of the Indian Ocean. As our pachyderm aircraft lumbered in to land, we could see the green islets lying within the reef, star-white beaches and the square fields of sugar cane covering, it seemed, every available piece of flat land, lapping the base of the curiously shaped mountains like a green check tablecloth. It was somehow ironical that we, the flightless mammals, were landing, in one of the biggest flying edifices known on earth, on the area of land that covered the remains of one of the earth's strangest flightless birds; for the Dodo's graveyard, from which were extracted the bones on which our tenuous knowledge of the Dodo is based, lies beneath the tarmac of Plaisance airport.

The doors of the plane opened and we were lapped in the warm scented air and dazzled by the brilliance of colours that only the tropics can provide. In thick clothes – it had been snowing in England – one felt the sweat prickle out all over one's body and dribble in uncomfortable rivulets down one's back and chest. We were ushered through Customs with

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the minimum of fuss, thanks to the enchantingly charming gentleman with the euphonious name of Lee Espitalier Noel – there were, we discovered, over two hundred in the family which caused them to give up exchanging Christmas presents – who had a delicious French accent that would have made Maurice Chevalier sound Cockney.

It was here that we discovered one of the many incongruities of Mauritius. In an island that had been an English colony for over one hundred and fifty years and was still a member of the Commonwealth, where English was taught in schools as the official language, everyone gaily and volubly spoke French. We also found a strange amalgamation of the English and Gallic cultures; although traffic progressed on the left-hand side of the road and hand signals were correct and as graceful as a ballerina's dance movements, the driving was of the suicidal variety that the French nation delighted to indulge in.

Our Creole driver drove at a ferocious speed down the road lined with half-grown sugar cane, the stems of delicate pinky-blue and the leaves acid green, through villages of tin and wooden houses, thronged by groups of women, gay as butterflies in multi-coloured saris, surrounded by dogs, chickens, goats, humped-backed cattle and children in an exuberant melee. Each village was fragrant with the smells of fruit and flowers, alight with trailing shawls of bougainvillea, each shaded by a giant banyan tree, like a hundred huge, black melted candles with green flames of leaves fused together in a mammoth, sheltering, shade-quivering bulk.

I was enchanted by the signs we passed – ‘Mr Tin Win Wank’ who was licensed to sell tobacco and spirits On and Off (the premises, one presumed, rather than as the spirit moved him); the mysterious signpost in the miles and miles of sugar cane that said, simply and unequivocally, ‘Trespass’, and as to whether