**Study Will Permit Genetic Identification of Populations of Galapagos Petrel**

The Ministry of the Environment (ME) and the University of San Francisco de Qutio are analysing the efficacy of the conservation measures for the Galapagos petrel on 5 islands.

Little is known about the Galapagos petrel (*Pterodroma phaeopygia*), a nocturnal marine bird, protected by the Ecuadorean government, which is threatened by invasive species such as blackberry, guava, rodents and cats.

A scientific study will determine whether there are similar genetic characteristics between the populations on the 5 islands where they nest, and evaluate the efficacy of protection measures adopted by the environmental authorities, some of which are supported by other institutions and individuals.

The research that was undertaken by the Galapagos National Park (GNP), the Ministry for the Environment and university specialists took 5 months.

From April to July, GNP rangers, together with university researchers, climbed the hills of San Cristobal and Santa Cruz to locate the nesting sites.  In these zones, slipping, stepping on crumbly logs, loose rocks or simply needing to use almost imperceptible mud trails didn’t hold up the work of the rangers as they searched inside each nest, put out rodent bait, checked on how much had been eaten in the previous period, and removed introduced plants (e.g. blackberry and guava) that could impede arrival of the birds to their nests.

This is the only marine bird endemic to the Galapagos that nests in the highlands of Santa Cruz, San Cristobal, Santiago, Floreana and Isabella.  The Galapagos petrel is also known as “patapega” , seeks damp soil with vegetation or  rocks, in which it can nest to lay its single egg once a year, in the same place that it was raised by its parents.

This protection trip is undertaken each year by the rangers, who on this occasion were accompanied by the researchers, so they could take blood samples from the birds that were found within the nests, or feathers if they couldn’t find a bird. These will be used for genetic analysis.

According to Cristian Sevilla, manager of Conservation and Restoration of Island Ecosystems in the GNP, the researchers hope to determine the level of relatedness and genetic characteristics, and hence work out if the populations on each island are closed systems or whether individuals move between the populations. The five islands used by the birds are those which have the necessary humid zone habitats 500m above sea level.

“This study will also measure the nesting success rate, through banding of individuals, registering active and abandoned nests, the presence of chicks and their survival” added Sevilla, who estimates that the data will allow the scientific determination of the number of individuals present in the Galapagos – current population estimates being more than 5000.

The study will continue for 12 months on the 5 islands, or could be extended to 5 years depending on the results. The aim is to be able to respond to the hypotheses put forward, such as in relation to the management of plants around the nests and effect of fishing on food supplies.

Sevilla explains that the protection of the birds involves participatory management on the islands, such as in San Cristobal, where the community are responsibly supporting conservation of nesting sites in the agricultural zone, as do other institutions, including the renewable energy agency (ERGAL) which is managing its wind farm to avoid impacts on birds.

It is estimated that the information obtained on the Galapagos petrel can represent an opportunity to involve the community of the agricultural zone in agro-ecology tourism projects, similar to the approach for some farms that have giant tortoises, given that the archipelago receives more than 200,000 tourists annually.