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Wildlife and Fauna of Mauritius

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Introduction

Mauritius, a volcanic island nation set in the turquoise expanse of the Indian Ocean, has long captivated travelers and naturalists with its lush landscapes, picturesque coastlines, and above all, its remarkable wildlife. Isolated by thousands of kilometers of open sea from continental Africa and Asia, Mauritius became the stage for dramatic evolutionary experiments. Plants and animals arrived sporadically, often by wind, wave, or the rare chance occurrence, and over millennia, they evolved into new and sometimes spectacular forms—a process that led to an outsized proportion of endemic species, found nowhere else on Earth.

The story of Mauritius's wildlife is one shaped by both wonder and warning: the island is home to some of the world's most celebrated conservation successes, but also infamous for one of the earliest and most profound extinction events of the modern age—the disappearance of the dodo. This large, flightless pigeon became an international symbol of irretrievable loss, but it is only the most famous among dozens of unique species that once inhabited the island's forests, wetlands, rivers, and reefs.

Despite the sobering lessons of its past, Mauritius remains an island of hope for conservationists and nature lovers. Today, dedicated efforts from local and global organizations are helping to rescue species from the brink of extinction, restore native forests, and rewild offshore islets. Charismatic survivors like the Mauritius kestrel, pink pigeon, and others—once counted in single digits—now persist thanks to decades of hard work rooted in science and community involvement. Offshore, coral reefs swirl with a riot of marine life, while sea turtles still return to nest on quiet beaches, as they have for millions of years.

Yet, the challenges are formidable. Tiny, fragmented habitats; invasive predators and plants; climate change; disease; and the pressures of a growing human population all threaten the delicate balance that native species depend on. The complex, often precarious relationship between introduced and native organisms means that every conservation action must be carefully weighed, guided by the successes and failures of the past.

This book, *Wildlife and Fauna of Mauritius: A Guide to the Wildlife and Fauna of Mauritius*, invites the reader to journey across the island's many habitats—from mountain forests and drier scrublands to freshwater streams, offshore islets, and beneath the waves of the surrounding seas. Along the way, we will meet the remarkable creatures that call Mauritius home, learn about their adaptations and the threats they face, and discover the innovative strategies being employed to preserve this irreplaceable heritage.

Whether you are a passionate naturalist, a curious traveler, or simply someone enchanted by Mauritius's unique story, this guide is designed to deepen your understanding and appreciation of one of the world's most astonishing yet vulnerable ecosystems. Through exploration and awareness, we can all play a part in ensuring that the wildlife and wild places of Mauritius endure for future generations.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Island of Mauritius: Geography and Climate

Mauritius, a teardrop-shaped island in the vast Indian Ocean, sits approximately 2,000 kilometers off the southeastern coast of Africa and about 850 kilometers east of Madagascar. It is part of the Mascarene Islands, a volcanic archipelago that also includes Réunion and Rodrigues. The island itself is relatively small, measuring about 65 kilometers in length and 45 kilometers in width, with a total area of 1,865 square kilometers.

The story of Mauritius's physical form is written in fire and time. The island is of volcanic origin, a product of eruptions that began on the ocean floor some 8 to 10 million years ago. These underwater volcanoes gradually built up layers of solidified lava, eventually emerging above sea level to form the landmass we see today. This volcanic history is still evident in the island's rugged terrain, particularly in the west and south, where cliffs and rock formations stand as silent testaments to its fiery birth.

Dominating the interior of Mauritius is a central plateau, sitting at an elevation that varies from around 270 to 730 meters above sea level. This plateau is partially encircled by a broken ring of mountains, the remnants of the ancient volcanic caldera that gave birth to the island. While not exceptionally high, these mountains add a dramatic flair to the landscape. The highest point on the island is Piton de la Petite Rivière Noire, reaching 828 meters. Other notable peaks include Pieter Both at 823 meters and Le Pouce at 812 meters.

From the central plateau, the land slopes down to coastal plains. Almost the entire coastline of Mauritius is protected by a ring of coral reefs, which create calm, shallow lagoons with stunning turquoise waters and white sandy beaches. These reefs not only provide breathtaking scenery but also serve as crucial habitats for a diverse array of marine life, a topic we will explore in more detail later. The southern coastline, however, is less protected by reefs, resulting in rougher seas and a more rugged, desolate beauty.

Numerous small rivers and streams crisscross the island, originating from the central plateau and making their way to the coast. Due to the island's size, these rivers are relatively short. The longest is the Grand River South East, stretching about 27 kilometers. While Mauritius has only two natural crater lakes, it boasts ten man-made reservoirs, with Mare aux Vacoas being the largest.

Mauritius enjoys a tropical maritime climate, characterized by fairly uniform

temperatures throughout the year. Situated near the Tropic of Capricorn in the Southern Hemisphere, the island experiences two main seasons: a warm, humid summer from November to April and a cooler, drier winter from June to September. The months of May and October are considered transition periods between the two seasons.

During the summer months, mean temperatures at sea level hover around the mid-20s to low 30s Celsius (mid-70s to mid-80s Fahrenheit). January and February are typically the warmest months. The cooler, drier winter months see average temperatures drop to the upper teens and low 20s Celsius (upper 60s and low 70s Fahrenheit). July is generally the coolest month. The temperature difference between the seasons is not drastic, usually only a few degrees Celsius.

Rainfall in Mauritius varies significantly across the island, with the central plateau receiving considerably more precipitation than the coastal areas. The eastern and southern parts of the island also tend to be wetter than the northern and western regions, which are more sheltered from the prevailing southeasterly trade winds. While there isn't a strictly defined rainy season, most rainfall occurs during the summer months, with February and March often being the wettest. Tropical cyclones can occasionally affect the island, particularly between January and March, bringing heavy rain and disrupting the weather for a few days.

Despite the variations in rainfall and the occasional cyclone, Mauritius generally experiences a good number of sunshine hours throughout the year. The coastal regions, especially in the north and west, tend to be sunnier than the central plateau and eastern parts of the island. The sea temperature around Mauritius is pleasant for swimming year-round, ranging from around 22 to 28 degrees Celsius (72 to 82 degrees Fahrenheit).

The diverse geography and climate of Mauritius have created a variety of microclimates and habitats across the island. From the humid forests of the central plateau to the drier coastal scrublands and the unique ecosystems of the offshore islets, these different environments provide the foundation for the rich and unique biodiversity that we will explore in the following chapters.

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