The Fabled Cahow: Saving a Lazarus Species from Extinction

By Kate E Sutherland

The Bermuda Petrel (*Pterodroma cahow*), locally known as the Cahow, was believed to be extirpated a short time after the islands were colonized, disappearing by the 1620s. As a boy, David Wingate found signs of these petrels around the island and there were a few records of live and freshly dead individuals initially thought to belong to other species. In 1951 Robert Cushman Murphy came to Bermuda in search of the Cahow, pulling one from a burrow as a young Wingate looked on. A species that “returns from the dead” is dubbed a Lazarus species. The Cahow was presumed extinct for over 330 years before rediscovery.

But what do you do when you finally find a species after all of that time with just 7 pairs left? All nesting on low-lying islets in one location on Bermuda? David Wingate dedicated his life to these birds at the moment he saw the first one held up by Murphy. His dedication, and that of Jeremy Madeiros, current Chief Conservation Officer of Bermuda, have turned the Cahow into a conservation success story like no other. We will follow these incredible seabirds from rediscovery to today. Those 7 pairs in 1951 have turned into 164 pairs during the 2022-2023 nesting season.

Short Bio:

Kate Sutherland moved to Hatteras, NC from Warrenton, VA in 2001 to work for Seabirding, a company that runs pelagic birding tours in the Gulf Stream and has the enigmatic Black-capped Petrel as their signature species! In 2016 she also began helping Bob Flood lead the Cahow Experience, a tour in Bermuda to see the highly endangered Bermuda Petrel aka the Cahow. She is currently working on her master’s in marine biology at University of North Carolina Wilmington investigating the foraging ecology of Black-capped Petrels utilizing stable isotope analysis of museum specimens. She lives and works in Hatteras with Seabirding and is also employed by Duke Marine Lab as a research assistant.