

DIGGING FOR DODOS

Hunting an extinct bird.

BY IAN PARKER

Julian Hume, a British paleontologist, is one of the world's leading authorities on the dodo, the large, flightless bird that lived on the island of Mauritius—five hundred miles east of Madagascar, in the Indian Ocean—until its extinction, at the end of the seventeenth century. I met Hume a few months ago in the southeast corner of the island, at the muddy work site of an international group of scientists looking for dodo remains; such an activity had not been seen on this scale for nearly a century. The group called itself the 2006 Mauritius Dodo Expedition. Hume, who is an easygoing man in his mid-forties, was unshaven, and as filthy as a child in a detergent commercial. He walked me around the area of the expedition's interest: a field on the edge of a sugar estate, where an orange ditchdigger on caterpillar tracks stood silent, holding in its scoop a block of dripping, peaty-looking earth that it had extracted a short time earlier. The neat hole left by the scoop had filled with water, and a dragonfly traced the outline of this new pond in an unflagging rectangular circuit. The digger's driver had fallen asleep in his cab while awaiting instructions. A jet took off from the international airport nearby. To one side, Hume's colleagues grubbed through a previous scoop of mud, using water pumped by a generator. When the generator stopped for a moment, we could hear surf; the sea was only a few hundred yards away. In the other direction, a wooded slope led up to sugarcane fields, which, out of view, stretched on a flat plain for miles inland toward distant mountains.

Hume, who grew up in a working-class family on the south coast of England, was a "bird and extinction freak" as a child, but he didn't start his formal scientific studies until he was in his thirties, and he finished his Ph.D. only in 2005. (A year later, he became a grandfa-

ther.) Today, Hume holds positions at the Natural History Museum in London and at the University of Portsmouth, but he is also a serious amateur artist, and in his spare time he makes careful, although inevitably approximate, paintings of dodos and other extinct bird species, working with acrylic paint on paper. Three of these have been published in the journal *Nature*. This dual approach to the subject might not seem fully respectable to some paleontological colleagues, but Hume argues that a study of extinct animals calls for an imaginative and extrapolatory frame of mind, of a kind not always valued in research science: a readiness to see what is not there.

It was in this spirit that Hume surveyed the Mauritius site—through the eyes of a Dutch seafarer of the late sixteenth century. As we walked, he described how Dutch ships first arrived on the island in September, 1598, when a party of sailors from an eight-ship exploratory fleet—on its faltering way to what is now Indonesia—came ashore at a beach not far from where we were. (The spot is marked by a strangely forbidding gray stone obelisk.) The ships had been at sea for four months. "The Dutch were out of drinking water, they were starving," Hume said. "And then they saw this green and tropical land. They could just plunge their hands into the water and catch a fish. There were parrots overhead—they could literally knock them out of the sky. There were giant tortoises, totally fearless."

Mauritius, which has an area of seven hundred square miles and a population of one and a quarter million people, was then uninhabited. Unusually in the history of European adventure and plunder, here was an island attractive to an imperial power—arable, fairly big, and well placed for trade routes—that had no prehistory and no indigenous people. Its first human

*A dodo skeleton in the Natural History Museum in London.*