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Bermuda Audubon Society
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Bermuda Audubon Society
NEWSLETTER

Fall 2000

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Society Goes On-line at www.audubon.bm

Even before I was elected as President, I was determined that the Society should have a website as soon as possible. Let's just say that designing the layout and putting it all together has been "interesting and challenging". I've made it as simple as possible – without the use of "bells and whistles" to enable a growing resource of information on Bermuda's natural history, conservation issues and environmental concerns. I'm grateful to those who have provided articles and owe a debt of thanks to Bob Morrison for his technical assistance.

Why have a website? It is an efficient means of communication and provides information to a wide range of people. The society frequently receives requests for information from tourists, especially birders who are intending to visit Bermuda. Now they can be referred to the website for information on when and where to watch birds, news of forthcoming events and a large list of responses to frequently asked questions. For those of you who are already members, there is the facility to read the latest newsletter as well as past issues. Conservation concerns are discussed and you are given the opportunity to take an active part in helping Bluebird and Longtail breeding success. Environmental issues are highlighted and you even have the chance to sign on-line to the campaign to ban helium balloons. It is hoped that the website will also prove to be a good educational resource for school students and adults alike.

There are links to other conservation organisations in Bermuda and other parts of the world. If you haven't done so already, take a look and see what you think. Suggestions and comments can be sent to our new email address: info@audubon.bm

Future events

Wednesday 11 October

"Kayaking near the North Pole – a vast and beautiful land of ice and fjords".
Come and enjoy David Saul's illustrated talk on kayaking in north-east Greenland.
B.U.E.I. Auditorium 7.30 pm. Members \$7.50 Non-members \$10.00 Children \$5.00

Sunday 22 October

Harbour Islands Cruise with Joffre Pitman. Depart Albuoy's Point 12 noon sharp.
Reservations: Penny Hill 292-1920 (after 6 pm). \$20 per person.
Bring binoculars and picnic lunch. (Rain date Sunday 29 October)

Wednesday 15 November

"Kayaking in the San Blas Islands, home of Panama's Kuna Indians".
Join Christine and David Saul in their adventures off Panama's Caribbean coast.
B.U.E.I. Auditorium 7.30 pm. Members \$7.50 Non-members \$10.00 Children \$5.00

Sunday 19 November

Field trip – Cooper's Island tour and cahow watch. Bring binoculars and telescope.
Meet 2.30 pm at reserve entrance (Clearwater)

The Cayman Experience

by Andrew Dobson

It is highly likely that the majority of Bermudians who have visited the Cayman Islands were either there on business, on a one-day cruise stop, or diving on the extensive coral reefs. There are many similarities with Bermuda – the British links, the racial mix, tourism (especially the cruise ships), international business, tropicbirds, and Grand Cayman which has an uncanny resemblance to the shape of Bermuda (but nearly four times as large at 76 sq. miles). There are similar environmental problems – loss of mangroves, rampant construction (especially for hotels, marinas and golf courses) and a rapidly increasing population (about 35,000).

My family and I visited the islands in March at the invitation of friends on Grand Cayman and so we had nearly two weeks to really explore the islands – yes, you can rent a car, drive on the left and travel a little faster than Bermuda. My enthusiasm for the trip was of course to see a new Caribbean country and its birdlife – and I certainly wasn't disappointed. Although the current bird list for species ever recorded in Cayman stands at only just over 200 (350-plus in Bermuda), there are many species that have never been recorded in Bermuda and several East Caribbean specialities. Like Bermuda, there is also a small group of dedicated birders – the Cayman Bird Club – they'd be pleased to welcome you on their weekly fieldtrips.

A little bit of birding every day while out exploring the islands yielded over 80 species, including 17 endemic sub-species. Being there at the end of March meant that most of the wintering herons, wildfowl and warblers were still present, while shorebirds were already on their northerly migration. Magnificent Frigatebirds constantly patrolled overhead, reminding you that Cayman is only 19 degrees north of the Equator, about 150 miles south of Cuba. So what were the special birds? About 100 West Indian Whistling-Ducks (easily observed at Willie Ebanks' Farm) were a spectacular sight. The several dove species (including ground-dwelling Caribbean Dove), Cayman Parrot, Thick-billed Vireo, Yucatan Vireo, Vitelline Warbler, Stripe-headed Tanager and Cuban Bullfinch – were all seen in the Botanical Park. The ancient Mastic Trail produced a variety of warbler species as well as kingbirds and flycatchers. Meagre and Pease Ponds hosted hundreds of grebes, herons, egrets and teal. Apart from the birds, THE highlight on Grand Cayman, especially for 5-year old Anna, was the opportunity to swim and feed stingrays in the open sea off Rum Point.

Having travelled the considerable distance to Cayman, we were determined see the two smaller islands of Little Cayman and Cayman Brac – some 80 miles away by light aircraft. Little Cayman – a long, narrow 10 sq. miles – human population 120 – Red-footed Booby population over 3,000 pairs and abundant Blue Iguanas. I wish we'd found the island sooner! A 6-seater plane took us on to Cayman Brac, similar in size and shape to Little Cayman, but with a population of 1,200. Brown Boobies lifted off from the inland bluff line or 'Brac' while a couple of hours searching found the Cayman Brac Parrot and Red-legged Thrush. An Antillean Nighthawk even obliged by flying over our hotel.

So next time you are on that business trip to Cayman, remember what is out there! There are plenty of tourist guide books. 'Birds of the Cayman Islands' by Patricia Bradley is a must and some of the following information might be useful:

www.caymanislands.ky

www.caymannationaltrust.org

Cayman Bird Club Tel. 949-5055 or 945-5348

Bird Report June to September

by Andrew Dobson

June: The summer is something of a nadir for birds, between the spring and fall migrations. The resident birds are attempting to raise young and keep cool, while most local birders are similarly seeking the shade, the sea or birding overseas! Man's migratory pattern is opposite to that of birds – a mass movement in the summer and winter for holiday relaxation. David Wingate and Jeremy Madeiros were honoured to guide two distinguished tourists around Nonsuch Island in June. President Jimmy Carter and his wife were able to add **Cahow** to their life lists on June 8th and just for good measure recorded Bermuda's first summering record of **Double-crested Cormorant**. Unfortunately this bird was found dying in Tucker's Town on July 9th entangled in fishing line. A **Royal Tern** was seen at Elbow Beach on June 10th and 11th. Also in mid-June, **Greater** and **Cory's Shearwaters** could still be seen passing northeastwards off the South Shore.

Non-resident summering birds include **Great Blue Herons**, **Green Heron** (2), **Osprey** (2), **American Coot**, **Whimbrel** (8) and an immature **Great Black-backed Gull**. Very intriguing was the sight of a displaying **Green Heron** (with another male heard) on 12th South Pond. One was still present on 30th July but there was no evidence of breeding.

July: Fall migration is far more evident from August but there are always some early arrivals in July. This year was no exception with a **Belted Kingfisher** on Nonsuch on July 2nd. The first shorebirds soon followed with a **Black-necked Stilt** in the company of a **Lesser Yellowlegs** at Spittal Pond on July 4th. The last remaining **Cahow** departed on July 10th. The first migrant warbler was predictably a **Louisiana Waterthrush** in Jenningsland on July 18th. At the end of July and the beginning of August there was a large fall of **Barn Swallows**. Certainly the largest influx in recent memory, they were found in every part of the island and day counts of 100 birds could easily be made.

August: A **Common Nighthawk** seen neat Shelly Bay on August 1st remained for several days. A **Bridled Tern** in Castle Roads on August 4th may prove to be the bird of the fall. Although it only lingered for a short time, it was the first record since 1978. Throughout August the expected species of shorebirds and warblers arrived for a brief stopover. One good "tern" deserves another, and an "all black" **Black Tern** in Castle Harbour on August 18th duly obliged. A **Peregrine Falcon** was at the same location on August 19th. Also on the 19th, a **Black-billed Cuckoo** on Nonsuch Island, and an endangered **Piping Plover** at Castle Harbour.

September: A flock of **American Black Ducks** flying over Eastern Blue Cut on Sept. 5th is the earliest fall date for that species. The water level in ponds around the island has been very high this year, providing little mud-flat habitat for shorebirds. The brief exposure of mud at the eastern end of Warwick Pond from 6th to 8th Sept. did provide a feeding area for a daily count of 100 small peeps, mostly **Semipalmated** and **Least Sandpipers**. Views of a possible female **Painted Bunting** at Bartram's pond on Sept. 9th proved inconclusive. However, THE birding event of the season was the fall out from "Florence" – a minimal Category 1 hurricane that passed to our north-west in the early hours of Sept. 16th. This "gale-in-the-night" (rather than "nightingale") was followed closely by a cold front, the combination of the two weather systems producing one of the best fall-out of warblers in many years. During the following days, mixed flocks of warbler species could be found around the island especially in casuarina trees and mangroves. Most evident were **Black-and-white Wablers** and **American Redstarts** amongst over 30 warbler species recorded at that time. Species such as **Blackburnian Warbler** and **Chestnut-sided Warbler**, usually hard to find in the fall, were easily found in a variety of locations. Although warblers may have stolen the limelight, other avian delights were to be found in overgrown fields such as those at Hog Bay Park. At least 300 **Bobolinks** were seen feeding in pumpkin fields with up to 25 **Baltimore Orioles** on Sept. 18th (probably a record day count for the latter species). Newly arrived shorebirds also found the refuge of Bermuda, establishing themselves on golf course fairways in particular. Of note were sightings of separate **Ruff** at St. George's Dairy and Mid-Ocean golf course on Sept. 16th and a rarely recorded species, **Baird's Sandpiper**, at the airport on the same day. A **Northern Harrier** was also at this east end location on Sept. 19th. A flock of 30 **Cliff Swallows** at St. George's dairy coincided with the arrival of a cold front weather system on Sept. 27th. What will October bring?

The 1999-2000 Cahow nesting season

by David Wingate

Following last years extraordinary record of 8 new pairs starting to colonize artificial burrows, I had high hopes that the established breeding population would reach 60 pairs. I also hoped that the fledgling crop would finally exceed the 30 mark which it has twice come so close to since 1988. Unfortunately this proved to be a setback year instead. The final tally was 53 established pairs (2 less than last year) and 25 chicks fledged (also 2 less than last year). It would have been even worse at 23 chicks but for the fact that we saved two starving chicks that wouldn't have made it by taking them into care at the aquarium for hand feeding. The poor fledgling crop was mainly due to an unusually high death rate of chicks after hatching. The actual hatching success was 32 chicks but 4 died soon after hatching and 3 others died late in development. But it was also due to the decline of established pairs.

What went wrong? The best evidence is that the population suffered an unusually high mortality due to the intense hurricane season along the Carolina coast. The last time this happened was when hurricane *Hugo* hit Charleston in 1989. Cahows are well adapted to survive normal hurricanes provided that they stay over the ocean, but when caught up in very powerful hurricanes that move ashore onto the continent they can be trapped against the shore and then blown far inland where they crash into the forest or end up lost on inland lakes! There are many documented instances of this for other species of petrel. Petrels are very long-lived birds with a low reproductive rate so even a slight increase of adult mortality can result in a rapid decline in the population. In a normal year I expect to lose about two adults in the breeding population. Last year, three whole pairs disappeared and three other pairs were disrupted by loss of one adult. To counter this only four new pairs became established, not including any of the eight which began colonizing last year. It usually takes 2-4 years before newly establishing pairs begin laying, which is my criterion for an established pair. Not only were the Cahows hard hit by hurricanes on their Gulf Stream foraging grounds, but their breeding islets in Bermuda were clobbered as well by hurricane *Gert* on 21 Sept. Fortunately the birds were not present at that season. Like hurricane *Felix* in 1995, *Gert's* massive groundswell caused appalling damage all along the south shore of Bermuda and completely overwashed two of the four Cahow nesting islets causing severe damage to 30% of the nestsites which had to be repaired before the start of the next nesting season. Happily the amount of work involved this time was much less than after *Felix* because the structural reinforcements carried out then were strong enough to survive the second event.

I am grateful to Jeremy Madeiros, Steven DeSilva and my conservation crew for helping with the arduous work. The one bright note of the season was our success in rearing the two retarded chicks that wouldn't have made it on their own. Thanks to Jennifer Gray's skills and some timely advice from an Australian petrel biologist, Nicholas Carlile, who has gained much experience feeding translocated Gould's Petrels, we were able to improve and simplify our feeding technique. Both birds recovered weight rapidly and departed like rockets on the night following replacement back in their natal burrows. We also learned from our bitter experience last year when a hand-reared chick replaced into its burrow in early July died of heat stroke. This year, careful temperature monitoring was done and the burrows were thoroughly ventilated and cooled before returning the birds into them.

Rehabilitation of Abandoned Cahows

by Jennifer Gray

Of all the visitors to the Bermuda Aquarium Museum and Zoo's Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre (WRC) in recent months, the most thrilling were two Cahow chicks brought in by David Wingate. Cahow rehabilitation was first attempted successfully by Dr. Wingate in 1972 and again in 1974. Further work on supplementary feeding took place fruitfully in the WRC in 1997 (Raine) and 1999. With such successes on record it was no surprise when two starving fledglings were brought to us in June of this year. With each effort to nurture young birds back to health we are provided with a rare opportunity to study the behaviour and development of animals that few human eyes have fallen upon in this century. In past years our Cahow chicks, also know as the Bermuda Petrel, were raised on a meticulously prepared blended gruel of fish, shrimp and squid with vitamin supplements added.

A visit to Bermuda by Nicholas Carlile of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service brought information that would yet again change and improve upon the methodology used in raising our infantile Cahows. Nick is deeply involved in a project that has seen the translocation of many Gould's Petrel chicks from Cabbage Tree Island to nearby Boondelbar Island on the SE tip of Australia. Translocation requires that juveniles be abducted from their nest sites and their parents when near fledged, at about three months old and moved to a place that they will hopefully return to when they reach adulthood and breed some years later. Such efforts can effectively enlarge the breeding habitat of rare species by encouraging colonisation on suitable available habitat and reduce loss due to competition for nest sites. As the chicks complete their development in their new surroundings the job of feeding becomes the responsibility of those scientists and environmentalists doing the translocating. In this case Nick Carlile was one of those who carefully nurtured and fed the young Gould's Petrels as they completed their fledge and prepared for flight. In New South Wales, where petrel chicks fared well on a diet of whole small fish, Nick suggested to us that the Bermuda Petrel, a similar species, could likewise do well, eliminating the need for laborious food preparation and equipment sterilisation.

With fingers crossed we continued with meticulous sterilisation of feeding bowls and a reduced amount of equipment and parboiled small whole live bait fish and squid before gently guiding them down the throats of our malnourished Cahows. I'll spare you the details of two long weeks on night shift for Cahow feedings and simply report that we again successfully reared the young to robust and ready fully-fledged birds. The effort this year took nearly half the time that was required in earlier years with previous methods. The new method of feeding was cleaner with less incidence of regurgitation by the young than we experienced with tube feeding gruel. The overall weight gain versus food intake was not as great as recorded with the gruel feeding method but we are confident that the chicks were just as healthy and prepared for their long inaugural flight out to sea. Both birds were carefully returned to their burrows after a period of exercising was observed in rehab. The refuelled Cahows departed from their rocky outcrops like nothing had ever interfered with their plan but for me these were not standard departures. These were more like children leaving home.

NOTE: Those who saw the illustrated lecture from Nicholas Carlisle while he was in Bermuda were truly inspired by his work. Ten years ago the Gould's Petrel in Australia was on the verge of extinction with only a handful of birds fledging each year. Today they see near 500 chicks leaving annually and the species may well be downlisted from "endangered" to "threatened" in the coming months.

President's Perch

I am honoured to be elected once again to the position of President of the Society. With the support of the executive committee and you the members, I am looking forward to an active time in the Society. Not only do I wish to thank David Wingate for his recent role as President, but also want to wish him, on your behalf, congratulations on his retirement as Government Conservation Officer. He steps down on October 11th, his 65th birthday, but the good news is that he will have more time for birding and the Society's business!

Thanks are also offered to two more Audubon members. Past president David Saul has volunteered to present a series of three slide lectures in the comfort of the B.U.E.I. David and his wife Christine have kayaked around the globe and his first lecture will focus on two trips they have made to Greenland, a land of fjords, glaciers, snow and ice. Please join us on Wednesday 11th October at 7.30 pm with your family and friends. Joffre Pitman has generously given the Society use of his glass-bottomed boat as another fund-raising event on Sunday 22nd October.

I had the opportunity to attend the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum meeting in London in July. The Bermuda Audubon Society is an associate member and it was a good occasion to meet and network with representatives of environmental organizations from other overseas territories. The following week I was at the headquarters of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds for a meeting with International Officer, Jim Stevenson. The RSPB represents our interests with BirdLife International, and I returned to Bermuda armed with ideas and educational materials. The RSPB has one million members, nearly 2 percent of the UK population, so perhaps we should be aiming for 1,000 members – why not introduce a friend to the Society?

Andrew Dobson

World Birdwatch 2000 “our winged friends”

The World Birdwatch event is a global celebration of birds. Since 1993, BirdLife has organized this event in collaboration with a network of organizations around the world. The aim of this event is to educate people about the importance of birds and the need for their conservation. For the month of October we encourage all Audubon members to send in their bird sightings. Last year 99 countries observed some 5660 species. For every species recorded, NTT-ME, a Japanese telecommunications company, will donate Yen1,000 (\$8.00) to BirdLife International.

Audubon members on the Paget Island birding weekend aim to see as many species as possible, but the count goes right through to the end of the month. Send your records to info@audubon.bm or mail to Bermuda Audubon Society P.O.Box HM 1328, HMFY.

For more information visit the World Bird Count web site: www.wnn.or.jp/wbc/

A Quieter Longtail Season in the Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre

by Jennifer Gray

Each year between March and October the Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre, WRC, at the Bermuda Aquarium Museum and Zoo receives stranded or orphaned White Tailed Tropicbirds or Longtails. Early in the season the centre will treat an occasional adult bearing battle wounds from other longtails, cats or dogs or simply emaciated from the wear and tear of the courtship season. Once the breeding season is underway and fledgling longtails are making their departure from nest sites the rehab team prepares for the arrival of immature animals. Some are simply unsuccessful in their departure attempt while others meet misfortune when dragged from their crevices in the cliffs by humans, dogs and cats.

The 2000 season saw a total of 14 longtails admitted into rehab. Two were disposed of humanely due to deformities, while two died as a result of avian poxvirus. We were unsuccessful at rearing five newly hatched chicks while five youngsters were successfully reared and released. These numbers represent a decline in the number of stranded longtails in recent years and could well be due to the lack of storm surge and hurricane activity during this year's nesting season. In 1998 a record 48 birds were admitted and in 1999, 23 birds were received. Many of these were directly associated with storm activity.

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