



In this issue:

- **The Value of Birds**
- **Society News**
- **Ocean Opera**
- **Winter Bird Report December 2000 to February 2001**
- **Christmas Bird Count**
- **Future Events**
- **Membership application**

The Value of Birds

Andrew Dobson

President, Bermuda Audubon Society

Imagine Bermuda without birds. The Longtail – the harbinger of spring – which by summer thrills us with avian antics around the coast. The mysterious Cahow, a living legend, part of our heritage and only just back from the brink of extinction. The Bluebird, a sheer delight with its plaintive song and fabulous colour. Then there is the ever-present White-eyed Vireo, our special ‘chick-of-the-village’. I have only highlighted four species of more than 350 that have graced our islands over the ages – but all are threatened with real problems for their survival.

Loss of habitat and invasive species are seen as the main causes of decline and threats to survival. In Bermuda we have lost most of our woodland and marshes. There are few undisturbed islands and cliffs, almost the last refuge for many species. Invasive species of plant overwhelm the native species, while birds also have to run the gauntlet of feral cats and rats.

What is the real value of birds? As an economist, the question of economic value is easy to explain but very difficult to quantify. In many societies, domesticated birds provide food and many wild birds, if managed wisely, provide a sustainable food source. In science, birds are one of the most studied groups in the animal kingdom. New findings are constantly being made. Birds are important distributors of seeds and pollinators of plants. They control plagues and are excellent indicators of a healthy environment. The value of birds to eco-tourism is immense. Some 78 million birdwatchers have travelled abroad on birdwatching trips and it is estimated that they spend around \$78 billion¹ in the countries visited. Our own web site is receiving hundreds of ‘hits’ from potential eco-tourists eager to find out what is to be found in Bermuda.

¹ *World Birdwatch* Vol.21 No.3 October 1999

Birds have a great role in folklore and mythology. Emphasis is placed on birds in many religions and they are frequently seen as national symbols and emblems. Birds appear in literature and the arts, featuring strongly in novels, poetry, music and dance. Artists like Botticelli and Rubens have assigned important roles to birds in their paintings.

To many of us, it is the aesthetic value of birds that is so important. The sheer pleasure and relaxation we get from seeing a Longtail fly along the coastline or a Cardinal perched on top of the tree.

There are nearly 10,000 species of birds in the world. BirdLife International has revealed that about 1,200 species have a real risk of being extinct in the next 100 years. The main threats are habitat destruction, introduced species and exploitation. It is not too late to act. BirdLife has identified and monitors Important Bird Area (IBAs). Action plans exist for threatened species and habitats. Biodiversity benefits from the protection, management and restoration of sites. Groups in Bermuda including the Bermuda Audubon Society are carrying out action plans. The Society is fully supportive of the Bermuda Biodiversity Project. The Society is an associate member of the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum and also has close links with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and BirdLife International. The Society will continue to lobby for conservation measures in Bermuda. We rely on the support of you our members. You can always express your views via email: info@audubon.bm or our mailing address – we would be pleased to hear from you.

Society News

Bluebird Workshop

Mrs. Masfield is patron of the Society and has kindly agreed to host a Bluebird Workshop at Government House on Sat. 17th March. 9.30 am. In Bermuda, bluebird survival is now totally dependent on the provision of nest boxes – so why not come along and make one for yourself or for a friend's garden. Pre-registration is required – call 292-1920

Meeting with BFAB

The Society's views on the feral cats problem, as expressed in the last newsletter and published in the local press, has had the desired effect of generating debate. Society members will be pleased to know that our own executive committee has met with the executive of BFAB. We found much common ground and will certainly be making our views known to the Minister.

Quarry Hill Development

The Society has submitted an objection to the proposal by Bermuda Properties Ltd. for 60 new housing units on Quarry Hill next to the old Castle Harbour Hotel site. The hillside contains endemic forest flora.

Birdwatching Course

The growing interest in birds couldn't have been better demonstrated than the fantastic support shown for the bird course run by Andrew Dobson and David Wingate. Forty-seven people attended the month long course, from the young to the 'not so young', from the novice to the experienced. The aim was to open people's eyes to the incredible variety of birds in Bermuda, and for the cost a pair of binoculars and a field guide, hopefully stimulate a life-long interest in birds.

Fieldtrips

Well done to the stalwarts who braved the weather at our recent fieldtrips. We did manage a brief view from the top of Abbot's Cliff before the deluge.

If you have a barbecue arranged – just take notice of when the Society is holding its fieldtrips!

Petrel Talk

Jeremy Madeiros, Government Conservation Officer recently travelled to Australia to study the Gould's Petrel, closely related to our own Cahow. Witnessing the phenomenal success of the Gould's conservation programme, Jeremy returned with outstanding photos and further hope for the Cahow. Mark your diary now for Jeremy's illustrated talk – Wed. 25th April at Horticultural Hall 7.30 pm.

Oceanic Opera

Paul Watson

Whale song, we hear the sound on the TV, maybe a tape or on the radio, but to hear it for real, in the ocean, brings many emotions at the same time. I have been lucky in the past, having previously swum with whales in Bermuda, notably a Humpback Whale *Megaptera novaeangliae* in January 1999. However on 22nd Jan 2001, whilst diving on the wreck of the 'Hermes', approx. ¾ mile off Warwick Long Bay, a multitude of emotions occurred simultaneously. First incredulity, then excitement and wonder when I heard that familiar eerie song which sent shivers down my spine.



Humpback Whale

Photo: Andrew Dobson

I was with two divers in the water, and four had already surfaced and were in the boat. I rushed to the surface excitedly shouting, Whale! Whale! I then heard a tremendous pssshhh, and looked around to see the whale surface about 25ft from the boat. I quickly sank back beneath the waves to get a good look and immediately saw a wondrous, inquisitive eye looking straight at me, two

quick flicks of the tail and a 35ft whale rapidly disappeared from view. I quickly got out of the water with two other very excited and wide eyed divers as this cetacean leviathan had swam within 20ft of the lucky pair underwater.

Now seven very excited people wanted to see more. We followed the whale for a minute or two, and drove ahead of its path. Six jumped into the water to snorkel with the whale, leaving me with the boat. Our winged giant was obligingly swimming under all six snorkellers, and letting two get within feet of it underwater. They all commented as they got out of the water, that they could hear whale song the whole time underwater. We watched as our new friend swam away and headed toward another whale about a mile further offshore. Incredibly another was seen further inshore, around the wreck of the 'Minnie Bresslaur', only about ¼ mile off Warwick Long Bay. This time it was my turn to get back into the water, instantly I was surrounded by that eerie sound as the song was heard underwater. As well as the song, a grunting vocalisation was also heard, but the resonance of the song was constant. This whale was a little more astute, it would play games with us, surfacing almost on top of us, letting the snorkellers get into the water, seeing it swim off, then disappear for a while. In and out of the water we got, and every time we thought the whale had gone, it would surface again nearby. In the water the sound of the song was constant, and on one occasion with the boat engines off we could all hear the wonderful chorus out of the water, we knew the whale was close! Back into the water the song was even louder, and it was a very sad seven, who 1½ hrs later had to leave as it was now getting late in the day. However the excitement definitely overcame the sadness and the story was recounted far too many times over the next few days to all who would listen. As a prelude to the tale, whales have been heard and recorded singing in Bermuda's waters, however no person that I have spoken to thus far have ever heard whale song out of the water. A very lucky day indeed.

Humpback whales regularly migrate past Bermuda during March and April, but for the last three years, it is believed, certainly by myself, as well as others, that a pod has taken to wintering around Argus and Challenger Banks to the South West of Bermuda.

Winter Bird Report December 2000 to February 2001

Andrew Dobson

Tropicbirds to Herons

The first **Longtails** (White-tailed Tropicbirds) were arriving from mid-February, but their return was slower than usual with a northerly airflow for the second half of the month. Nevertheless, the first Cahow chick was noted on 26th Feb. Cormorants have been scarce this winter. A **Great Cormorant** first seen on 19th Dec at Mangrove Bay has been present most of the winter, but only one or two **Double-crested Cormorants** have wintered this year. All the expected species of herons and egrets have wintered this year with the exception of Cattle Egret. At least three juvenile **Black-crowned Night-Herons** have been present, most commonly at the Society's Stokes Point Reserve. American Bitterns have been observed in Devonshire and Pembroke Marsh.



American Bittern

Photo: Andrew Dobson

Geese to Rails

Of the four **Brant Geese** that arrived in late Fall, only one remained into December and was still present on the East End Dairy at the end of February. Two immature **Snow Geese** have also wintered on Mid-Ocean golf course. Sixteen species of duck have been recorded during this season. The less common have included three male **Wood Ducks** together on Jubilee Road on 7th Jan. A male **Northern Pintail** first seen on 27th Dec has commuted between Seymour's Pond and Spittal Pond. A **Bufflehead** has remained faithful to Seymour's Pond since 7th Jan. **Blue-winged Teal** has been the most common wintering duck species with up to fifty present on Spittal Pond. **American Coots** have also been very common this winter, with over 150 at Spittal Pond and a further 50 on Jubilee Road. **Purple Gallinules**, uncommon in winter, have been seen regularly in Pembroke Marsh, Devonshire Marsh East and Jubilee Road. **Sora** have also been difficult to find, so four at Pembroke Marsh on 25th Feb were a good find.

Birds of Prey to Shorebirds

Ospreys are not uncommon at this time of year and at least two birds over-wintered. **Peregrine Falcon** was rarely recorded in the winter until the 1990's; perhaps a sign of global warming that has not driven birds as far south. One wintered at the east end of the island and was still present at the end of February. A flock of 17 **Whimbrel** has remained at the Civil Air Terminal throughout the season, often observed at close range on low water mudflats at Stocks Harbour. A flock of seven **Least Sandpipers** at Westover Farm on 27th Dec was unseasonal. Two **Forster's Terns** at Dockyard on 19th Dec were present into February.

Flycatchers to Shrike

An **Eastern Phoebe** at Mid-Ocean golf course on 22nd Feb was a good find, but the flycatcher of the winter, if not THE bird of the season was an **Ash-throated Flycatcher** at Southside. First discovered in November it was still present at the end of February. **Ruby-crowned Kinglets** are present in most winters, but **Golden-crowned Kinglets** are much rarer. This winter, the latter species wintered at Spittal Pond and another was seen at Port Royal golf course on 14th Jan. Wintering thrushes have been hard to find. **Hermit Thrushes** have been noted at Hog Bay Park, Hungry Bay and Spittal Pond, while at least four **American Robins** have been seen regularly in

Walsingham. A **Northern Shrike** was discovered at the airport on 27th Dec and remained into February.

Warblers to Sparrows

Bermuda's mild climate enables many species of warblers to over-winter. At similar latitudes in the North American continent these birds couldn't survive. At least twenty-four species of warblers were recorded this winter including a **Yellow Warbler** on 20th Jan, which was in the company of an **Orange-crowned Warbler** at Port Royal golf course. On the same day, a **Prothonotary Warbler** was also seen at Wreck Road. Observed on a number of occasions in the Smith's Hills was a **Kentucky Warbler**, another extremely rare winter warbler. Sparrows did their best to steal the limelight this winter. The 3rd Dec was one of those red-letter days when a group of visiting and local birders were at the airport enjoying views of the **Ash-throated Flycatcher, Merlin Osprey, Snow Bunting** and a variety of shorebirds – but the memory will be of three migrant sparrow species - **Vesper, Grasshopper and Savannah** – all in the same binocular field of view! Other sparrow species have also been recorded, with a **Swamp Sparrow** at Bartram's Pond on 1st Jan., a **Lincoln's Sparrow** at Warwick Pond on 4th Jan. and a **Fox Sparrow** at Port Royal golf course on 14th Feb.

Many thanks to those who have contributed their sightings: Eric Amos, Andrew Dobson, Ian Fisher, Wendy Frith, Bob Machover, Jeremy Madeiros, David Wallace, Paul Watson, Martin Wernaart, David Wingate.

Christmas Bird Count

Eric Amos

The 26th Annual Christmas Bird Count - Wednesday 27th December 2000

The weather so far this winter has been consistently wild to say the least. Cold fronts have been lining up one after another and zipping through the local area bringing days of rain and high winds. So with only a couple of reasonable (not in any way perfect) birding days occurring during the three week period of the 2000-2001 count, the fact that the count was able to be undertaken at all was most fortunate. The average temperature range during the 10 or more hours taken to complete the Bermuda Audubon Societies annual Christmas Bird Counts for the last 26 years has been 63-70°F and invariably there has been light winds and a fair amount of sun - ideal conditions for counting birds! Twelve birders in 10 parties braved cool temperatures (57.7-64°F), blustery winds (gusts up to 30 knots) and wet conditions to complete the 26th count. They were given some insight as to the conditions that many counters in the northern USA and Canada deal with regularly - and of course we saw no snow or ice! Nevertheless, although the promised sunny breaks for December 27th were few and far between and the isolated showers became more frequent during the afternoon, we did not do too badly to get a count of 84 species (the average being 88).

There were no real surprises even though Steven DeSilva's Northern Shrike had not been recorded on count day before. Unfortunately many species known to be on Bermuda during the period managed to stay out of sight. One - the wintering Peregrine Falcon at the airport - was later to eat one of the two feral Budgerigars recorded there by Steven DeSilva! Other highlights include 7 Least Sandpipers found by Dave Wallace at Westover Farm - a new maxima for this species. The Brant at the St. George's Dairy was the second CBC listing for this small goose. 11 Lesser Black-backed Gulls eclipsed the old record by 4, while the 17 Whimbrels at the airport matched last years record count. 2 Purple Gallinules (Bruce Lohran/Jeremy Maderios) increased the maxima and the number of counts for this rather rare species by one. Jeremy's Kentucky

Warbler in Smiths Parrish was only the second one to make the count. Missing after 15 consecutive CBCs was the “Spittal Pond Flamingo”. This bird had escaped captivity at the Aquarium in February 1985 with several others when workmen felled a big *ficus* tree in the compound and it remained free after the others were taken back into custody. It was joined on Spittal Pond by another escapee in December 1986 and they remained inseparable until September 1995.

Future Events - For information on any of the events: tel. 292-1920

- **Saturday 10 March**
Working Party – vegetation clearance and planting
South Shore Paget, west of Coral Beach. 11.00 am to 3.00 pm
More information : tel. 292-1920

- **Saturday 17 March**
Bluebird Workshop – Government House – enter from Langton Hill
9.30 am. Come and make your own nest box for free!
Pre-registration is required for security reasons.
Please email or phone in your names (see below)

- **Sunday 25 March**
Fort Scaur Field Trip – including the Heydon Trust
Meet at car park 2.00 pm

- **Wednesday 25 April**
‘How Australia can help the Cahow’
An illustrated talk by Jeremy Madeiros on his recent trip to Australia to study the Gould’s Petrel
Horticultural Hall, Botanical Gardens 7.30 pm

Membership Application/Renewal	
Title (Mr. Mrs. etc) _____ Name: _____	
Address: _____ _____	
Post code: _____	
Tel. no. (H) _____ (W) _____	
Email: _____	
Please tick	
<input type="checkbox"/> Student	\$5
<input type="checkbox"/> Adult	\$20
<input type="checkbox"/> Family	\$30 (two or more persons)
<input type="checkbox"/> Life	\$500
<input type="checkbox"/> Donation	_____ (Cheques payable to “Bermuda Audubon Society”) P.O.Box HM1328 Hamilton, HMFx
Date of application: _____	