



Bermuda Audubon Society

NEWSLETTER Summer 2011

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Nonsuch Camp immerses teens in conservation education



Eleven teenagers aged 14-17 took part in this year's Natural History Camp on Nonsuch Island from 18-25 June. This year there were students from Cedarbridge, Saltus, Mount Saint Agnes, Bermuda Institute, Warwick Academy, a home school and a US boarding school. The camp, started in 1972, is run by the Audubon Society and Bermuda Zoological Society with the support of the Department of Conservation Services, which allows use of Nonsuch Island as the camp base. Participants are chosen on the basis of a written application, in which they describe why they want to take part, and teacher recommendations. The camp was sponsored by Catlin Insurance, PartnerRe and Rubis

Bermuda. Environmental learning during this year's course included fieldtrips to Walsingham nature reserve for cave-spelunking and an inland pond snorkel; to Spittal Pond and coastal dunes for fieldwork; snorkelling and coral-reef fieldwork at North Rock; a fieldtrip to Paget Marsh; snorkelling and fieldwork



around Harrington Sound and a conservation project on Nonsuch with Terrestrial Conservation Officer Jeremy Madeiros. There were also evening lectures on everything from Bermuda geology and hurricane ecology to bird life, marine ponds and a study of man's impact on fragile habitats. "We hope it fosters an active and life-long interest in Bermuda's natural history," said Bermuda Audubon's Fiona Doe, this year's camp director. "It provides students with an opportunity to experience advanced-level fieldwork, plus access to Bermuda's top scientists. We hope it inspires all of them to become environmental stewards of the future." Photo shows the winner of the Mervyn White Shield for best academic performance on

the camp Michael Johnston of Saltus, Fiona Doe (camp director), and Sir Richard Gozney (Audubon patron). Winner of the Camp Spirit award was Peter Cooper of Saltus.

Banded Ring-necked Duck

Andrew Dobson



A pair of Ring-necked Ducks failed to migrate during the spring and remained on the golf course ponds at Tucker's Town. Not an unusual species in Bermuda but these two birds had the distinction of being the first to spend the summer in Bermuda. Keen to record the fact, I took a photo and for the first time noticed that the male bird was banded. Whenever I had seen the birds before, they were either floating on the pond or sitting on the bank. One of the delights of digital photography is the fact that one can magnify the image and actually read the band numbers. However, it took several return visits over the following week to get the complete 8-digit number using a telescope as well. The banding information is highly computerised and within two days I had information that the bird had

been banded on 5 March 2008 at Skaneateles, Onondaga County, New York.

The North American Bird Banding Programme is important for studying the movement, survival and behaviour of birds. About 60 million birds representing hundreds of species have been banded in North America since 1904. About 4 million bands have been recovered and reported. Data from banded birds are used in monitoring populations, setting hunting regulations, restoring endangered species, studying effects of environmental contaminants, and addressing such issues as Avian Influenza, bird hazards at airports, and crop depredations. Results from banding studies support national and international bird conservation programs such as Partners in Flight, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, and Wetlands for the Americas. The North American Bird Banding Program is under the general direction of the U.S. Geological Survey and the Canadian Wildlife Service. Co-operators include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mexico's National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity and Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources; other federal, state and provincial conservation agencies; universities; amateur ornithologists; bird observatories; nature centres; non-governmental organizations such as Ducks Unlimited and the National Audubon Society; environmental consulting firms and other private sector businesses. However, the most important partner in this cooperative venture is the finder, the person who voluntarily reports a recovered band.

Monitoring Bluebird Nest Boxes

Andrew Dobson



Like many people on the island, we have a bluebird box in our garden. Bermuda's bluebirds rely solely on artificial nest boxes to breed and therefore to remain as a species in Bermuda. Their demise was the loss of cedar trees in the 1940s and 1950s as a result of the scale insect infestation (the trees provided natural nest holes). The bluebird's continued existence was further threatened by the aggressive House Sparrow which was able to get into the nest boxes. In some years the bluebirds nest in our garden and in others they go elsewhere. This year we were in luck but we were very concerned about a week after four eggs hatched and the mother went missing. On inspecting

the nest, the mother was found dead next to the babies with head severed – a sure sign of an attack in the nest by a House Sparrow. Amazingly, the male bluebird had been feeding the bluebirds throughout that

day even with a dead mate in the box. With the help of my daughters, Anna and Fiona, we quickly took down the box and installed a new nest made from our guinea pig's hay. We put the three surviving week old chicks back in the box and re-positioned it on the pole. The chances of the male raising the three birds alone were pretty slim. However, over the next two weeks the male bluebird was in and out of the box with feeding visits and very aggressive towards anyone who approached the box. All three chicks fledged and left the box successfully – a real credit to the “father of the year”. It does demonstrate the need to monitor a nest box regularly if you have one in your garden.

An online article with photos can be seen at:

<http://www.royalgazette.com/article/20110624/ISLAND/706249932/-1/Island>

A new 'Bluebirds' link has been added to the Home Page of the Bermuda Audubon web site. It provides you with all the information you need to know on maintaining and monitoring a bluebird box.

An Unusual Grey Catbird

Andrew Dobson



A strange black-and-white bird on the Elbow Beach property resulted in many calls to the Bermuda Audubon Society, with guests unable to find it in any bird guide. I managed to track down the bird and take some photos. I was surprised to find a male Grey Catbird singing its heart out – but not in



its usual overall grey-black plumage. This bird had a stunning white head and white in the tail, wings and back. This abnormal plumage condition, known as leucism, is caused by a genetic mutation that prevents pigment, particularly melanin, from being properly deposited on a bird's feathers. As a result, the birds do not have the normal, classic plumage colours listed in field guides, and instead the plumage has several colour changes. The degree of leucism, including the brightness of the white and the extent of pigment loss, will vary depending on the bird's genetic makeup. The Grey Catbird is a common resident bird in Bermuda – often referred to locally as the 'blackbird'. The bird produces a loud 'meow' call, hence the name 'catbird'..... or is it that unusual. Fiona Dobson took the right hand photo of a Grey Catbird while camping on Burt's Island. It shows more extensive white plumage.

Bird Report March to July 2011

Andrew Dobson



Highlights of the reporting period include: the first summering record of Ring-necked Duck; continued Cahow breeding success; rarely seen Audubon's Shearwater; a record four South Polar Skuas; and Bermuda's third record of Whip-poor-Will.

A male **Wood Duck** summered on Mid-Ocean/Tucker's Point G.C. to 4 July (GB). A male **Eurasian Wigeon** was present 23 Jan (Jubilee Road) to 27 Feb (Spittal Pond) (DBW). Two **Ring-necked Ducks** on Tucker's Point G.C. provided the first summer record for Bermuda. The male was last seen 27 June and had been banded on 5 Mar 2008 in Skaneateles, Onondaga Count, New York. The female was still present 4 Jul (AD). The **Cahow** breeding

population continues to increase, with the number of nesting pairs (producing an egg and/or chick) at a new record of 98, which is 6 more than last year, and a record number of 57 successfully fledged chicks, 5 more than last year. This includes 4 chicks successfully fledged from the new colony at Nonsuch Island. Three chicks which had been prematurely abandoned by their parents were starving and had to be taken into care, of which two did not make it, and one was nursed back to health and recovered enough to successfully fledge out to sea (JM). **Cory's Shearwaters** were moving at 100+ per hour off Cooper's Point 6 Mar (PW). A **Great Shearwater** was photographed flying around the National Stadium floodlights at night 30 Jun (CB). This bird was obviously dis-orientated by the bright lights. **Sooty Shearwater** passage peaked at 70 per hour off Devonshire Bay 18 May (AD). An **Audubon's Shearwater** was picked up at 9-Beaches Resort 5 May (NP) and after being checked at the Bermuda Aquarium Museum and Zoo was released into a burrow on Green Island. It remained overnight and flew off the following day. It represents only the 3rd or 4th record since the species was extirpated as a Bermuda breeding bird in the early 1980s. One of the two wintering **Northern Gannets** was last seen 9 Mar (PW). A **Lesser Yellowlegs** at Seymour's Pond 7 Jul was the first returning fall shorebird (DW). Three **Whimbrel** remained at Stocks Harbour to 8 July (PW). A late **White-rumped Sandpiper** was at Tucker's Point G.C. 26 Jun (AD). A female **Wilson's Phalarope** was on Spittal Pond 4-7 June (BB). An adult **Black-headed Gull** in St. Georges Harbour 26-28 Apr (PW) was the first spring record for Bermuda. Two **Laughing Gulls**, one at Ferry Reach and one at Flatts Inlet were seen the 18 Jun (JM). Bermuda's first **Black-tailed Gull** was last seen 28 Apr (PH). **Arctic Tern** passage peaked in mid-May with 12 passing Devonshire Bay 18 May (AD). Two



Forster's Terns were seen south of Bermuda at N31 39, W064 09 on 16 Jun (DBW). Four **South Polar Skuas** were seen 30 miles south-west of Bermuda 16 May (DBW) (*Photo above- David Wingate*). Seven **Pomarine Jaegers** were seen off Cooper's Point 23 Apr (AD, PH). Single **Swallow-tailed Kites** were seen over Devonshire and Smiths 21-25 Mar (PHo) and Botanical Gardens 14-15 Apr (LM). A **Yellow-billed Cuckoo** was in Hamilton 16 April (PW). A **Whip-poor-Will** was flushed at Stokes Point N.R. 4 Mar (DBW), only the 3rd Bermuda record. A wintering **Ruby-throated Hummingbird** in Smiths was last seen 18 Mar (KR). A **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** on Nonsuch Island 17-19 Jun (JM) provided the first June record for this species. The same bird may also have been seen a few days later at Walsingham. A **Downy Woodpecker** was a surprise find on St. Georges G.C. 1 Mar (PW). The latest ever record of **Tree Swallow** was at Spittal Pond 19 June (DBW). An **American Robin** was on St. Georges G.C. 13 Mar (PW). A partially leucistic **Grey Catbird** was at Elbow Beach Hotel 4-11 Jun (BB). A **Summer Tanager** was in St. David's 8-9 Apr (WS) (*Photo- Andrew Dobson*). A **Prairie Warbler** returned to Hinson's Island for a second summer and was last heard singing 26 Jun (JH). A **Red-winged Blackbird** was near Pembroke Marsh 22 Mar (PW).

Observers: Geoff Bell, Bart Brown, Andrew Dobson, Janice Hetzel, Peter Holmes (PHo), Peter Hopkin (PH), Jeremy Madeiros, Leila Madeiros, Nigel Pollard, Keith Rossiter, Wolfgang Sterrer, David Wallace, Paul Watson, David Wingate (DBW).

Common Tern Update

David Wingate

The continued survival of our summer nesting common tern population has been precarious ever since it was decimated by hurricane Fabian in 2003. This event prompted a crash research programme to answer three questions: 1. What were the exact circumstances of the crash? 2. Is there anything we can do to assist the recovery? 3. Is the Bermuda population genetically isolated or can it be sustained by immigration from outside? The research team consisted of myself, with 50 years experience monitoring and banding the local tern population; Dr. Ian Nisbet, a recognized world authority on the Common Tern and Dr. Patricia Szczys, an expert in DNA analysis.



In 2005 we began trapping and blood sampling the entire adult population and its offspring and this has continued to date. The first paper to result from this research, published in *Waterbirds* journal last year, demonstrated that hurricane Fabian had selectively eliminated all the males in the breeding population and that the surviving females paired as non-productive breeders in subsequent years until they either died out or found male mates from males which escaped the hurricane because they don't come north from the wintering grounds in South America until their second summer. These young males were barely enough to sustain the population and it has not exceeded 4

breeding pairs since, despite the fact that breeding success in Bermuda is better than anywhere else. Our research revealed that females migrate south before the hurricane season, thus escaping the impact of hurricane Fabian and that only locally reared birds are sustaining the population. In a second paper, just submitted to *Conservation Genetics* journal, we demonstrate that the Bermuda population is genetically unique, worthy of subspecies status and that immigration into the population from outside is extremely rare at best, meaning that its survival is going to depend on local recruitment alone. These findings support my own conclusions based on 50 years of monitoring, and that study will be published in a third paper which will include a review of all records of tern nesting on Bermuda since human settlement and recommendations for increased conservation measures locally. (Photo- Andrew Dobson)

Atlantic Explorer – pelagic seabird and cetacean monitoring

David Wingate



BIOS provides a unique opportunity for local naturalists to join its hydrostation cruises on HSBC Atlantic Explorer for pelagic seabird and cetacean monitoring. The advent of high resolution and fully automatic digital cameras and powerful anti-vibration lenses has now made it possible even for non professionals to obtain scientifically verifiable records of seabirds and dolphins etc under the usually difficult circumstances of at-sea observation. In the typically low productivity conditions of the Sargasso Sea off Bermuda an observer must often wait for hours at a time before some interesting bird or whale comes close

enough even to see clearly, and then the sighting is typically brief and hampered by boat movement or salt spray before it is gone again. Busy oceanographers do not have the leisure time to put in the number of hours of scanning required to get these brief opportunities, with the result that our knowledge of seabirds and cetaceans is still in a pioneering stage out there in Bermuda's only true wilderness environment. I have been privileged to go out on every Bermuda Atlantic Time Series (BATS) cruise since



last Dec. These typically run for 4 – 7 days and range out to about 140 miles SE totally out of sight of Bermuda. While most of the time it is like being a volunteer in a sensory deprivation tank, (or on rough days like a roller coaster ride!) there are always a few moments of extraordinary excitement and surprising records to make the whole exercise worthwhile. I hope to continue this for a year or two before writing up the results and putting together a power point show of the experience. (Photos of Long-beaked Spinner Dolphin 8 April 2010 – David Wingate)

Are Audubon Shearwaters still trying to nest in Bermuda?

David Wingate

On the night of 5-6 May 2011 a most extraordinary ornithological event took place at a beach party at Nine Beaches, Daniel's Head. An Audubon's Shearwater, not confirmed as a nesting species since my last record in the early 1980's was attracted to a floodlight set up for the beach party and after flying back and forth uttering the characteristic courtship calls eventually crashed into a casuarina and fell to the ground. Luckily, it was retrieved unhurt by Nigel Pollard, who thought it might be a Cahow – being very similar in appearance and nocturnal behaviour – and he immediately delivered it to the Aquarium where Jeremy Madeiros and I measured, weighed and photographed it the next day. Jeremy then released it into a crevice on Green Island, Castle Harbour, where Audubon's used to nest. (Photo- Andrew Dobson)



In parallel with my 50 year struggle to bring the Cahow back from the brink I also had the sad experience of watching the last few pairs of Audubon's Shearwaters on the Castle Harbour islands fade into extirpation – or so I assumed. Unlike the Cahow, this species still survives fairly commonly elsewhere, notably in the Caribbean and Bahamas as the nearest points to Bermuda. (They range up into the Gulf Stream). Also unlike the Cahow they are much more prone to be attracted to bright lights at night (as witness the event at Nine Beaches), so I attributed this as one probable cause of their demise on Bermuda because they are nocturnally active on the breeding grounds. For example, in 1963 a fledgling that I watched depart on the night of 13-14 July was found dead the next morning on Ferry Reach, hit by a car. On 20 Feb 1965 an adult Audubon's was grounded by bright lights at the airport

parking lot. I retrieved that bird alive and released it at Cooper's Point. In Nov. 1968, a Norway Rat killed a pair on Outer Pear islet off Coopers Point. Then just as things were beginning to look hopeless, with three pairs remaining on the Castle Harbour islands I made the incredible discovery of a pair nesting successfully in a cliff crevice on Bermuda's mainland at Spittal pond on 15 April 1967! That pair nested successfully for 4 years before the nest was found by a cat and one of the adults found eaten on 8 Feb 1972.

That mainland nest site, and those on the Castle Harbour islets had one feature in common. The crevice entrances were too small to permit entry and take over by Longtails. Bermuda has about 150 miles of coastline at fine resolution, so I began to wonder how many other cliff crevices meeting that specification might be supporting other undiscovered pairs of this cryptic nocturnal species. In August 1990, Jeremy Madeiros bolstered this thought by finding the recent skeleton of an Audubon's Shearwater while exploring Great Head cave which is probably inaccessible to cats. Then on the night of 8 May, 1991 while I was living in a cottage on the shoreline of the U.S. Naval Annex (now known as Morgan's point), I had the memorable experience of hearing the distinctive "pimlico, pimlico" courtship calls of an Audubon's somewhere close by in the garden!!! I was unable to track it down in the dark before it moved off, but that date is highly significant because it is only a couple of days different from the bird that was caught at Daniel's Head and matches the time of year when naïve sub-adult birds come in off the ocean for the first time to prospect for nest sites and mates.

The still unresolved question about these mainland records is whether they represent relic pairs from a population no longer sustainable or spontaneous re-colonization attempts by birds from the Bahamas' population. If the answer is the former, then it seems entirely possible that an extremely low and widely

dispersed relic population of this long-lived seabird still survives although surely unsustainable in the long term. If the latter is the case, then Bermuda is an unfortunate sink or death trap for naïve sub-adult birds that might try to colonize from the Bahamas.

I throw out this challenge to the local birders to try and prove continued nesting attempts on Bermuda. The place to start is surely Great Head cave with the aid of a tape recording of Audubon's courtship calls to attract a response. Remember, the age of discovery is never over!

Society News

- **Pay Your Membership Online**

We are now set up for online memberships. If you have not yet paid your 2011-2012 dues you can now do so by credit card online at www.bermudatix.bm – just click on Bermuda Audubon Society under 'Memberships' on the Home Page.

- **Audubon reserves**

Enlargement of Seymour's Pond has been completed and a huge amount of invasive vegetation cleared. The next phase of the project will be the planting of endemic and native vegetation. Fence repairs have also been carried out on Audubon reserves at Somerset Long Bay and Stokes Point.

- **Cooper's Island**

The Audubon Society was present at the open day held last month at Cooper's Island. A big thank you to the members who manned the Audubon table and to those who led bird walks.

- **New Committee**

At the recent Annual General Meeting, the following committee was elected for 2011-2012

President: Andrew Dobson

Treasurer: Peter Holmes

Executive Sec: Karen Border

Committee members: Jennifer Gray, Peter Lee, Jeremy Madeiros, Kim Smith, Paul Watson, David Wingate

- **Top Shell Conviction**

The Bermuda Audubon Society applauds the courts for successfully prosecuting a man who collected and was caught with an astonishing 544 legally protected West Indian Top Shells. The species was wiped out by over-consumption after Bermuda was first settled in 1609. Since then, there have been two efforts to reintroduce the species, one in 1902 and a second in 1982. This species is an important part of our biodiversity and hopefully the publicity given to this case will deter potential collectors. Well done to members of the public who asked the offender to stop what he was doing and reported him to the police. The new hotline for reporting such incidents: 705-FISH (3474). The full story can be read at:

<http://www.royalgazette.com/article/20110706/NEWS/707069923/1001/news>

Footnote – or should that be 'Bird note'

An interesting note in the New Scientist related how a birder, in preparation for a trip to the tropics, downloaded bird calls onto his Nokia phone. The phone sorted them into musical genre! Pied Puffbird was classified as "oldies", Laughing Falcon as "pop", Wood Quail "disco", Dusky Nightjar sings "jazz" and the owls as "country". Perhaps someone with a Nokia phone could add the Bermuda birds? I hazard a guess the Mourning Dove would be "soul", the plaintive call of the Eastern Bluebird "blues" (what else?) and the Kiskadee "techno music".

Future Events

Sunday 17 July 2011

Fieldtrip to Nonsuch Island – bring your own lunch, have a swim.
Depart Tucker's Town Dock 10 am. Return 2.30 pm
Cost \$25 Reservations required. Email: info@audubon.bm or 238-8628

Monday 18 July 2011 and Tuesday 16 August 2011

Marine fireworms fieldtrip to Ferry Point by boat
Depart Grotto Bay Hotel Dock 7.30 pm Return 9.45 pm
Bring your own 'sunset' picnic. Opportunity to swim in phosphorescence
Cost \$25 Reservations required. Email: info@audubon.bm or 238-8628

Sunday 4 September 2011

Fieldtrip to Spittal Pond
Meet at Eastern car park 7.30 am. (2 hrs)
No charge. In search of early fall migrants.

Saturday 24 September 2011

BIOS Marine Science Day 11am-4pm
Bermuda Audubon will be present at this event.
Volunteers required to assist at the BAS tent. Email: info@audubon.bm or 238-8628

Saturdays 29 Oct, 5 Nov, 12 Nov, 19 Nov 2011 (Raindate the Sunday)

Cahow pelagic fieldtrips - Depart Grotto Bay Hotel Dock 3.00 pm Return 6.00 pm
A chance to see Cahows flying over the ocean about 2 miles off-shore
Cost \$25 Reservations required. Email: info@audubon.bm or 238-8628
Trips will depend on weather conditions and sufficient bookings

Friday 7 to Sunday 11 October 2011

Paget Island Bird Camp
Contact info@audubon.bm for further information.