



**Bermuda Audubon Society**

# **NEWSLETTER**

Summer 2018

P.O. Box HM 1328, Hamilton HM FX Vol.29 No.3

[www.audubon.bm](http://www.audubon.bm)

Email: [info@audubon.bm](mailto:info@audubon.bm)

In this issue:

- Roseate Tern – first breeding since the 1840s *David Wingate*
- Common Tern Report 2018 *David Wingate* and Cahow Report 2018 *Jeremy Madeiros*
- Bird Report March to July 2018 *Andrew Dobson*
- Society News and Future Events

## **Roseate Tern – first breeding since the 1840s**

**David Wingate**

One of the world's rarest and most graceful seabirds has bred on Bermuda again after an absence of 169 years. A single pair of Roseate Tern, *Sterna dougallii* took up residence on the Audubon Society's nature reserve at Pearl Island in the Great Sound where it was kept under close watch. The Roseate Tern last nested on remote Gurnet Rock at the entrance to Castle Harbour in the late 1840s, but was ruthlessly extirpated by scientific collectors and bird shooting "sportsmen" at a time when the world's wildlife resources were still regarded as limitless.

The Roseate Terns were first spotted in Hamilton Harbour by Miguel Mejias and me on 22 May. They were not yet nesting on Pearl Island when it was checked on 13 June, but when next checked on 7 July they were confirmed to be a breeding pair with an egg. Unlike the Common Tern, which typically lays three eggs, Roseates only lay one egg a year. Out of concern for the safety of the birds and the egg/chick, it was decided to keep the exciting news quiet until the chick had fledged.



*David Wingate and Miguel Mejias with the chick. Photo: Andrew Dobson*

Thanks to a motion-activated camera mounted on the island by Erich Hetzel, the progress of the incubation, hatching and raising of the chick was all recorded with still photographs and video over a period of several weeks.

The egg hatched on 24 July and the chick was double-banded and blood sampled for DNA identification on 7 August. Fledging occurred sometime between 15 and 19 August. It will probably head south with its parents within the next couple of months to spend the winter off the east coast of Brazil. It is highly likely that the same pair will return to nest again next year, but the chick which we nick-named Phoenix, will take at least three years to mature.

Many thanks to Erich Hetzel, Miguel Mejias, Jo Smith and Lynn Thorne, who assisted in watching out for the birds and carefully monitoring this extraordinary event.

## The tragic history of Bermuda's Roseate terns

Probably once numerous in Bermuda, by the mid 1800s Roseate terns were already confined to Bermuda's most remote and inaccessible islet - Gurnet Rock - but even here they were not spared. Naturalist John Hurdis contracted others to obtain specimens for himself and records various collection attempts in successive diary entries.

*1 August 1847:* "Smith tells me... that he had some difficulty landing a boy upon the rock. The boy twice returned with specimens of about a dozen terns ... He then went for eggs and returned with some dozens in the fold of his shirt; but missing his footing, fell into the water and was in danger of drowning. Mr Smith, in his endeavours to save the boy was carried onto the rock, the dinghy was upset and stove and the whole of the specimens and eggs lost."

*13 June 1848:* "Mr. Wedderburn visited Gurnet rock .... He found it tenanted by forty or fifty of the Roseate tern of which he killed seven."

*2 June 1849:* "Mr. McCloud visited Gurnet rock. He tells me he saw four terns only, of which he killed two."

*21 June 1849:* "Mr. Orde and Mr. McLeod visited Gurnet rock last evening. Of terns they saw none."



*Roseate Tern Photo: Lynn Thorne*

## Common Tern - Breeding Season Report

David Wingate

This year's nesting season got off to a depressing start with the continuation of a trend of steady decline initiated by hurricane Fabian in 2003, which wiped out all the males in the population except those which remain in the winter quarters over summer for their first year. (Most females were spared because they migrate south much earlier than the males and before the peak of the hurricane season). While recovery began in 2005 it has been repeatedly set back again by other more recent hurricanes. Additionally, there has been an inexplicable trend of island abandonment in favour of nesting on abandoned ship buoys. Nesting on buoys is marginal because if the chicks fall overboard accidentally before they can fly they cannot get back onto the buoy and drown.

At the beginning of this season there were only two male/female pairs left. Both were nesting on ship buoys and both only produced two chicks from four egg clutches. The common tern has a worldwide distribution and as its name implies, is relatively common. However, what makes the potential loss of the Bermuda population of such grave concern is the fact that up until this year our DNA analysis from blood samples has indicated that it is endemic, with little or no recruitment from outside Bermuda, and possesses several unique characteristics. One of its unique features is a preference for widely spaced solitary nesting rather than nesting in dense colonies like all other terns.

Our fear was that the local population would soon be extinct. But then in mid-season something akin to a miracle occurred. The "cavalry" arrived in the form of two new males in the nick of time to save the situation. Their late season pairing with two surviving females resulted in two clutches that were fertile. While these were also on a buoy and a raft, respectively, they each managed to fledge two chicks. The fact that both these new males were un-banded strongly implies that they are new immigrants from outside. Fortunately, I succeeded in banding and blood sampling one of them, and the DNA should enable us to confirm this hypothesis. If that is the case, then there is renewed hope that our small but precious common tern colony will be able to persist.

# Summary of the 2018 Cahow Breeding Season

Jeremy Madeiros, Senior Terrestrial Conservation Officer, Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources, Bermuda Government

Bermuda's national bird, the endemic and critically endangered Bermuda Petrel, or Cahow (*Pterodroma cahow*) has one of the most interesting stories to be found in conservation and species recovery work. After being thought extinct for over 300 years, a small number of breeding pairs were re-discovered nesting on several small, rocky islets off the east end of Bermuda in 1951. A recovery programme for the species began by the early 1960s, when there were only 18 breeding pairs, producing a combined total of only 7 or 8 chicks annually. Since then, intensive management work has enabled the Cahow population to begin a slow, but accelerating recovery, with the number of breeding pairs increasing to 55 by 2000 and exceeding 100 by 2012.



*Cahow Egg. Photo: Carla Marquardt*

new nest prospecting by young adult birds just reaching maturity was also exceptionally high, reflecting the increasing number of fledglings produced annually by the nesting population. It looked like 2018 would exceed 2017's record of 117 breeding pairs and 61 successfully fledged chicks, and by the end of January, a total of 124 breeding pairs had been confirmed as laying eggs. During January and February, Carla Marquardt volunteered to candle all accessible eggs during my routine band checks and weighing of incubating adult Cahows. Candling is a technique used to determine if an egg is fertile and to follow development of the embryo inside the eggshell, proving to be of such value that it will be incorporated into future management of the species. The chicks hatched in late February and early March and then spent three months developing inside their underground burrows, being supplied by the adults with squid, fish and shrimp-like crustaceans. By the time the last chick flew out to sea on 28<sup>th</sup> June, it was confirmed that 71 chicks had successfully fledged, breaking last year's record number by 10!



*Cahow Chick. Photo: Andrew Dobson*

There were early indications that the 2018 Cahow breeding season was going to be another record-breaking one, with both adult birds and chicks being consistently recorded at higher than average weights. The adults were evidently exploiting food sources, most likely far to the north of the Gulf Stream, using their exceptional flying ability. (Geolocator studies in 2009-2012 revealed that Cahows regularly carry out foraging trips of 1,800 to 4,000+ miles over 3-7 days – just to feed the chick once!) This resulted in healthy adult birds and well-fed chicks, with almost no malnourished fledglings that needed to be taken into care and given supplemental feeding. The level of

The two new nesting colonies on Nonsuch Island, established by translocating chicks from the original, smaller nesting islets during 2004-2008 and 2013-2017 now both have breeding Cahow populations, with a total of 18 breeding pairs. These produced a record number (for Nonsuch) of 13 fledged chicks, including “Sunny”, 2018's “Cahow-Cam” chick. The hatching, development and fledging of which was again live-streamed by infra-red video over J. P. Rouja's “Nonsuch Expeditions” website and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Bird Cams project, enabling viewers in over 100 countries to follow the story of “Sunny”. In addition, 2018 saw the first two breeding pairs establish at the second, “B” translocation colony on Nonsuch. One of these pairs consisted of a male bird translocated as a chick to the “B” site in 2014, with the female being “Backson”, the first ‘Cahow-Cam’ chick

which fledged from the “A” site in 2013. Five additional pairs were also prospecting nest burrows at both sites during the season and will hopefully lay their first eggs as breeding pairs next year.

It appears that the Cahow has now reached a point in which its population recovery has accelerated over the last few years. This is due to the intensive management programme, which has been able to control or reduce most of the ongoing threats facing the species, coupled with the re-introduction of the Cahow to a larger, managed habitat on Nonsuch, with room for population growth without the annual threat of hurricane damage or destruction of the nest burrows. It should be noted, however, that 124 pairs are still a tiny overall population, and the Cahow remains one of the rarest seabirds on the planet. The long-term objective of the recovery programme is increasing the Cahow population to a minimum of 1000 breeding pairs, which will be needed to de-list the species from “Critically Endangered” to “Threatened”. We still obviously have some way to go, but the future looks increasingly positive for this symbol of Bermuda’s Natural Heritage.

## Bird Report May-July 2018

Andrew Dobson

Highlights of the season included: the first breeding of Roseate Tern since the 1840s, the third record of Black-bellied Whistling-Duck and another record-breaking number of Cahow chicks.



*Black-bellied Whistling Duck. Photo: Andrew Dobson*

A Black-bellied Whistling-Duck was at Port Royal golf course 3 Jun (EB) and remained at Somerset Long Bay nature reserve to 31 July+. The only previous records are of one in 2008 and a flock of 13 in 2014. A male Gadwall was a surprise arrival at Spittal Pond, 23- May (PW). The Cahow breeding season produced another record-breaking year with 124 pairs and 71 hatchings (JM). A Swallow-tailed Kite was seen over Prospect, 3 May (PW). The first fall shorebird was a Willet over the Great Sound 12 July (AD). Four pairs of Common Terns produced two chicks each, with all of them nesting on man-made structures (DBW, MM). A pair of Roseate Terns nested on Pearl Is and raised a single chick,

the first breeding in Bermuda since the 1840s (DBW). A Least Tern was in the Little Sound 15 Jul (EH). A Royal Tern was at The Causeway 11 May (PW). A South Polar Skua was photographed at Challenger Banks 20 May (KW). The leg band showed it had been banded 30 Jan 2017 as a non-breeding bird on Fildes Peninsula, King George Island, Antarctica. A Black-billed Cuckoo was seen at Spittal Pond 17 June (AD).

Observers: Eva Bottelli, Andrew Dobson, Erich Hetzel, Jeremy Madeiros, Miguel Mejias, Paul Watson, Kevin Winter, David Wingate.



# Society News

## Goodbye Andrew!

We bid a fond farewell to Andrew and Katrina Dobson at a lovely dinner at the Fourways Palm Garden on 16 June. Andrew, who has been a leading light of the Audubon Society for the past 28 years, was presented with a unique cedar plaque engraved with a Cahow as a token of our heartfelt appreciation for his exceptional leadership and outstanding contributions to the birds and environment of Bermuda. Andrew left Bermuda with his family in August to return to England. They will be greatly missed and we hope to see them back here many times in the coming years.



*Andrew Dobson with David Wingate and Karen Border, incoming President. Photo: Anne Hyde*

Donations in Andrew's honour and the proceeds of a silent auction held at the dinner have to date raised nearly \$8,000, which will be used to sponsor Andrew's retirement project: *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Bermuda*. You can still contribute: send a check payable to the Bermuda Audubon Society P.O. Box HM 1328, Hamilton, HM FX or transfer payment online to our account at Butterfield Bank #20 006 060 055394 100. Please indicate your name and book donation in the beneficiary info field.

### **A Message from Andrew**

It has been a pleasure to produce the Audubon Newsletter since 1990. I have tried to document the strange variety of birdlife that passes through Bermuda and provides enjoyment to so many people. It has also been a privilege to serve on the Audubon committee for nearly 30 years. As I leave Bermuda with my family at the end of the month, I'm proud to have been part of a society which has achieved so much over those years and been a champion of the environment. There is a great team leading the society and I wish Bermuda Audubon every future success.

# A Tribute to Andrew Dobson

**Karen Border**

Andrew and Katrina arrived in Bermuda in December of 1989. Andrew wasted no time in finding the best birding spots and tracking down the local birders and one of the first things he did was join the Bermuda Audubon Society.

He didn't just join the society; he swept in like a breath of fresh air and made his mark straight away. He was elected secretary at his very first AGM in 1990 and two years later he was elected president for the first time. Over the next 28 years he went on to serve as president 17 times, initially alternating years with others, but for the last few years, despite trying his best to get others to take on the role, he bowed to popular demand and stayed on as our leader. In his 28 years of service to the Society, Andrew has made a remarkable contribution.

He started the current version of the Audubon newsletter in December 1990 and reliably produced a few issues a year ever since. These newsletters provide not just a record of the activities of the society over that period but are a fabulous source of bird data going back decades, with their detailed reports of sightings. In addition to the newsletters, the anniversary magazine that he and Jennifer Gray produced for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2004 is a wonderful keepsake, recording the history of the society to that date and including descriptions of all our nature reserves.

Andrew also created the society's first website back when they were still quite an innovative development. He set it up and ran it single-handedly until we launched our new site a couple of years ago. He also set up the Audubon Facebook page, which now has over 1,000 followers, partly thanks to the fabulous bird photographs that Andrew regularly posts: his skill as a photographer is well-known.

As a teacher, educating people about birds and Bermuda's environment has been a huge part of his mission. His Birdwatching Guide to Bermuda, published in 2002, is regarded as the must-have field guide for the island. Among his other legacies, Andrew was closely involved in the production of the film 'Bermuda's Treasure Island' by Deirdre Brennan, which told the story of Nonsuch Island and the Cahow, and he facilitated the production of our local bird ID cards.

Few people have done more to encourage and promote the love of birds and birding in Bermuda. Andrew has contributed regular articles in the local press, field trips at Spittal Pond, Coopers Island and elsewhere and held birding courses. His wonderful illustrated talks at BUEI have become something of an annual feature. He has also lectured on Bermuda's birds for the BAMZ natural history course and every year at the natural history camp for teenagers on Nonsuch Island.

Andrew has spread the word about the importance of birds, and Bermuda birds in particular, beyond our shores too, at overseas conferences and in international birding magazines. He has also played an important role in the development of Birds Caribbean, for which he has served as President. Andrew can also claim credit for adding seven new species to the Bermuda bird list!

Over the past 28 years, in no small part due to Andrew's involvement, the Audubon Society has remained an active and vibrant organisation working on behalf of Bermuda's environment. Andrew's work for the society was given the recognition it so truly deserves in this year's New Year's Honours list when he was awarded the Queen's Certificate and Badge of Honour. He will be hugely missed by us all, and we thank him from the bottom of our hearts for everything he has done.



## **The Ag Show - 19-21 April Bluebird Box Competition**

Seri Fisher once again won the Audubon Trophy for the best bluebird nest box at the Annual Agriculture Show. She built a beautiful box of cedar with an accompanying poster presentation. Special mention also to the St. Paul's Boys Brigade for their multiple entries.



## **Nonsuch Island Trip – Saturday, 5 May**

One of the highlights of our year is the annual trip to Nonsuch Island. We had a great turn out and even a special guest, Lisa Sorenson, the executive director of Birds Caribbean. Everyone enjoyed the Cahow Encounter and the guided tour of the island. Thanks so much to Jeremy Madeiros for sharing his time, wisdom and enthusiasm for the Bermuda Petrel with all of us. Thanks also to David Wingate for bringing to life the unique history of Nonsuch Island.



## **Annual General Meeting - Wednesday, 9 May**

We had a productive meeting with 32 members in attendance. We thanked our new patron, His Excellency the Governor John Rankin, for hosting our AGM at Government House. Unfortunately, he was unable to attend. Andrew Dobson, after almost 30 years of service to the Bermuda Audubon Society, gave his final President's Report with a review of the activities of the year. Incoming President Karen Border gave a lovely farewell and thank you speech in his honour. Katrina received special recognition for her support.



*Karen Border and Katrina Dobson*

## Future Events

### Spittal Pond Field Trip

**Saturday 8 September. 8:00 am**

Shorebirds are in decline and need our help. As part of our celebration of World Shorebird Day and participation in the Global Shorebird Count, we will be leading a guided walk at Spittal Pond. Meet at the eastern car park. Bring your binoculars. Also consider checking out the most recent ebird checklist and learn about what birds we are likely to see: <https://ebird.org/hotspot/L952649>. Trip is free for members, \$10 donation recommended for non-members.

### Paget Island Bird Camp

**Friday 12 to Sunday 14 October**

Join your fellow Audubon friends and birders and enjoy a weekend escape to Paget Island with field trips on the island and on the mainland. Email [info@audubon.bm](mailto:info@audubon.bm) for more details and to sign up.

### Cahow Watching Boat Trips

**Weekends in November: 3 & 4, 17 & 18, 24 & 25** 2pm-6pm. Board Endurance from Aquarium Dock. See Cahows (Bermuda Petrel) as they gather offshore prior to coming to their burrows under cover of darkness. Observe their fascinating courting displays over the open ocean. Cost is \$50 which includes a donation to the Cahow Recovery Programme. Email [info@audubon.bm](mailto:info@audubon.bm) to make a reservation. Only 24 spots available per trip. Trips will be held subject to good weather and sufficient numbers.

### BirdsCaribbean Cuban Bird Tour with Andrew Dobson

**24 – 31 January 2019 (8 days)**

Join BirdsCaribbean, the Caribbean Birding Trail, Andrew Dobson and acclaimed Cuban bird guide, Ernesto Reyes Mouriño, on the adventure of a lifetime.

Cuba is well-known for its amazing landscapes, vibrant culture and unique biodiversity. The itinerary takes you to several of the best and most beautiful birding locations in Cuba, providing opportunities to see many of Cuba's endemic species and subspecies as well as many migrants. Follow the link below for more information and details on signing up:

<https://www.birdscaribbean.org/2018/07/birding-tours-of-cuba-in-2019-from-birdscaribbean/>

### Membership Renewal

Although it is just the end of summer, it is time to start thinking about renewing your Bermuda Audubon Society Membership. We have changed our membership year to a calendar year so your membership will expire on December 31st. Please go to [www.audubon.bm/join](http://www.audubon.bm/join) for the details.

If you are unsure of your membership status or have any questions, please contact us at [info@audubon.bm](mailto:info@audubon.bm) or call Janice Hetzel on 236-4527.