



Bermuda Audubon Society

NEWSLETTER

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In this issue:

- Devonshire Marsh fire *Andrew Dobson, Jeremy Madeiros, David Wingate*
- 2018 - Year of the Bird *Andrew Dobson*
- Bluebird season well underway *Jennifer Gray*
- 2018 Cahow breeding season update *Jeremy Madeiros*
- Bird report March-April 2018 *Andrew Dobson*
- Society news and future events

Devonshire Marsh Fire - 17th March 2018

Andrew Dobson, Jeremy Madeiros, David Wingate



Jeremy Madeiros and personnel from the Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources have carried out thorough foot surveys of the entire burn area in Devonshire Marsh and looked at the effect that the fire has had on the three Audubon Society Reserves in the marsh. This included having GPS coordinator Mandy Shailer using the Department's drone to make photo-mosaics of the marsh and burn area, which determined that a total of 30 acres of the marsh burnt in the fire. These flights will be carried out every two weeks for the next few months to document the recovery of vegetation in the marsh. This typically occurs quite rapidly and the last survey in the first week of April revealed that most of the charred Cinnamon and Royal Ferns in the marsh are already sending up extensive new green fronds.



Firefly Nature Reserve - Although it was initially thought that the fire had not severely impacted this reserve, the drone footage revealed that the fire had burnt into the entire southern half of the reserve, and also revealed an easier way to access it through the main marsh, as recently widened ditches on the north side of the reserve make it

very difficult to access from Vesey Street. Almost all of the large Bermuda Cedars in this reserve had already been killed by the last large fire around 1998, and a few of these large dead trees at the back of

the reserve were charred through at the base and collapsed. However, most of the larger Palmetto Palms and patches of Osmunda Ferns in the Firefly reserve were little affected and will survive.



Freer Cox Memorial Reserve -

Nearly all of the Freer Cox Reserve's 11.7 acres were burnt extensively, except for a thin strip immediately adjacent to Vesey Street. Much of this reserve consists of extensive Saw Grass, Bracken Fern, and Wax-myrtle savannah, with scattered individual and clumps of Palmetto Palm and Royal and Cinnamon Ferns. The more mature stands of Wax-myrtle, Palmetto Palms and Bermuda Cedars along the northwest, Vesey Street boundary were a bit scorched, but appear mostly intact, including some of the best clumps of Cinnamon and Royal Ferns. At the fodder field on

the south edge of the reserve, adjacent to Middle Road, the fire burnt right to the roadside and badly scorched a number of cedars and palmettos planted there about 12-15 years ago, although the large roadside Royal Palms were unaffected.

Winifred Gibbons Nature Reserve - The interior, southern and eastern portion of this much smaller reserve was also burnt, including a number of palmettos, but the more mature cedars, wax-myrtles and palmettos along the edge of Vesey Street were mostly just outside or on the edge of the burn area, including the Ten-day Fern specimens.

David Wingate comments that Devonshire Marsh was once a relatively fire-resistant marsh like Paget Marsh still is. However, extensive harvesting of cedar and cattle grazing degraded it to a more open canopy which favoured fire climax plants like saw grass and bracken fern which can carry a fire but are not killed by it. The great marsh fire of 1914 is considered to have been the turning point, converting it to a fire climax habitat. Such habitat is designed by nature to burn at regular intervals. In nature such fires are typically started by lightning but in the case of Devonshire Marsh it has always been caused by human agency, either accidentally or deliberately.

The Society is obviously very concerned about any fire in Devonshire Marsh. We are extremely grateful to the Bermuda Fire Service for their prompt action and relieved there was no damage to residential or commercial property. A fire report has been requested from the BFS. Devonshire Marsh is a hugely valuable wetland area for the eco-system services it provides. The Devonshire Marsh area is a haven for wildlife as well as plants and home to dozens of rare species. One of the reasons the Bermuda Audubon Society was formed in 1954 was to increase the public's acceptance of the value of not just wild birds — but also plants, soil and water — and most importantly, the interdependence of these natural resources. Bermuda's wetlands are a vital part of Bermuda's fragile ecosystem. The limestone geology of Bermuda means a lack of surface water. Industrial use dates back many years when people did not appreciate the environmental importance of wetlands. This fact, and the past practice of marsh drainage means that we have only about 100 acres of peat marsh habitat today. Remaining areas are so small that any further degradation of this habitat is extremely serious. The marsh plays hosts to many unusual species of fauna and flora. Up to 20 species of shorebird may be recorded during the year. Numerous ducks, herons and egrets are also present in the winter. The marsh will take time to recover from the fire and re-colonization by plants and wildlife.

Photos: Andrew Dobson – marsh on fire

Mandy Shailer - drone photo and mapping

Alison Copeland – damage to Freer Cox reserve

2018 – Year of the Bird

Andrew Dobson

As we continue to celebrate the Year of the Bird, have you followed up on any of the suggestions made in the last newsletter? (see *Vol.29 No.1*).

- Make or buy a bluebird nest box and position it on a pole in a suitable location.
- Go on a bird walk with a friend and surprise yourself with the number of birds you can identify.
- Create your own account at eBird.org and record the birds you see. It's easy, fun and you'll learn lots more about Bermuda's birds.
- Marvel at the arrival migrant birds like Longtails who have journeyed back to Bermuda to breed. See if you can spot any other spring migrants as they head north.
- Join a bird organisation to support all they do to help birds. You'll enjoy all the additional information they provide about birds and the magazines and newsletters produced.
- Buy a pair of binoculars and bird field guide for one of your younger family members.
- Learn about birds using the Cornell app which is free to download at:
<http://merlin.allaboutbirds.org/>

Bluebird Season Well Underway

Jennifer Gray

The relentless March winds likely delayed the start of bluebird egg laying so be sure to do everything you can to help them be successful this season. The bluebird is almost completely dependent on man for its survival and Bermuda is the only place outside of the eastern half of North America where it has ever been known to breed.

The Audubon Society has stocked Aberfeldy Nursery with boxes so if you don't have one up – or yours got damaged – don't delay...get one up today, mounted on that perfectly placed pole. Make a 2"-wide collar of engine grease around the bottom half of the pole to keep ants, lizards and other pests from climbing. Be sure that boxes are mounted in areas where pesticides are not used. Monitor the young in the nest and remove unhatched eggs or dead chicks to prevent ants from invading the nest. Check your bluebird boxes at least once a week during the nesting season. Birds do not mind being checked.

Bluebirds nest from March until early August. They usually have two broods per season, but three broods are possible. Learn to recognise a bluebird nest — it is a tidy and neat cup shaped nest that is usually made up of woven grass or Casuarina needles. A sparrow nest is untidy, made up of mixed foliage and often strewn with bits of trash. Always remove sparrow nests immediately. Bluebirds usually lay three to five light blue eggs. The incubation period for bluebird eggs is 12 to 14 days. Nestlings remain in the nest 18 to 21 days before they fledge. Don't be discouraged if your nesting boxes are not used the first year. If bluebirds are not common in your area, it may take them a few seasons to find your new box.

Full instructions of how to make a box are available at <http://audubon.bm/conservation/bluebird>

In Native American mythology, some tribes consider the bluebird a spirit in animal form that symbolizes the dawn of a new day; others associate the friendly bird with the sun. The Iroquois believe that the bluebird is a harbinger of spring that fights off the evil demigod of winter, Tawiscaron. According to folklore, many Native Americans hung dry gourds to entice bluebirds to nest near their settlements, so they can enjoy their enchanting songs of happiness and hope. Just gazing upon one of the little flying cobalt creatures of contentment is said to bring joy.

So, as Dorothy posits, "If happy little bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why, oh, why can't I?"
Enjoy the season!

2018 Cahow Breeding Season Update

Jeremy Madeiros

The 2018 breeding season of Bermuda's critically endangered national bird, the Bermuda petrel or Cahow (*Pterodroma cahow*) is on its way to establishing a number of new records, in its continued recovery from the edge of extinction. Following on from 2017's record number of 117 breeding pairs producing 61 successfully fledged chicks, in 2018 there are 124 established breeding pairs (having produced an egg, whether it hatched or not), and what looks like 69 to 71 chicks. The total number of chicks will not be known precisely until the last chick fledges in June, as a couple of the deeper burrows still need to be checked with burrow-scopes, and there is also the possibility of losing some of the chicks in later development.



The number of Cahows now breeding at the two new translocation colony sites of Nonsuch has grown to 18 breeding pairs (including the first two breeding pairs at the second, "B" site), and there are a record number of 13 chicks on Nonsuch in 2018 (compared to the previous record of 10 chicks in 2016). In addition, there are 5 additional new prospecting pairs at the two sites on Nonsuch, all with at least one bird being either a returned, translocated bird from the "B" colony, or a Nonsuch-hatched Cahow.

It is worth noting that the new breeding colony on Nonsuch Island as of last year (2017) had already produced 54 successfully fledging chicks, and although most of these are still too young to have returned as mature adults to Bermuda, a total of 9 Nonsuch-born chicks have already been confirmed as having returned to the breeding islands (with 7 recorded on Nonsuch) by the 9th April 2018. Among all of the nesting islands, there are a total of at least 13-14 newly prospecting pairs, most of which will hopefully come "on-line" next year as breeding pairs producing their first eggs.

Top: recently hatched Cahow
Middle: well-fed Cahow chick
Bottom: Jeremy Madeiros monitoring adult Cahow
(Photos – Andrew Dobson)

Bird Report March-April 2018

Andrew Dobson

Highlights of the season included: a probable first record of Yellow-legged Gull; an influx of Bonaparte's Gulls; Bermuda's 6th Black-whiskered Vireo; and another record-breaking number of Cahow chicks.

Two **Snow Geese** remained at Port Royal GC to 22 Mar (AD). Single **Brant Goose** were still present at Port Royal GC 7 Apr (AD) and at Shelly Bay Park 10 Apr (NM). A **Eurasian Teal** was at Spittal Pond 1-22 Mar (AD, FD). The **Common Merganser** remained at Port Royal GC to 5 Apr (RL). The **Ruddy Duck** remained at Spittal Pond to 31 Mar (AD). The **Cahow** breeding season promises to be another record-breaking year with about 70 hatchings confirmed (JM). An influx of **Bonaparte's Gulls** in March saw an unprecedented 29 birds at Spittal Pond 17 Mar (AD, EH, JS) with additional birds at various locations (*photo Andrew Dobson bottom right*).



A probable **Yellow-legged Gull** was seen in St. Georges Harbour 11 Mar (EH, JS, PW) which would constitute a new record for Bermuda (*photos above Erich Hetzel*). A second year **Glaucous Gull**

remained in St Georges Harbour 10-31 Mar (PW) (*photo right Andrew Dobson*) with another sighting near Penhurst Park 12 Mar (NM). The first migrant **Common Tern** was seen on Ferry Reach 25 Mar (AD). An **Eastern Phoebe** was a good find at Seymour's Pond 27-28 Mar (DW). A **Black-whiskered Vireo** was banded at Ferry Point 29 Mar (PW) for only the 6th record in Bermuda (*photo below Paul Watson*). Expected spring **Louisiana Waterthrush** appeared at BIOS 29 Mar (PW) and at Camden Ditch 4-9 Apr (GB). A **Dickcissel** was on St Georges GC 30 Mar (PW).



Observers: Geoff Bell, Andrew Dobson, Fiona Dobson, Erich Hetzel, Richard Lee, Jeremy Madeiros, Neal Morris, Jo Smith, Paul Watson, Daniel Weeks.

PROTECT OUR PARKS

Please join with 'Protect our Parks' and make your voice heard concerning ATV's!

In November 2017, the Ministry of Public Works invited public comment on the proposal to permit All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) tours in the West End: along the Western railway trail and into Scaur Hill and Hog Bay Parks. More than 600 people expressed their objection, while only 2 people expressed support for the scheme.

Opposition by a number of local groups, representing an even greater number of individuals, has resulted in the formation of a coalition with the name of Protect Our Parks. Those groups are:

- **Bermuda Audubon Society**
- **Bermuda Botanical Society**
- **Bermuda Environmental Sustainability Taskforce (BEST)**
- **Bermuda National Trust**
- **Farmers' Association**
- **Greenrock**
- **The Garden Club of Bermuda, and**
- **The Heydon Trust**

Technical officers of the Parks Department have also expressed opposition in light of the extra burden that will be put on them to monitor adherence to the rules of conduct of the tour participants and to rectify environmental damage that will unquestionably be caused by these vehicles.

Most recently, over 200 signatures were collected on the Petition at the start of the Bermuda National Trust's Palm Sunday Walk.

While innovative ideas for tourism are to be encouraged, those schemes must not result in an erosion of the quality of life for Bermuda's residents by further limiting access to open space away from heavily-trafficked roadways. Our railway trails and parks are for the peaceful enjoyment of all residents and we encourage your signature as an expression of support for our right to a voice in the protection of those amenities.

Finally, while we continue to investigate whether all of the required permissions have in fact been secured for the operation, and whether it is lawful, **we are asking anyone who hasn't already objected** to the ATV tour proposal to sign a petition sheet, which is available at the following locations:

The J&J Produce stand at Melville Estate, Devonshire

Amaral's Farm stand on Middle Road, Devonshire

Windy Bank Farm in Smith's

Tom Wadson's Home Farm Market in Southampton

Society News

- The Society has joined many other environmental organisations in opposing the use of ATV vehicles along the railway trail and in our national parks. We encourage members to sign the petition available at various locations across Bermuda (see previous page).
- In celebration of “2018 - The Year of the Bird” Andrew Dobson gave two lectures at BUEI and one at BAMZ. For ideas as to how you can participate, see our last newsletter.
- The bluebird nesting season is well underway. Boxes can be obtained at Aberfeldy Nursery in Paget or at the Aquarium. The Society also assisted with a bluebird nest box workshop at BAMZ.
- Once again, a huge thank you to Horsfield Landscape & Design Ltd for providing another volunteer day at our ABS reserve and using their skilled workers to remove a number of invasive casuarina trees.
- The Society is pleased that the restoration of Eve’s Pond can finally get underway, following the approval of our management plans. The property was purchased several years ago by the Buy Back Bermuda campaign, a partnership between Audubon and the Bermuda National Trust. The plan is to create a brackish pond to provide a habitat for migratory ducks and other wetland bird species. Invasive plant species will be cleared, and the sand removed will be used to build an embankment along North Shore Road. This embankment will be planted with native and endemic plants. Just like our Buy Back reserves in Southampton and Somerset, there will be a nature trail with interpretive signage as well as an observation platform. We really look forward to providing the public with another nature reserve that everyone can enjoy.

Future Events

Bluebird Nest Box Competition

This will take place at the Annual Exhibition in the grounds of the Botanical Gardens 19-21 April 2018. The Audubon Society trophy will be presented to the best student box. The entry deadline has passed, but please go and see the efforts made by our young students.

Nonsuch Island Members’ Fieldtrip

Saturday 5 May 10:00 to 3:00. The trip will include a morning tour with Cahow encounter and time to swim & snorkel in the afternoon. Boat details will be sent to those who sign up. Price \$50 members. \$75 non-members. Spaces are limited. To sign up email info@audubon.bm or call 238-8628.

Notice of Annual General Meeting

Wednesday 9 May 6:00pm at Government House.

Please confirm your attendance at info@audubon.bm or call 238-8628 for security clearance.

Audubon Dinner – SAVE THE DATE

Saturday 16 June – Fourways, Paget

You will receive an invitation to this dinner, to honour Andrew Dobson’s nearly 30 years of service to the Society. He and his family will be leaving Bermuda later this year.

Spittal Pond Fieldtrip

Saturday 8 September

A guided bird walk at Spittal Pond as part of the World Shorebird Count.

Meet at the eastern car park at 8:00am.

Paget Island Bird Camp

Friday 12 to Sunday 14 October Email info@audubon.bm for more details.