



Bermuda Audubon Society
NEWSLETTER

Spring
1998

P O Box HM 1328, Hamilton HM FX Vol.9 No.1

**The Equestrian Federation Vesey Street Expansion Proposal:
A Potential Environmental and Political Disaster**

Members will know from press reports that Audubon combined with the Bermuda National Trust and S.O.S. to object to this proposal back in October. Subsequently, a public meeting was called by Devonshire South representatives Michael Dunkley and John Barritt to hear public opinion on this proposal. Although the meeting was attended about equally by supporters and opponents, it was abundantly clear that those lobbying for it were actually a minority with the special interest in harness racing who naturally turned out in force to support their proposal.

The vast majority of those without a vested interest in harness racing, including many other equestrians, expressed opposition on environmental grounds because of the gargantuan scale of woodland destruction and quarrying that would be required and the appalling impact it would have on the neighbouring lands, through increased wind exposure. Much emphasis was given at that meeting to the dangerous precedent of an environment minister arbitrarily suspending the protective

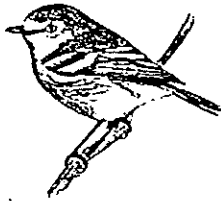
zoning of Woodland Reserve and it was recommended that the legislation be changed to remove this ministerial right because of its potential for political manipulation and bias.

The executive of this society continues to take the view that approval of the proposal by the Board (which is highly unlikely), or approval on appeal by the minister, would be an unmitigated environmental and political disaster. The public simply must not allow it to happen! That is not to say that we don't support the equestrians' desire for better facilities but simply that in such a small island as this we have to accept certain environmental constraints as unavoidable and seek acceptable compromise. This is an issue that should be thoroughly researched and addressed in the next comprehensive development plan, and not rushed through with obscene haste by submitting to a private pressure group.

Meanwhile, we understand that an alternative proposal to designate this threatened woodland as parkland - a

proposal that is compatible with the Woodland Reserve zoning - is currently being recommended by the Parks Commission. A concept plan for the park, which includes closing Vesey Street as a through road (as was done with the old road at Shelly Bay), suggests that the area has enormous passive recreational park potential, equivalent to Hog Bay Park, which would appeal to a much wider cross-section of the community.

In order to increase public awareness of this potential we are organising a field trip, for members and non-members alike, to tour the area on Sunday, 15 February. We understand, too, that the National Trust's Palm Sunday Walk route may be laid out to include this area.



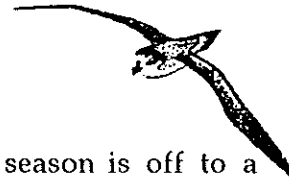
Vesey Street Woodland

The White-eyed Vireo, commonly known to Bermudians as 'Chick-of-the-village' is an endemic sub-species of the migrant White-eyed Vireo found in North America. This diminutive songbird suffered a serious decline with the loss of Bermuda's cedar woodland in the 1940s and 1950s. Woodland has disappeared at an alarming rate since the 1950s, habitat favoured by our unique vireo. It feeds on insects as well as berries, the Vesey Street woodland providing an ideal food source. It also uses the woodland as a nesting area.

However, it is only one of many species to use these woods during the course of the year. Other resident birds include the Grey Catbird, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Cardinal and European Goldfinch. The area is of immense value to migrant passerines (perching birds) and many wintering species. Some 50-plus species actually use the woodland as a feeding area, including doves, owls, swifts, sapsuckers, flycatchers, swallows, thrushes, waxwings, vireos, warblers, grosbeaks, buntings, sparrows, orioles and finches. The area is vital not only as a 're-fuelling station' for migrant birds, but for the many species of birds which choose to winter in Bermuda. As many as 20 species of North American warbler are recorded in these woods each winter - species which are already under severe stress from the loss of suitable habitat in Central and South America.

Any further decline in the available woodland in Bermuda is going to have a serious effect on the number of species visiting and surviving in Bermuda.

Andrew Dobson



Cahow Update

The 1997-98 season is off to a good start with no losses between seasons and two new pairs establishing during the November courtship season. Current evidence suggests there may be 55 established pairs this year, two more than last year. For some years now I have been trying to correlate variations in breeding success with oceanographic

and climate variations. As this season coincides with one of the most extreme El Nino events ever recorded, it will be very interesting to see whether it results in better or worse breeding success.

The most exciting development of the fall was our discovery that cahows can now be observed by telescope from the shore at Cooper's Point, on nearly every day in November at the height of the courtship season. Typical count this year were 3-5 birds returning at 4.00-5.00 pm. When weather cancelled one of our planned boat trips to see them, we redirected our November field trip to watch from Cooper's Point with good results.

David B. Wingate



Update on Research into the Status of the Endemic Skink of Bermuda

Concern for the survival of the Bermuda rock lizard or skink, *Eumeces longirostris*, arose after 1990 when it became evident from studies conducted on Nonsuch, Castle Island and elsewhere by Wingate, Robinson, Griffith and Conyers, that the population had declined alarmingly since 1970, even on isolated Nonsuch Island. Because the causes for this remain obscure, James Conyers and David Wingate decided to recommend designation of the species as "critically endangered" - according to the parameters of the IUCN endangered species listing protocol. Then, with the advent of concern for conservation of

biodiversity following the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the BAMZ decided to launch a biodiversity initiative in Bermuda with the skink as a banner species for initial conservation effort.

Thanks to a grant from Works & Engineering to the Parks Department for skink research in 1996, a leading authority on this type of research initiative Dr. John Davenport from Scotland, was chosen to carry out a pilot study with Jack Ward and Annie Glasspool in July of '97. Southampton Island in Castle Harbour was chosen because it appeared to be one of the few places to retain a very healthy population and because of fears that a proposed archaeological dig on the fort there might disrupt the population. The Parks Commission decided to put the dig on hold pending the results of the study.

The Davenport team expanded on the previous research to develop a more refined *modus operandi* for determining the status of the skink population and revealing the causes of its decline. Immediately following that study, two other replicate surveys using the same techniques were carried out on the National Trust's Palm Island Nature Reserve in Ely's Harbour, and Castle Island in Castle Harbour, by David Wingate and his daughter, Rosalind (who needed a field project for her degree in environmental science at the University of Wales, Swansea). To their surprise and delight the population on both of these islands proved equally healthy, with good recruitment from successful breeding each year.

Palm Island was chosen because it is at the opposite end of Bermuda and

because, like Southampton Island, it was free of cats, anolis lizards and toads, three introduced competitors/predators suspected of causing the skink's decline elsewhere on Bermuda. Castle Island was chosen because it does have anoles, so it was reassuring that these alone do not appear to inhibit the skinks that much. These studies have already confirmed one thing: that the re-introduced yellow-crowned night heron, which was suspected in part of causing the observed decline on Nonsuch Island, is not a significant predator on skinks after all. Why, otherwise, would skinks remain common on Southampton and Palm Islands, where the herons hunt landcrabs just as commonly as on Nonsuch?

It is probable, of course, that several factors operating together have combined to cause the decline of the skink. The challenge is to determine what fraction of the crisis is caused by each. Current hypotheses are that habitat characteristics may be the most important determinant of survival with discarded litter, especially bottles (which become deathtraps), being a secondary factor, and introduced predators and competitors such as cats, anoles, toads, etc., being a tertiary but cumulative factor. Only when we know the answers to these questions will we be able to design a strategy to protect the skink in the wild.

David B. Wingate



Bird Notes - Fall '97 and Early Winter

The fall has been an unusual season weather-wise, but hasn't it been everywhere? August's rainfall was a record 12.23" (av. 5.1") and September's figure of 9.2" was well above normal (av. 5.1"). October by comparison saw virtually no frontal systems passing over Bermuda, and consequently lower numbers of migrant warblers in particular. The southward fall migration is evident in Bermuda from July, usually confined to a few shorebirds. This year there were two significant records in July. A Louisiana Waterthrush on 8th July at Mid-Ocean Golf Course was the earliest record for this species by nine days and the earliest fall record for any warbler species in Bermuda. Two Gull-billed Terns were first seen on 22nd July over Nonsuch Island. They constituted only the 12th Bermuda record and only the second fall record for this species. It is also the first record of two birds together and they were present to 8th August. Early records continued into August. A Green Heron on 11th August at Trott's Pond was the earliest record by 16 days. This did not prove to be an isolated case as there were two more early Green Herons on 21st and 24th August. A Black-throated Blue Warbler on 25th August at Ferry Point Park was an early record by 3 days.

More interesting birds arrived with the expected migrants in September. A Peregrine Falcon on 4th September on Nonsuch Island was very early, while an B on 16th September at Cooper's Island was the earliest by 2 days. A Greater White-fronted Goose

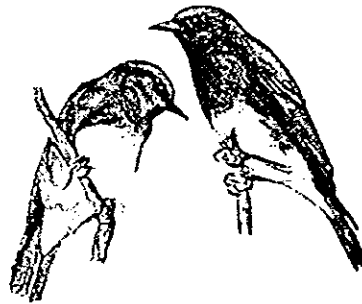
present from 20th September to 11th October at Devonshire Marsh provided Bermuda's with only its second record for this species. The first record involved two birds in the winter of 1989/90. An Olive-sided Flycatcher present on 21st and 22nd September was Bermuda's 6th record, the last having occurred in 1985. To round off the month an Audubon's Shearwater on 26th September was found dying on Elbow Beach. This is a significant observation because it is the first record that this species has occurred as a migrant since it last bred in Bermuda in the 1980s. October should have been an exciting month for migrant birds, but the lack of frontal weather systems prevented any great influx of birds. A Ruby-throated Hummingbird on 12th October in Smith's Parish was one of at least three records this fall. Of nearly 30 known records for this species since 1852, at least 20 have occurred since 1974. With the fall migration continuing into November, and at last some deteriorating weather! - some good birds arrived. A Horned Lark on 13th November at St. George's Dairy was the first since 1993. A Black Scoter on 18th November at Spittal Pond was only the 6th Bermuda record. An adult Snow Goose arrived on 20th November at Waterville with an immature the following day at St. George's Dairy. A Common Redpoll on 25th November at St. David's was the first since Nov.'91 and the first indication of a small 'winter finch' influx.

A real treat in November for many Audubon Society members was watching Cahows flying over the sea just off Cooper's Point. Several pairs of birds were seen in good light about an hour before dusk. The birds return to

Bermuda in October and November to claim or reclaim nesting burrows. This provides a great opportunity for Bermudians and visiting naturalists to see the Cahow from land, rather than the unpredictable nature of pelagic trips.

So what of the winter birds so far? Early December saw a number of northerly gales and anticipation was running high amongst local birders that something good most have been blown in. Common Redpolls were seen in various parts of the island and a flock of 16 birds on 15th December at Spittal Pond was exceptional. However, these finches took second place to a flock of at least 8 White-winged Crossbills which feasted on casuarina seeds on one particular tree in Dutton Avenue from 9th December. This species of crossbill has only been previously recorded in December 1969 (several) and March 1974 (one bird). While searching for the crossbills, a Northern Rough-winged Swallow was seen on 10th December over Pembroke Marsh, a species not recorded in Bermuda since 1985. Although some 20 species of warbler were recorded on the Christmas Bird Count, a Blackpoll Warbler on 22nd December at the Biological Station provided a rare wintering record.

Andrew Dobson



1997-1998 Bermuda Christmas Bird Count

Eleven participants in seven parties took part in the 23rd Bermuda CBC on Monday 22nd December, 1997. New to the count were five species and four counters. New species: Blackpoll Warbler, White-winged Crossbill, Common Redpoll, Northern Harrier and Peregrine Falcon. New counters: Andre Raine, Roger Pocklington, Patricia Pocklington and Bernard Oatley.

Ninety-six species were recorded, and the "Bird of the Count" was deemed to be Roger Pocklington's Blackpoll Warbler, which although not new for the season was certainly unexpected as the majority of Blackpolls at this time of year are wintering in South America. Also new was the White-winged Crossbill - a 'winter finch' which normally spends the cold months in the northern forests of North America and only moves south during extremes in climate or lack of food. This was the first winter record since December, 1969! Other notable sightings were a Tree Swallow and Northern Rough-winged Swallow (2nd CBC records), and a Least Sandpiper and Northern Gannet (3rd CBC records).

Christmas Bird Counts are held during a two and a half week period. Initially restricted to the U.S.A., counts are now held throughout the Americas and in many other places in the world.

Each count group has a designated circle, 15 miles in diameter (about 177 square miles) where they try to cover as much ground as possible

within a 24-hour period. The data collected by each count group are then sent into National Audubon Society headquarters in New York. Count data is published in a special book-sized edition of the National Audubon Society Field Notes magazine, and the long-time status and health of an area's local and wintering birds can be measured by analyzing the data using party hours and/or miles.

Eric Amos

ENDNOTES

Useful Tip . . . For sparrow or starling control when they are getting in under the eaves of your house, simply exclude them by screening all openings with 1/2" mesh hardware cloth.

Have you seen . . . *Birding*, February, 1998? It contains a detailed account of the cahow and how to distinguish it from the Black-capped Petrel at sea - "Identification of Bermuda Petrel - new light on an endangered seabird", by David B. Wingate, Todd Hass, Edward S. Brinkley & J. Brian Patteson. Copies will be available in the BAMZ library - call Penny Hill at 297-2323

Audubon Web Site . . . Thanks to Peter Holmes we are now on the Internet with a web page listing executive committee members, upcoming events and interesting bird sightings. This has already proved to be great publicity.. You can find us at www.audubon.org/chapter/bmu. We also have an e-mail address which is: audubon@ibl.bm

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(see address label for expiry date)

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Bird News

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Future Events

Sunday, 15 February

Vesey Street - field trip and guided tour of entire area - 2.00 pm. Park at western end of Vesey Street. All welcome.

Sunday, 8 March

Cahow scan by telescope from Cooper's Point. Meet at NASA gate - 5.30 pm. We should see several cahows as well as migrating Manx shearwaters if the wind is east or southeast.

Saturday, 14 March

Bluebird Workshop - Horticultural Hall, Botanical Gardens, 9.30 am - 12 noon. Slides by David Wingate on the bluebird nestbox programme. Demonstrations of box construction and installation. Question and answer period. All welcome.

Sunday, 19 April

Paget Marsh field trip. Meet at St. Paul's parking lot - 2.00 pm. A close look at the boardwalk and pond restoration project which should be underway by then. The marsh is at its best in April.