



Bermuda Audubon Society

NEWSLETTER

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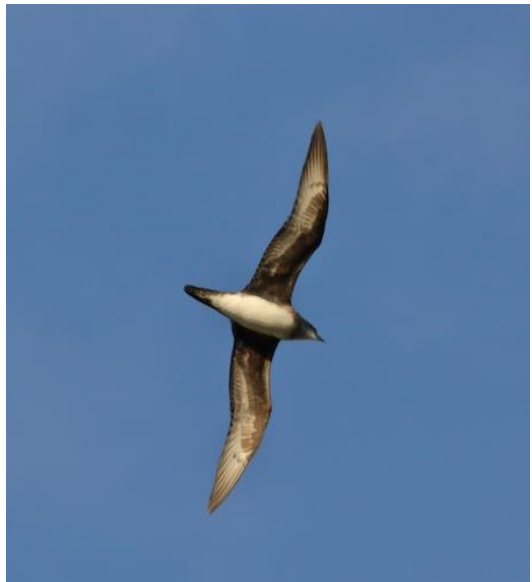
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Trindade Petrel : first land-based record

Paul Watson

This intriguing record started on 30 January with a call to David Wingate from Jessica Cox to report a large bird flying over her garden in Devonshire and making a strange call. She sent David a recording from her phone. The same evening Bruce Lorhan, who lives nearby, heard the bird calling and recognised it was either a shearwater or a petrel; after seeing it on subsequent days he confirmed it as a 'gadfly' petrel but not the species. The bird continued to grace the skies over Devonshire for a few days before a group of local birders descended on the Cox property on 4 February to look for it. Within minutes of arrival a beautiful gadfly petrel was flying overhead and making the most amazing 'ki ki ki ki' call, nothing like our Cahow.

Gadfly petrels can be difficult to identify as many are similar. The commoner Pacific species were quickly discounted, as was Zino's and Deserta's petrels from Madeira. We discussed the next closest possibility, from the South Atlantic: Trindade



Trindade Petrel - photo by Neal Morris

Petrel. Using my smart phone, I quickly was able to confirm the bird we were watching was indeed a Trindade Petrel. A playback of the call was also identical, clinching the ID. The bird continued to fly over the Cox property and nearby Devonshire Marsh for another couple of weeks and was last heard on 18 February.

The observed behaviour is consistent with the bird exploring potential breeding habitat and, whilst obviously lost, the calls would be to obtain a response from other potential breeding birds, which makes the record even more bizarre. Trindade Petrel breeds on both Trindade and Martin Vaz islands, several hundred kilometres off the east of Brazil. Birds there breed year-round with peak egg laying in April and October. The species is listed as Vulnerable by Birdlife international with global population estimates varying between 15,000 and as low as 1,100 individuals.

Trindade petrel shows two colour morphs, the light morph having been documented at sea on two previous occasions in Bermuda: 13 November 2015 and 12 April 2016. A dark morph gadfly petrel believed to be this species was seen 30 miles offshore on 10 January 2003 and another from Cooper's Point on 5 January 2006.

My Personal Experience Of The Trindade Petrel

David B. Wingate

In birdwatcher's terminology the Trindade Petrel was a 'life bird' for me and a very special one at that, because it had also been my 'nemesis bird', that is, one which I always had the bad luck to miss when others got to see it, despite countless hours of sea watches from Cooper's Point and on the ocean. For example, the only one of Bob Flood's annual November pelagic Cahow tours that I happened to miss was the one when Lynn Thorne obtained a one-in-a-million-chance photo of a Cahow and a Trindade petrel flying together at sea.

Just like the Cahow, this gadfly petrel has an enormous ocean feeding range which extends throughout the tropical Atlantic as far north as Bermuda and Cape Hatteras, and like the Cahow it only comes ashore to breed. The only known breeding grounds are islands off Brazil. Instances of individual gadfly petrels going ashore on other oceanic islands are not unheard of. In fact, a few years ago a single Cahow was attracted ashore by the cacophony of courtship calls in a shearwater colony on one of the Azorean islands. However, in that instance the source of attraction was clear. I could have understood if this bird had been attracted ashore at the burgeoning Cahow colony on Nonsuch, but instead it chose to focus its visits ashore over 'Sunnylands' in Devonshire and its visits were in daylight hours precisely between 4:45 and 6:15 pm. Its flight was so fast that its circuits over Sunnylands had a radius of several hundred meters and we estimated that it covered up to 40 miles in the 90+ minutes that it stayed over land each day. It never showed any sign of landing attempts. The only thing at Sunnylands that might have been a source of attraction is a noisy gaggle of domestic geese.

This was by far the weirdest and most memorable bird record of my life. Surreal is the only way to describe the emotions of the small band of birders who were so warmly welcomed by Jessica Cox during those three memorable weeks. Thank you, Jessica, and let us know if the bird ever returns.

Sear's Cave proves ideal haven for restoring Governor Laffan's Fern to the wild

Governor Laffan's Fern (*Diplazium laffanianum*) is an endemic (unique to Bermuda) fern, which is teetering on the edge of extinction. It was last reported growing in the wild by Nathaniel Britton in 1905, when he recorded it at cave mouths and in rocky crevices in the Walsingham area. On returning to Bermuda in 1913, Dr. Britton visited locations where he had previously seen this fern, but was unable to find any. Searches over the last 100 years have also failed to turn up any wild-growing ferns, so the species is considered 'extinct in the wild'.

A number of potted specimens did survive, and it was from these that Parks Department staff were able to send spores to the United States for propagation in 2003. Between 2009 and 2015 five shipments of laboratory-raised Governor Laffan's Ferns arrived back in Bermuda from the Department of Plant Conservation at Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium in Nebraska.

Given the very limited amount of information on the habitat previously occupied by this species, any attempts at re-introducing the laboratory grown ferns to the wild will have to be treated as trial and error. The Bermuda Audubon Society's commitment to protect Sear's Cave in Smith's Parish as a fern sanctuary made it an obvious choice for a trial introduction. On 29 January 2015, Jeremy Madeiros and I planted six, 2-inch tall Governor Laffan's Ferns in Sear's Cave. We revisited the cave in February 2017, and found 3 of the 6 had survived the previous year's hurricanes. On another visit in September 2018 we found two ferns surviving, one of which had grown nicely in a sunny spot on the slope in the sinkhole.



Gov. Laffan's Fern in Sear's Cave on the day of planting in 2015, and in 2018 (note bottle and mossy jar for scale).

Encouraged by this, we returned on January 18th 2019, and planted twelve more Governor Laffan's Ferns. Four of the newly-planted ferns were from the 2012 shipment, seven were from the October 2014 shipment and one was from the May 2014 shipment, so hopefully a good mix of genetic diversity is represented in the population. We also introduced another rare endemic fern, the Bermuda Shield Fern (*Thelypteris bermudiana*) into Sear's Cave by planting two large specimens which I had grown from spores collected from Walsingham in 2013. Sear's Cave now contains the highest fern species diversity of any location on Bermuda, with three endemic species and three native species. We will continue to monitor the planted ferns and control weeds in the habitat, and as more ferns reach planting size, we hope to make some further introductions at Sear's Cave.



Left: Jeremy Madeiros with two Governor Laffan's Ferns, planted January 2019

Below: Alison Copeland talks about ferns on the Sear's Cave field trip in February



SEAR'S CAVE NATURE RESERVE

Audubon's Sear's Cave Nature Reserve is a small but interesting reserve in Smith's Parish. The 'cave' is the remains of a large chamber in which the roof has collapsed, exposing it to the elements. The resultant deep, steep-sided depression is an ideal habitat for ferns, being sheltered, shady and humid.

Sear's Cave was a gift from the Trott family in memory of Sir Howard and Lady Trott. It was opened officially in 1992. It had been used as a dump and large amounts of garbage were removed, as well as many invasive plants. It is now a botanical reserve containing many of Bermuda's fern species.

Least Bittern Confirmed Breeding in Bermuda

David B. Wingate

Last summer while I was off island an apparently rat-killed Least Bittern was found by Philip Pitcher on the edge of Pembroke Marsh adjacent to the TCD car park on 27 August 2018 and taken to the Aquarium museum. There it was skinned and stuffed as a museum specimen by apprentice taxidermist Eva Botelli. Its weight was 55 gms and its sex was determined to be male.

I did not see the specimen until much later, but when I did I was immediately struck by the fact that most of its first year plumage feathers still had natal down attached to them. The Least Bittern is already known to be a regular migrant and winterer here, but no species of heron is known to undertake migration before it is fully fledged and free of down, so here was positive proof that the bird had to have been hatched on Bermuda.

The location where the specimen was found is also highly informative. Despite Pembroke Marsh's bad reputation as the former site of Bermuda's largest garbage dump, the remaining 10 acres of this former 30 acre peat marsh basin is still by far the largest surviving area of freshwater cattail marsh habitat on Bermuda. If Least Bitterns were to nest in Bermuda this would surely be the most likely site they would choose. I recalled that many years before I had actually heard and seen a pair of Least Bitterns there in midsummer, which had prompted me to speculate in my diary at the time that they might be nesting. I soon located the record – 12 July 1985 - so it appears that they may have been nesting secretively all along. This poses a challenge for local birders to follow up on this coming summer.



The remaining unspoiled section of Pembroke Marsh has been zoned as nature reserve since the 1985 Development Plan and I oversaw the excavation of a deep water channel firebreak between it and the dump in the early 1990s when I was the Government Conservation officer. Hopefully this new nesting record will underscore the continued significance of this reserve and inspire renewed efforts by conservationists to restore the entire freshwater ditch system that connects it to Mills Creek as a linear park.

Least Bittern - photo by Andrew Dobson

It's Bluebird Nesting Season - Are you Prepared?

Jennifer Gray

Many Bermuda Bluebirds are scouting nest boxes and developing pair bonds for nesting season. It won't be long before the first eggs are laid 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.

If you want to build your own Bluebird box, kits are available for \$25 from Aberfeldy Nurseries with all proceeds to Audubon. Ready-made boxes cost \$35. Everything you need to know about siting and monitoring a box is in a leaflet that comes with the kit/box, or can be found on the [Audubon website](#) or that of the [Bermuda Bluebird Society](#).



Photo by Richard Ground



- Find an open space with a nearby tree for that perfectly placed pole.
- Make a 2" wide collar of engine grease/vaseline around the bottom half of the pole to keep ants, lizards and other pests from climbing.
- Check your bluebird boxes at least once a week during the nesting season. Monitor the eggs and young, they really won't mind your periodic peeking, and remove broken eggs or dead chicks to prevent ants from invading the nest.
- 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 nest from March until early August. They usually have two broods per season, but three broods are possible. Bluebirds usually lay three to five light blue eggs. The incubation period 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.

Become a Citizen Scientist - Join NestWatch

Help us track the success of our Bermuda bluebirds

NestWatch is a monitoring programme set up by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, designed to track status and trends in the reproductive biology of birds, including when nesting occurs, number of eggs laid, how many eggs hatch and how many hatchlings survive. The database is used to study the current condition of breeding bird populations and how they may be changing over time as a result of climate change, habitat loss, the impact of non-native animals and other factors.

Participating in NestWatch is easy and just about anyone can do it, although children should always be accompanied by an adult when observing bird nests. Log onto <https://nestwatch.org/> and follow the directions. You can also download the NestWatch Mobile App for [iOS](#) and [Android](#) and record what you see at the nest in real time. Your observations will be added to those of thousands of other NestWatchers in a continually growing database used by researchers to understand and study birds.

With your input the Bermuda Audubon Society will be able to better monitor the health and success of our bluebird population and be in a better position to mitigate against threats.



- ♥ *The Bluebird is a symbol of happiness in many cultures around the world, including in Russia, where it represents hope, and in China's Shang Dynasty, where it's a messenger of knowledge and enlightenment.*
- ♥ *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.*

Bird Report November 2018 - February 2019

Janice Hetzel

Highlights of this period included an **American Woodcock** seen and photographed by several observers on 2/1. This bird was noticed in a private garden in Devonshire and reported to BAS. It had been seen for over a week prior. A **Trinidad Petrel** was seen circling over a residence in Devonshire 30/1-18/2. These Petrels are pelagic and only come ashore to breed. Their normal breeding territory is on islands off the coast of Brazil. In addition, a **Dovekie** was found in the waters off Castle Island on 26/11. It was unable to fly and brought into BAMZ for rehabilitation. Unfortunately, it did not survive. Of note, three large pieces of plastic were found in

its gut.



American Woodcock - photo by Erich Hetzel

We had a successful **Christmas Bird Count** on December 29th. Our 17 observers reported 95 species on count day and a total of 108 species were seen over the count week. The total number of birds seen were 6,066. The full results can be found at netapp.audubon.org.

The **Yellow-breasted Chat** first seen on 18/11 in Ferry Point Park has stayed the winter. Additional notable birds that spent the winter included the **Marsh Wren** at Spittal Pond, the **Red-breasted Nuthatch** at Port Royal Golf Course, a **Red-winged Blackbird** that was first seen on 21/12 at Jubilee Road (NM) and a **Common Merganser** first seen on Ships Hill Pond on 19/12 (DW) and then reported multiple times on Mangrove Lake (SV). A **Tree Swallow** was seen at Spittal Pond on 1/12 (NM) and again at Hungry Bay on 2/12 (GB). An **Eastern Kingbird** was seen at the Airport on 5/12 (PA). A

Common Eider was seen in Ferry Reach on 11/12 (LG). A **Brown Booby** was spotted at the Airport on 12/12 (PA).



Common Eider - photo by Lisa Greene

A **White-winged Crossbill** was spotted on 27/12 at the ABS Reserve (EH). A **Common Redpoll** was reported on 4/1 at Ferry Point Park (NM). A **Canada Goose** was seen at Outerlea Farm on 9/1 (DW). This is likely a second bird. A **Common Nighthawk** was seen at St. Georges Golf Course on 14/1 (NM). A **Red Phalarope** was seen in the waters by Coopers Island on 23/1 (PW). A **Ruff** was photographed at Westover Farm on 24/1 (PW). An **Eastern Phoebe** was seen at Spittal Pond on 27/1 (PW). A **Yellow-throated Vireo** was seen and photographed in Spanish Point on 30/1 (RB), at Port Royal Golf Course 26/2 (RB) and at the Arboretum 26/2 (PF).

A male **Gadwall** was seen at Spittal Pond 30/1 (DW). A Bufflehead was seen at Pembroke Marsh on 30/1 (DW). A **Purple Finch** was seen at Ferry Point Park 3/2 (NM). A **Common Merganser** was seen on Mangrove Lake on 10/2 (SV).

An **Eastern Wood-Peevee** was seen at Somerset Long Bay East 18/2 (RB). Two **Common Terns** were seen at Spittal Pond 22/2 (PF).



Yellow-throated Vireo - photo by Richard Brewer



Observers:
Peter Adhemar(PA)
Geoff Bell (GB)
Richard Brewer(RB)
Paul Fisher(PF)
Lisa Greene(LG)
Erich Hetzel(EH)
Neal Morris(NM)
Susan Vallis(SV)
Paul Watson(PW)
David Wingate(DW)

Ruff - photo by Paul Watson

Society News

Many thanks to all the volunteers who turned out in January to assist with culling invasive plants, especially casuarinas (*right*) at the society's Alfred Blackburn Smith Nature Reserve, west of Coral Beach Club.

The reserve is open to Audubon members during daylight hours and is a wonderful place to whale-watch during the spring!



We also had an excellent turn-out for our Sear's Cave field trip and birding walk in February (*left*).

The sink hole is an important habitat for Bermuda's native and endemic ferns. Thanks to Alison Copeland of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources for a very informative talk on the fern project.



Our annual Bluebird nest box workshop, held at the Botanical Gardens in February, was a great success.



David Wingate gave a fascinating talk on Bermuda's terns, at BUEI on 28 January.

Thanks to Erich Hetzel for technical support and Gordon Campbell, who donned period costumes to bring historical readings to life.

Future Events

eBird Workshop

Tuesday 26 March 2019 6:30pm Aquarium Education Room

Come and learn how to use eBird to record your bird sightings online and contribute to a worldwide bird database. Please email info@audubon.bm to sign up. Workshop is free.

Nonsuch Island Field Trip

Saturday 4 May 2019 10:00am to 4:00pm

The trip will include a morning tour with Cahow encounter and time to swim or relax on the island in the afternoon. Spaces are limited; members have priority. Members \$50, non-members \$75.

To reserve a place email info@audubon.bm or call 735 0441.

Notice of Annual General Meeting

Monday 13 May 2019, 6:00pm Government House

All members are welcome. Includes a presentation on the past year's activities and birding highlights.

For security purposes please email info@audubon.bm or call 735 0441 if you plan to attend.

If you would like to stand for election to the Committee of Management, or wish to nominate someone, please contact Janice Hetzel on the email or number above.

Spittal Pond Fieldtrip

Saturday 7 September 8:00am

A guided bird walk at Spittal Pond as part of the World Shorebird Count. Meet at eastern car park.

Paget Island Bird Camp

Save the Date: 11-13 October.

Longtail igloos for sale

Thanks to the creativity and hard work of Alistair Border and Erich Hetzel, we have a new batch of Bermuda-made Longtail igloos for sale.

Price \$120, email info@audubon.bm or call 238-8628 to order.

