

# **NEWSLETTER**

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# VISITOR PUTS ON A SHOW

by Miguel Mejias



Brown Pelican (Pelecanus occidentalis) - Photo: Miguel Mejias

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Vagrancy is the tendency of birds to appear in areas well outside their typical range. It is not uncommon for vagrant arrivals to coincide with strong weather systems such as the barrage of south-westerly gale force winds from the southern US that lashed Bermuda in January.

On January 15th, a local birdwatcher spotted an unusually large bird gliding over the #17 pond at the Port Royal Golf Course. A few moments later, review of video footage concluded that this was indeed a Brown Pelican, an occasional vagrant to the island and a strictly coastal species that breeds throughout most of the American and Mexican coastlines.



Brown Pelican - Photo: Tim White

To our delight, the bird was spotted over the next few days in Hamilton Harbour, even treating onlookers at Darrell's Wharf to several plunge dives during an otherwise dreary and gloomy day. While this species won't be winning any gold medals for its sloppy dives, they are always a welcome spectacle in our harbours. During a dive, this bird tucks its head and angles its body to the left, presumably to protect its trachea and esophagus, which are on the right side of the neck, from being damaged upon impact. Photographs confirmed that this was indeed an adult Brown Pelican, which have largely silvery-grey backs, chocolate-brown bellies, white and brown necks and hints of yellow on the head.

Unexpectedly, a Brown Pelican sighting was reported in the Shelly Bay/Harrington Sound area a few days later; however, unlike the colourful visitor in our capital's waters, this bird was a mute brownish colour with a white belly indicative of an immature bird. Thus, Bermuda hosted TWO Brown Pelicans in January, both victims of adverse winds. The last reported sighting of the adult bird was 23 January soaring offshore near Westover Farm in Somerset and the immature bird was last seen near Shelly Bay on 22 January.

Previous local observations of pelicans suggest they are somewhat restless upon arrival, frequenting multiple harbours, bays, and coastlines before settling down in one area. When they aren't actively plunge-diving for fish, they can be seen resting on the water, reef markers, or sitting on rocky shorelines or outcrops, the latter making them difficult to detect! Be sure to keep your eyes open for future sightings of this massive seabird, especially in the summer!

# **ENDANGERED RED KNOT RINGS OUT THE OLD YEAR**

## by Miguel Mejias

Bermuda's 2021 Birding year finished on a high note with a very special Red Knot (Calidris canutus) seen at Spittal Pond on 31st December. An infrequent visitor (3 records in the last 6 years) this bird is not only a rare sight here but an endangered species which faces and overcomes tremendous odds every year. These medium-sized shorebirds (about 10 inches) have one of the longest migrations of all birds - about 9000 miles from wintering as far as the southern tip of South America to breeding in the Arctic circle. This phenomenal trip takes several critical stops for rest and refueling.



Red Knot (Calidris canutus) - Photo: Miguel Mejias

Red Knot - Photo: Tim White

During its Spring migration the Red Knot relies on a diet of Horseshoe Crab eggs along the Delaware Bay; however the Horseshoe Crab population itself has been in dramatic decline, contributing to the Red Knot's endangered species status. Even if efforts to revive the Horseshoe Crab population succeed, the Red Knot population still faces new challenges in both its wintering and breeding grounds due to climate change and sea-level rises. While Bermuda plays host to these and other migrating shorebirds, please help protect them by keeping your pets away from Nature Reserves and other ponds or beaches where migrating birds rest and recover.

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## STOKES POINT EAST RESTORATION

## by Jennifer Gray

On Sunday, 12th December, a team of 12 students from Warwick Academy and a few of their parents came together to plant native trees at the new Audubon Nature Reserve known as Stoke's Point East, in St. Georges. Thanks to the generosity of Andrew MacFarlane, the Warwick Academy Natural History Club was able to grow the trees and coordinate with the Bermuda Audubon Society for the tree planting event.

Under the guidance of Audubon President, Jennifer Gray, and honorary member, David Wingate, the students dug holes for 14 Warwick Academy trees (Olivewoods, Palmettos, Cedars and Hackberries) but then, although the morning's forecast was meant to be good, a fast-moving cold front brought a delivery of heavy rainwater exactly one hour too early; just before the plants were put in the ground! In torrential rain, on slopes of slippery mud, the students tackled the task of getting the trees planted and as the rain eased, they spent another 40 minutes touring the walking trails and culling invasive jumby bean and Brazil pepper seedlings.



Stokes Point East is a lovely piece of open space that includes farmed arable land, woodland reserve and coastal reserve. It was gifted to the Society in 2014 and provides a wonderful extension to Stokes Point West Nature Reserve just across the road. Tree plantings by this group compliment the clearing of thickets of Brazil pepper and other invasives, the creation of a walking path through the reserve and many plants, including a Poinciana tree at the entrance, put into place under our Conservation Management Plan for the area.





The Audubon Society wish to extend their gratitude to the committee members that turned up to help, the student volunteers and their family members, for their hard work!

**THANK YOU:** Matthew Arruda, Robert Chandler, Kiara Crockwell, Francesca Fox, Zac Chaeus Grant, Zipporah Grant, Tene Grant, Erich and Janice Hetzel, Catherine Kempe, Max Kempe, Sam Larrett, Andrew MacFarlane, Callum MacFarlane, James MacFarlane, Valerie Paulo, Ava Simons, Narinder Simons, Max Swainson, Paul Watson.

A special thank you to Rosalind Wingate who heads up the Warwick Academy Natural History Camp, inspiring our youth and improving our environment.

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# A BRIEF HISTORY AND NEST BOX TIPS FOR BERMUDA EASTERN BLUEBIRDS

by Miguel Mejias

The Eastern Bluebird (Sialia sialis) is one of the most beloved and easily recognizable breeders in Bermuda. Males have brilliant sky to sapphire blue upperparts, rusty-brown breast and flanks with white bellies, whereas the female's attire, although similar, is more subdued than her mate's (Figures 1 & 2).



**Figure 1. Eastern Bluebird** male photographed in Bermuda by Miguel Mejias



**Figure 2. Eastern Bluebird** female photographed in Bermuda by Miguel Mejias

Their colonization of the Bermuda archipelago seems to coincide with human settlement in the early 1600s (Avery et al. 2013), and several observations of their nesting behaviour have been documented since. Breeding occurs between March – August, with pairs rearing anywhere from 1-3 broods (Matson et al. 2014). Historically, this cavity-nesting species utilized a diverse array of holes for nesting: holes lining ancient quarries and roadside cuttings, wall crevices, tree and branch cavities, and even holes within calabashes and boxes suspended for them in the verandas of Bermudian homes (Reid 1883).

While post-settlement logging and bushfires gave way to more open, greenspace, the preferred year-round habitat of Eastern Bluebirds (hereafter, "bluebirds"), this benefit was grossly outweighed by the litany of human introductions that have and continue to hamper bluebird nesting. In the 1870s, in order to combat flies, the House Sparrow (Passer domesticus (Figure 3) was deliberately introduced from the USA to Bermuda.

This fellow cavity-nesting species readily competed, displaced, and occupied nesting holes that, up until then, belonged to bluebirds (Reid 1884, Amos 1991). Additional nesting holes were lost after the death and felling of Bermuda Cedar (Juniperus bermudiana) following a blight that annihilated ~95% of the cedar population during 1946-1951 (Rueger et al. 1996).

The 1950s marked the arrival of the European Starling (Sturnus vulgaris) and Great Kiskadee (Pitangus sulphuratus), the former being a much larger cavity-nesting species and the latter serving as a predator of bluebird eggs and nestlings (Amos 1991). Their tendency to feed on the ground also makes them readily prone to cat predation (M. Mejías, pers. obvs). Pesticides and exotic anoles lizards threaten bluebird survival by the reduction of prey and nest predation, respectively.

A species once described as "very common" (Reid 1884), the bluebird has vanished from several of its historical strongholds (Amos 1991). To prevent extirpation, The Bermuda Audubon Society was established in 1954, where it championed bluebird survival with the building and installation of artificial nest boxes. These artificial cavities proved successful, being readily accepted by bluebirds. In fact, nearly the entirety of Bermuda's bluebirds relies on human made, artificial nest boxes, and they are found readily occupied on golf courses, parklands, graveyards, gardens, and backyards; golf courses appear to support the highest breeding densities (M. Mejías, pers. obvs). As of the early 2000s, the local bluebird population appears stable, albeit small, with about 500 nesting pairs found across said localities (Dobson 2002).

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While installing artificial nest boxes is essential to the persistence of breeding bluebirds in Bermuda, they do come with inherent responsibilities. Boxes should be installed on a strong and stable post at eye level; multiple boxes should be at least 300 feet (~90 meters) apart to reduce competition between neighbours. To avoid chronic heat exposure to nest-cavity occupants, boxes should be oriented so that the entrance faces east. While nest entrances are small enough to exclude the much larger European Starling, the similar-sized House Sparrows are frequent competitors for these boxes. Therefore, it is imperative for observers to pay attention to which species are seen entering and exiting nest boxes. Bluebird nests are small, neat, and shallow bowls made almost exclusively of grasses and casuarina needles. In contrast, sparrows build messy, large, globular nests of



Eastern Bluebird - Photo: Neal Morris

grasses and garbage, which often take up almost the entirety of the nest box; these nests and their contents should be removed immediately. Conveniently, bluebirds lay blue eggs, and sparrows lay brownish eggs, which makes remembering which to dispose of easier.



**Figure 3. House Sparrow** male (left) and female (right) photographed in Bermuda. Photographs by Miguel Mejías

Unfortunately, sparrows are tenacious occupants, and the actions required to control them can vary anywhere from continuous removal of the sparrow nest and eggs, leaving the box door open for at least a week or removing the nest box for a few weeks to a month, to the hiring of trained personnel to trap and cull the sparrows. Unfortunately, sparrow invasion runs the risk of red mite infestation, which could kill bluebird nestlings. If you suspect your nest box, bluebird nest, or nest with bluebird eggs have red mites, one can apply a few puffs of diatomaceous earth (can be purchased at Noah's Ark) at the bottom of the nest or nest box floor, to kill mites; this product should be handled while wearing a face mask. While bluebirds are somewhat tolerant to human visits to nest boxes, it is imperative that the nest box not be opened 2-3 days prior to fledging (i.e., 15-17 days old; fledging usually occurs by 18-20 days). Disturbance at this stage could cause premature fledging, which makes the young vulnerable to predation or being runover by a vehicle (M. Mejías, pers. obvs). Once all the chicks have fledged (immature birds have same body plan as adults, but with brownish-grey plumage, large white spots, and limited blue in wings) and are being fed on the green by parents, the old nest should be removed and the box washed with hot, soapy water, in preparation of a second brood.

Information on how to acquire/build a Bluebird nest box can be found on the **Bermuda Audubon** webpage: https://audubon.bm/conservation/bluebird or the **Bermuda Bluebird Society** page: https://bermudabluebirdsociety.com

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# AUDUBON PONDS ARE REFUGES FOR BERMUDA'S ENDEMIC KILLIFISHES

by Dr Mark Outerbridge Senior Biodiversity Officer, Department of Environment and Natural Resources

There are two species of endemic killifishes which live on Bermuda; Fundulus relictus known only from three ponds in St. George's Parish (including Bartram's Pond in the Stoke's Point Nature Reserve which were introduced by David Wingate in 1986) and Fundulus bermudae which live in 12 other ponds across the rest of Bermuda. Of the 15 ponds inhabited by these endemic fish, eight were artificially created. Environmentally minded organizations like the Bermuda Audubon Society are playing a key role in the preservation of local wildlife, especially for the killifishes.



Mature Male Killifish (Fundulus bermuda) - Photo: Jennifer Gray

Restoration projects which involve the creation of new ponds provide excellent opportunities to introduce killifish and establish new populations, thereby contributing to their range expansion across Bermuda. The most recent involved transferring 248 killifish from Trott's Pond (Smith's Parish) into Eve's Pond (Hamilton Parish), after slowly getting them used to the differences in salinity between the two ponds. Future surveys will determine if they establish a self-sustaining population in their new home, but I suspect they will do very well there.

A genetic investigation in 2009 reported that the killifish inhabiting Evan's Pond and Warwick Pond are more closely related to each other than to the rest of the killifishes on Bermuda. The study could not conclude if they represented a new species but recommended that they be treated as a single management unit. In order to ensure the long-term survival of this west-end unit I have performed a series of translocations using fish from both Warwick Pond and Evan's Pond to establish new populations in Warwick Parish and Southampton Parish.



Evan's Pond killifish being released into an artificially created pond on the Riddell's Bay golf course

The results of the field work undertaken for my Master's dissertation indicated that the killifish population in Warwick Pond was showing signs of imminent collapse (2). Fearing their loss, I captured enough males and females to establish a temporary colony in a small, shallow, plastic-lined freshwater pond that had just been created at the WindReach Recreational Center. This colony grew in size and subsequently enabled me to transfer 400 individuals to Seymour's Pond in 2011 after it was enlarged. A population survey the following year indicated that the 400 founding members had increased in abundance to an estimated 10,300 fish. They had clearly profited by the move.

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Furthermore, fish were taken from the WindReach pond in 2012 to the freshwater pond in the Madagascar exhibit at BAMZ, where they can still be found. Sadly, it appears that the original Warwick Pond killifish population may have disappeared as I have not been able to catch any fish there since 2008 (the latest attempts were made this past June).



Founding population of killifish adjusting to their new home in Eve's Pond.

In August (2021) 98 fish (mostly large adults) were transferred from BAMZ to the pond located in the Somerset Long Bay West reserve. The salinities in both ponds were almost identical (0-3 ppt), so gradual saline acclimation was not necessary and the killifish were released on the same day of capture. If they are able to establish a self-sustaining population in the Somerset Long Bay West Nature Reserve, then the Warwick Pond variety of killifish lives on in three new locations. I have already managed to get fish from Evan's Pond established in two privately owned ponds, so the future of the west-end killifish now looks that much brighter.

To learn more about Bermuda's killifishes please read their recovery plan, which can be viewed at www.environment.bm/species-recovery-plans.

#### References:

- 1, Outerbridge, M.E. 2020. Recovery plan for the killifishes of Bermuda (Fundulus bermudae & Fundulus relictus). Department of Environment and Natural Resources. 52 pgs.
- 2, Outerbridge, M.E. 2005. Distribution, population assessments, and reproductive seasonality of Bermuda's killifish. MSc Thesis. University College Cork. 115 pgs.
- 3, Copeland, A. 2013. Paddling in the pond: the 2001/2012 killifish surveys. Envirotalk 80(4):18-22.



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# **BIRDERS, KNOW YOUR OLIVEWOOD AND PITTOSPORUM!**

# Tips on how to distinguish our native Olivewood (Cassine laneana) from the introduced Pittosporum (P. tobira)

### by Lisa Greene

Both of these trees are evergreen and, from a distance, look similar primarily because the leaves are a similar shape and colour – a dark green, elongated oval shape with the edges curling under. Both have lighter coloured new leaves and small flowers held in clusters. But on closer examination, there are several characteristics that distinguish them.



Native Olivewood leaves



Native Olivewood fruit

#### Olivewood

**Growth form** - dense oval shaped "shrub" developing into a branching tree to 45', taking many years. **Leaf colour** – mature leaves stiff, glossy and deep green; new leaves (January and February) bright green. **Leaves** - approximately 2 1/2" long, and often quite broad, leaf edge with gently rounded teeth. **Flowers** – small, yellow-green, held in loose clusters, followed by egg-shaped fruit, medium yellow when ripe.



Introduced Pittosporum leaves and fruit

#### **Pittosporum**

Growth form - shrub/hedge that develops into small tree (18'), if not maintained as a hedge.

Leaf colour – young leaves are lighter green

Leaves - approximately 3", narrower oval, leaf edge smooth; emitting a distinctive smell when crushed.

Flowers - white, fragrant, held in dense clusters of many flowers, followed by green three-parted fruit that turn brown and split open when ripe, revealing sticky red seeds.

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# **CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 2021**

#### by Janice Hetzel

Bermuda's 47th annual Christmas Bird Count took place on December 18th with 24 dedicated birdwatchers spread across Bermuda from dawn to dusk, counting every bird they saw. This year, 7,561 individual birds across 83 species were seen on count day, and another 12 species were added during count week (3 days before and 3 days after the designated count day). This data, invaluable for researchers studying the state of the world's bird populations, is submitted annually to the National Audubon Society in the US.

Notable birds in the count period included a juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron at Spittal Pond, a Snow Bunting at Cross Island near Dockyard, a Dark-eyed Junco near Fort Victoria in St. Georges and a Swainson's Thrush in the dunes behind the south shore beaches. Also remarkable were the 85 (!) Killdeer seen at the new airport pond. In 2021, four pairs of Killdeer fledged 9 chicks at this location - the first report of Killdeer reproducing in Bermuda. With the large numbers seen during the Christmas Bird count, we might anticipate the Killdeer will become a regular Bermuda resident breeding bird.

World bird populations are in serious decline. According to a study published online in the journal Science, Sept. 2019, 2.9 billion adult breeding birds have been lost in the continental US and Canada over the past 50 years. This is nearly 30% of the total population. Most of



Juvenile **Black-crowned Night-Heron**Photo: Tim White

these losses are in 12 bird families including: sparrows, blackbirds, warblers, finches and shorebirds. Species from these families regularly migrate to and through Bermuda each year. The Dark-eyed Junco seen on our count was down by 168 million birds (1 in 3 lost) and the White-throatedSparrow down by 93 million (1 in 3 lost).

This brings to light Bermuda's important role as a "lifeboat" for these migratory birds. We need to protect and preserve our habitats so they might find suitable open space to rest and feed on their long migrations or, in some cases, to survive the winter in Bermuda. Loss of habitat to development is a problem for birds everywhere, and Bermuda is no exception. We should all work to minimize the loss of open spaces and improve habitat by planting native and endemic species and by limiting and carefully controlling pesticide use.



Swainson's Thrush - Photo: LeShun Smith



Snow Bunting - Photo: LeShun Smith

We must also ensure the safety of these migratory birds while they are here. The impact of cats on our birds needs to be addressed. Predation by domestic cats is the number-one direct threat to birds caused by humans. Our pet cats need to be kept indoors and a concerted effort must be made to address our feral cat population. To be sure, many cat owners have been given gifts of dead and dying birds but much of this killing occurs unseen. Recently, a dead Merlin, a beautiful small raptor, was found to have been killed by a cat. Over the past year, at least 35 cat kills have been documented at Port Royal Golf Course alone and most of these were declining shorebird species.

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# **BIRD REPORT: SEPTEMBER 2021 - FEBRUARY 2022**

By Janice Hetzel

Over this 6 month period 175 species were observed. The highlight was the **Hammond's Flycatcher**, a new species for Bermuda seen by Luke Foster on 5 Oct at Port Royal Golf Course and the subject of an article in our last Newsletter. Other unusual sightings included a **Hudsonian Godwit** seen by Peter Adhemar on 7 Sept near Shelly Bay Marsh, a **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** seen by Luke Foster on 24 Oct and a **Northern Gannet** seen by Luke Foster and Miguel Mejias on 23 Jan.



Hooded Merganser - Photo: Richard Brewer



Baird's Sandpiper - Photo: Andrea Webb

We had a good complement of Waterbirds including up to 4 **Northern Shoveler** at Spittal Pond (AW), 8 **American Wigeon** at the Airport Pond, a **Bufflehead** at Mangrove Lake (9 Jan, JS) and 4 **Hooded Merganser** at Spittal Pond (28 Nov, LS). A **Purple Gallinule** was seen 3 Nov (MM.) In the fall, both **Yellow-billed Cuckoo** (10 Oct, LF), and the more rare, **Black-billed Cuckoo** were seen in numerous locations starting on 10 Oct (LF). Twenty seven species of Shorebird were reported including the IUCN, Near Threatened species of **Piping Plover** (25 Sept, LF) and a **Red Knot** (7 Nov, HM). Also seen were a **Dunlin** (4 Sept, NM), a **Baird's Sandpiper** (7 Sept, LF) and a **Willet** (11 Sept, AW). A surprising collection of 85 **Killdeer** were spotted at the airport pond (14 Dec, PW).

Eight species of gull were reported including a **Bonaparte's Gull** (25 Dec, PA), a **Black-headed Gull** (13 Nov, PW), a **Laughing Gull** (4 Nov, HM), and a **Franklin's Gull** (10 Nov, NM). A **Least Tern** was seen once (5 Sept, TW) and a **Forster's Tern** (8 Nov, NM) was seen by several birders but only on one day. Other brief visitors were a **Magnificent Frigatebird** (18 Jan, LF) and the two **Brown Pelicans** (15 Jan, IP). The secretive **Least Bittern** was seen (12 Sept, PA) in several locations and a single sighting of an **American Bittern** (11 Feb, PW) was reported.



Eastern Phoebe - Photo: Neal Morris



Least Tern - Photo: Tim White

The usual Herons were seen with the addition of a juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron (29 Oct, PW) and a mature one in Flatts Inlet (15 Feb, RP). The Little Egret from the spring was last reported on 7 Nov. A Northern Harrier arrived on 16 Oct (LF) and two were seen at Kindley Field (27 Nov, PW). In addition to the Hammond's, flycatchers seen this period included an Eastern Wood-pewee (6 Sept, NM), a Yellow-bellied Flycatcher (14 Oct, AW), a Least Flycatcher (22 Sept, MM), an Eastern Phoebe (19 Oct, LF) and an Eastern Kingbird (4 Sept, NM). A Northern Wheatear was seen (10 Oct, MM). We had a Snow Bunting arrive on 18 Nov (MM) and stay the winter posing on the wall at Cross Island.

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Song Sparrow - Photo: Neal Morris

A large variety of Sparrows were seen including **Chipping Sparrow** (7 Nov, NM), **Dark-eyed Junco** (22 Oct, PW), **White-crowned Sparrow** (30 Oct, DW), **White-throated Sparrow** (18 Nov, PW), **Savannah Sparrow** (6 Nov, PW), **Song Sparrow** (8 Nov, LF), **Lincoln's Sparrow** (15 Nov, PW), and **Swamp Sparrow** (16 Feb, PW). Although it felt like we did not have as many warblers this past year, in the end, 32 species were seen. Most notable of these were a **Yellow-breasted Chat** (1 Dec, PW), a **Canada Warbler** (4 Sept, LF) and a **Wilson's Warbler** (21 Sept, MM). **Bermuda Petrel** returned in good numbers, first seen for their Fall reconnaissance on 25 Oct (JM) and returning in January for their nesting season.



Canada Warbler - Photo: Luke Foster



Yellow-breasted Chat - Photo: Miguel Mejias

**Observers**: Peter Adhemar (PA), Luke Foster (LF), Herb Marshall (HM), Miguel Mejias (MM), Neal Morris (NM), Ingela Persson (IP), Ron Porter (RP), Joanne Smith (JS), LeShun Smith (LS), Paul Watson (PW), Andrea Webb (AW), Tim White (TW) and David Wingate (DW).

# **SOCIETY NEWS & EVENTS**

# **DEVONSHIRE MARSH BIRDING WALK - 19 FEB 2022**







Paul Watson A

Alison Copeland

It was a beautiful sunny and cool day to enjoy a Bermuda Audubon Society morning walk along Vesey Street and our Devonshire Marsh nature reserves. Thank you, Paul Watson, for all the tips on where to look for birds in the area, and what we might expect to find and thank you, Alison Copeland, for sharing your plant wisdom. It was an adventure enjoyed by all.

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# FREER COX RESERVE CLEAN UP - 19 FEB 2022



HUGE SHOUT OUT to the wonderful volunteers who showed up on February 19th to clean up the roadside of our Freer Cox Nature Reserve. It's disheartening to see all the debris tossed over the wall by fellow islanders but OH SO SATISFYING to get it cleaned up. THANK YOU to all who worked so hard. It was such a great team effort.





# **UPCOMING EVENTS**

**Eve's Pond Volunteer Day** (run by Bermuda National Trust)

Saturday, 19th March

Sign up: palmetto@bnt.bm

## Whale Watching Trip

Saturday, 9th April / Rain date Sunday 10th April

Sign up: info@audubon.bm

#### **Eve's Pond Opening**

Earth Day - Friday 22 April Sign up: info@audubon.bm

#### Northrock Snorkel

Saturday 18 June / Rain Date Saturday 25 June

Sign up: info@audubon.bm

### Somerset Long Bay Late Afternoon Beach BBQ

To be held in July - details to come

#### Members' Sunset Boat Cruise

To be held in August - details to come

### Spittal Pond Field Trip for World Shorebird Count

Saturday 3 September 3

#### Paget Island Bird Camp

To be held in October - details to come

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