



Bermuda Audubon Society

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Purple Swamphen – New to Bermuda

Andrew Dobson



On 26 October I received an email from Helen Jardine with a distant photo of what I assumed to be a Purple Gallinule. As I was going into town late in the afternoon – I swung by Bernard Park – not expecting to see the gallinule – and certainly not a Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*! It is much larger than the gallinule, red legs, massive feet, red on the forehead – and stunning purple plumage. Never having been seen before in Bermuda, the bird caused much interest and excitement during its short stay and was quite confiding in the flooded area of the park. It was last seen on 6 November.

There is an established introduced population in S.Florida which was introduced in the late 1990s, escaping in the Pembroke Pines area – perhaps the origin of this bird. The birds rapidly multiplied and can now be found in several areas of southern Florida. War was declared on them in 2006 and over the subsequent two-and-a-half years, nearly 3,200 were killed but it was apparently too late it is thought

that the swamphen will become an established part of Florida's avifauna - however it is not yet on the AOU checklist. African (and south Asian birds) have a green backs – as did the Barnard Park bird. The Florida birds are mostly or entirely of the grey-headed race *P.p. poliocephalus*, native to the area around the Caspian Sea. There are 13 or more subspecies of the Purple Swamphen (depending on the authority) which differ mainly in the plumage colours. Following much discussion by experts on both sides of the Atlantic, the Purple Swamphen at Bernard Park would appear to of the race *P.p. madagascariensis*. Also known as the African Swamphen on that continent, it is found in the Nile delta/valley; many of the coastal areas of the west African coast from SW Mauritania to Cameroon; much of southern African and Madagascar - Taylor.B (1998) Rails. Pica Press.

In Europe it is reported as a genuine vagrant as far north as France, Germany and Austria. How our bird got here will, I suppose always be a mystery. It must have hitched a long ride if it came from West Africa.

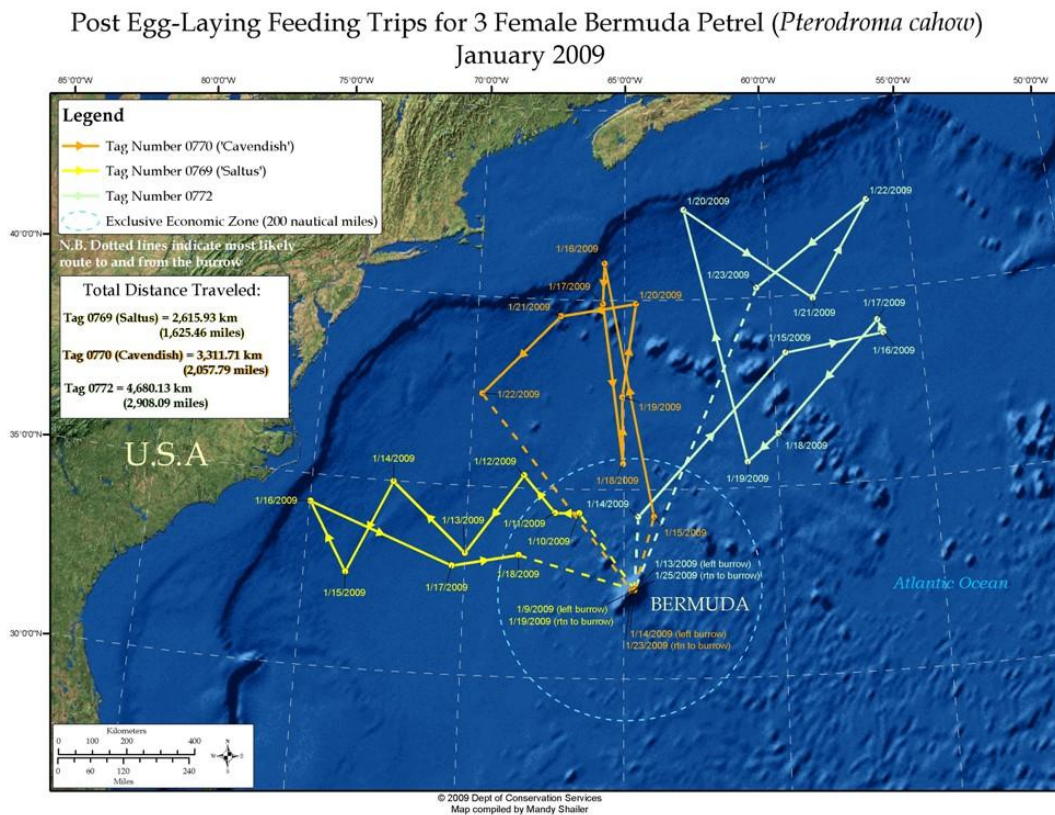
Many ships pass west to east across the Atlantic at latitudes on or near ours.

Photo: Purple Swamphen at Bernard Park 30 Nov 2009 Andrew Dobson

Cahow update

Jeremy Madeiros

Cahows return to breed in mid-October and as of late December, Jeremy Madeiros had already confirmed 96 pairs. Perhaps a few more pairs will be confirmed in the New Year to break the 100 mark! This does not mean that all the pairs will necessarily lay an egg – but the prospects are good for another record year. The increase in numbers has of course been aided by the translocation project – spear-headed by Jeremy (moving young Cahows from burrows on small islets to artificial burrows on Nonsuch Island from which they fledged). Nonsuch Island was successfully imprinted on these Cahows as some translocated birds from 2004, 2005 and 2006 have returned to the island. One pair raised ‘Somers’ in the last breeding season and there are already 6 pairs established on Nonsuch.



The other big news concerns the use of data loggers on the Cahows, explained by Jeremy Madeiros in a lecture to the Society in November. ‘Lotek’ data loggers were attached to 12 birds earlier this year. These archival geolocational data loggers weigh only 4.7 grams and can determine the daily position of the birds when at sea. Information can be downloaded directly onto a laptop computer when the birds return to their nest burrows. This can be done without having to remove the loggers from the birds, and the loggers can then be reset to continue gathering daily position as well as water temperatures for up to two years. During the breeding season, feeding trips involved distances of anywhere between 1,500-4,000 miles and over a wide area to the west and north of Bermuda. What everyone really wanted to know was where the birds went in the non-breeding season. So far, three of the birds have been re-captured and data retrieved. There were the predicted visits to the Gulf Stream to the west, but one route went north to the Bay of Fundy, into the Gulf of St. Lawrence and over the Grand Banks. One bird which had a failed nesting attempt left the nesting burrow early. By April-May it was in the northwest Atlantic, at one point only 125-150 miles off the southwest tip of Ireland. Even though no-one has seen the bird - is the Cahow now on the bird lists for Canada and Ireland?

Bird Report July to December 2009

Andrew Dobson

Highlights of the period included the first record of Purple Swamphen in Bermuda and an exceptional eight American Avocets. *Photo: Five avocets at Cloverdale Pond – Andrew Dobson*



An immature **Northern Gannet** was seen 18 Dec at Shelly Bay (RP) and 24 Dec at Coney Is. (JM). A **Great Cormorant** was off Nonsuch Is. 24 Dec (JM). **Cattle Egrets** numbers increased from 24 at the Airport 16 Nov (DW) to 32 island-wide 19 Nov (DW). A **Black-crowned Night-Heron** was at Somerset Long Bay NR 7 Nov- 16 Dec (AD). A swan sp. was seen flying over Sandys Parish on 13 and 17 Dec (SR and PH). A **Canada Goose** was at Spittal Pond 16-19 Dec (TW). The long-staying **Eurasian Wigeon** was at Spittal Pond 2 Aug (DBW). An adult **Peregrine** was chasing City Hall pigeons 10 Nov (PH). A **Northern Harrier** was over the Airport/Castle Harbour Islands 9-17 Oct (PA, JM). Bermuda's first **Purple Swamphen** was at Bernard Park 26 Oct to 6 Nov (but probably present for at least a week before that)(AD). Two **Piping Plovers** were at Cooper's Point 11 Nov (AD). There had only been eight single records of **American Avocet** in Bermuda, so when two arrived at Spittal Pond 2 Oct (KR) no-one expected numbers would peak at 8 on Oct 11 with five at Spittal Pond and three at Port Royal GC. One bird lingered to 7 Nov. A **Willet** was at Port Royal GC 20 Sept (PH). **Upland Sandpipers** were seen at a number of locations including 5 at the Airport 7 Sep (PW). A **Red Knot** was at the East End Dairy 12 Sep (AD) and Spittal Pond 21-27 Sep (AD). A **Ruff** was on Mid-Ocean GC 3 Oct (PW). A **Franklin's Gull** was at Spittal Pond 1 Aug (PW). One imm. **Least Tern** was on a North Channel marker 5 Sep (AD). Not often seen during the day, a **Barn Owl** was watched at Lover's Lake 19 Sep (PW) and 9 Oct (GA). A late **Chimney Swift** was over Horseshoe Dunes 1 Nov (AD). A **Ruby-throated Hummingbird** was on Wreck Road during the first two weeks of Nov (WF). A **Northern Flicker** was drinking at a garden birdbath in Tamarind Vale 13 Dec (A&SC). An **Acadian Flycatcher** was at Spittal Pond 11-12 Oct (AD). **Western Kingbirds** were at Lagoon Park 3 Oct (PH), Port Royal GC 12 Oct, St. Georges GC 24 Oct, Spittal Pond 29 Nov (AD) and two 12 Dec (TW). A **Blue-headed Vireo** was at North Pond 14 Oct (AD). A **Warbling Vireo** was at Fort Scaur 2 Oct (DW). A **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** was at Lagoon Park 16 Dec (DW). A **Grey-checked Thrush** was at Springfield 23-25 Oct (WF, PH) and Talbot Estate 31 Oct (AD). A **Hermit Thrush** was at Lagoon Park 16 Dec (DW). A **Wood Thrush** was in a Jenningsland garden 24 Dec (JM). Single **Golden-winged Warblers** were at the Arboretum 5-6 Oct and Heydon Trust 25 Oct (AD, DW). A **Cerulean Warbler** was near the East End Dairy 2 Oct (PW). A **Kentucky Warbler** was at Cemetery Hill 19 Sep (PW). A **Chipping Sparrow** was at St. Georges GC 24 Oct and three at Port Royal GC 16 Nov (DW). **Clay-coloured Sparrows** were reported from Heydon Trust 25-26 Oct (AD) and Wreck Road 11 Nov (WF). A small flock of **Savannah Sparrows** (5) was at Port Royal 16 Dec (DW). A **Grasshopper Sparrow** was on the Airport fence 21 Nov (AD). A **White-throated Sparrow** was reported from Wreck Road 11 Nov (WF). A **Snow Bunting** was on the Castle Harbour Islands 8 Nov-24 Dec (JM). Single **Dickcissels** were at Tudor Farm 17 Sep (DW), Lukes Farm and Riddles Bay GC 16 Dec (DW). A **Pine Siskin** was a good find at Cooper's Point 14 Nov (PW).

Observers: Eric Amos, Gerry Ardis, Peter Adhemar, Andrew and Sonia Cox, Andrew Dobson, Wendy Frith, Peter Hopkins, Jeremy Madeiros, Ron Porter, Susan Roberts, Keith Rossiter, Tim White, David Wallace (DW), Paul Watson, David Wingate (DBW).

Seymour's Pond Revisited

David Wingate

Seymour's Pond was the very first nature reserve established by the Bermuda Audubon Society following its incorporation in 1960 to hold land in trust as nature reserves. It was also the first nature reserve to be acquired by means of a public fund raising drive in 1963.

Strategically located alongside the main road at Barnes' Corner near the junction with South Road it is in a highly visible rural area for all passing motor traffic. The reserve features a pond backed by a densely wooded hillside and is flanked by farmland and more woodland to the west. Happily, that additional open space was acquired from the Wadson estate by the Government as a park a few years ago so that the entire triangle between Middle and South Road as well as the waterfront on Little Sound is now one big open space park area. In addition, the Society was gifted a small strip of land on the roadside originally part of the Clarence Masters estate in 1990, enabling it to undertake comprehensive restoration and management of a pond once divided into three private properties.

There are several reasons why restoration and better management of the pond was required. Firstly, it was impacted by garbage dumping back in the days when filling of the marshes was an accepted practice for garbage disposal and mosquito control, but happily only part of the pond was filled before the introduction of the top-minnow, *Gambusia Holbrookii*, in 1928 solved most marsh mosquito problems by biological control. For several decades up until the 1990s there was a Health Department crew which maintained the edge of the pond to prevent in-growth of rank grass that clogged the open water but this practice has since been discontinued. Three other factors have further compromised the ponds effectiveness as a nature reserve. The first is encroachment of invasive Brazil pepper bushes around the grassy edge of the pond reducing its effective size for waterfowl. The second is increased chemical contamination and pollution, both from road runoff that drains into the pond and from pesticides and herbicides used on the adjacent farmland. Dr. Jamie Bacon and her research colleagues have been studying this problem extensively and it has been widely publicized in connection with deformities recorded in the toad population. Seymour's Pond is one of the worst effected ponds. Thirdly, the gradual but accelerating rise in sea level in association with global warming has already drowned part of the former farmland on the pond edge, aggravating the chemical pollution problems and forcing a re-design of the boundary between fields and pond.

Back in 2000 the Society submitted an application to Planning intended to address all these problems and enhance the wetland and woodland areas of the reserve to a higher standard of management for conservation purposes. The application called for re-instatement of the part of the pond originally filled in, leaving an islet for nesting waterfowl near its NE end and removal of most of the encroaching Brazil pepper and sheathed paspalum grass mats that were in-filling the pond edges and reducing the open water area. All excavated material was to be used to re-contour the pond edge and back-fill an old stone quarry hidden in the forest on the hillside behind. Our proposal received planning approval at the time, but funding and other factors prevented its execution before the Planning approval lapsed.

We are now in the process of applying again, but additional bureaucratic constraints and new regulations have made the process far more drawn out and costly. Pending renewed planning approval and sufficient funding to hire a contractor we hope to initiate this project next year. Inevitably there will be some untidiness associated with heavy construction machinery during the course of the work but we are confident that the end result will be a great improvement, both for the wildlife and the view from the main road.

Society News

Andrew Dobson



Cahow t-shirts

The Society has been at the City Market during Saturdays in December, selling bluebird nest box kits and Cahow t-shirts. Sales have been good and a special word of thanks goes to those who have manned the stall. T-shirts are still available – so please consider buying one and supporting the Society.

You can place orders for Cahow t-shirts or Bluebird box kits by emailing Karen Border on borders@logic.bm.

Your order will be packaged for collection from the reception desk at the Bermuda National Trust's headquarters, Waterville, off Pomander Gate Road. You will receive an email telling you when it is ready for collection. Please have your payment ready in a sealed envelope marked "Karen Border, Audubon", along with your name, address and phone number. You can hand this in at Waterville reception when you collect your package. This arrangement is in the spirit of collaboration with the kindness of the Bermuda National Trust. Please follow these instructions carefully.

Adult sizes: Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large and 2XL.

Child sizes: Youth Large and Youth XL – Youth Large will fit children from about 8 years old. Price: \$15 each, or two for \$25.

Longtails benefit from XL "Day of Giving"



Coating styrofoam longtail igloos with SKB fibrebond is a messy job, but somebody has to do it. A group of eight staff from XL volunteered to get the task done during their annual "Day of Giving" in June. Under the supervision of David Wingate and Karen Border, they painted 30 igloos with the coating, which makes them tough and waterproof, ready for installation. The XL staff also helped to complete installation of an igloo on shore of Harrington Sound, at the Aquarium, and were able to view a longtail chick in a previously installed igloo at the same site. Thanks also go to Jeremy Madeiros for getting all the materials and equipment for the job, and the

Department of Conservation Services for allowing us to use the grounds at Shorelands.

These artificial nests have been shown to be readily acceptable replacements for natural cliff holes lost to erosion or habitat destruction. Over 300 longtail igloos have been installed in Bermuda in the last decade and the vast majority are rapidly occupied by nesting pairs. Igloos cost \$75 and can be ordered by emailing info@audubon.bm, or calling 238-8628. Advice on siting and correct installation is included in the price.

Dollars for Hours



PartnerRe once again ran its Dollars for Hours programme, linking schools to local charities. In return for a generous \$30,000 donation to each school, the students were involved in a project with the charity. CedarBridge Academy was partnered with the Bermuda Audubon Society and we were fortunate enough to have many bluebird nest boxes made for the nest breeding season. Our thanks go to the staff and students of CedarBridge who made this possible.

BNTB staff plant 75 trees at Vesey Reserve



Over 30 Bank of Butterfield staff turned out for a volunteer work day at Buy Back Bermuda's new Vesey Nature Reserve in Southampton on 24 October, 2009. They planted around 75 native and endemic trees on an area cleared of invasive species by a Bank of Bermuda work party the previous autumn. Trees planted included palmettos, cedars, hackberry, foresteira, Jamaica dogwood, white stopper, snowberry and mulberry. In addition, some wax myrtles contributed by Richard Amos were planted near the brackish pond.

The 7.5 acre Vesey Reserve was acquired by Buy Back Bermuda (a joint initiative between Bermuda Audubon Society and Bermuda National Trust) in 2008. It extends over the ridgeline of Skroggins Hill to the shoreline of the Little Sound, and borders Evans Bay Nature Reserve. The property is currently being restored as a nature reserve and will not be open to the public until 2010.

The BBB committee is also most grateful to the 'Round the Sound' swim committee who have donated the money from this year's event to Buy Back Bermuda.

Other events

This has been a very busy couple of months for the Society. November was deemed 'Cahow Month' to tie in with the 400th anniversary celebrations. As well as launching the T-shirt, a fieldtrip was held to Cooper's Point where everyone had views of Cahows arcing over the ocean in the late afternoon. Jeremy Madeiros delivered a Cahow lecture bringing us all up to date on the recovery programme. Just for good measure, there was also a working party clearing invasives and mowing the trails through the Alfred Blackburn Smith nature reserve.

We are sorry to have lost our Treasurer, Judith Swain, who is travelling around the world with her husband. Our thanks to her for doing a fine job, and also to Lyn Llewellyn who has stepped into the breach.

Tackling the Problem of Feral Animals

Jonathan Nisbett

The Bermuda Audubon Society is very concerned about the increasing problem of feral animals. It has held discussions with Government officials and other concerned groups, including BFAB. The following article comes from the latest issue of *Envirotalk* (Vol. 77 No. 4), written by Veterinary Officer Jonathan Nisbett.

What's a feral animal?

Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, defines a feral organism as one that has "*escaped from domestication and returned, partly or wholly, to a wild state. The introduction of feral animals or plants to their non-native regions...can disrupt ecosystems and may, in some cases, contribute to extinction of indigenous species.*" While disruption of ecosystems and extinction of species are very important, there are also major economic and potential communicable disease components to Bermuda's feral populations.

Bermuda's feral animals

Chickens, pigeons, ducks, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, and red-eared sliders are some of the feral species found throughout the parks, open lands, woodlands, farms, golf courses, ponds, urban and residential areas of Bermuda. One theory states that the feral chicken and pigeon populations began as a result of coops being destroyed and birds being released during major hurricanes. While the theory can be debated, it is clear that the cats, guinea pigs, rabbits and slider populations did not begin through a similar act of God. No matter what theory is proposed or opinion held, the root cause behind these feral populations has always come down to a single entity: the human. In some cases, people willingly contribute to the feral animal population because they have distaste for euthanasia of an unwanted pet. "After all," they think, "what's the harm in one more cat, chicken, rabbit, guinea pig?" as they release the animal into one of Bermuda's parks, open spaces or nature reserves. Spittal Pond, Devonshire Marsh, Paget Marsh, Clearwater Park, and Warwick Long Bay Park are just a few of the areas that commonly receive unwanted pets, dumped and abandoned to fend for themselves. A distaste for euthanasia is an understandable motivation, but the resultant actions have brought undesirable consequences.

What sustains these feral animals?

That which sustains the chickens, cats, etc. is the same that sustains any population: Energy; energy derived from food. Dishes of commercial animal feeds, loaves of old bread broken into convenient-sized pieces, left-over bits of meals and snacks are examples of human-supplied foods that are sufficient to produce and sustain rather healthy looking populations of chickens and cats. The energy in these diets is sufficient not only to sustain the existing individuals, but also allow the populations to reproduce; and, in the case of chickens, to reproduce at an unchecked rate. The comic, observed irony is that cats are commonly seen waiting for the chickens to finish eating before moving in themselves. The relative to the 'king of the jungle' is not king at the feeding station. The cats have learned that they need not work to kill a chicken for food, but just wait and humans will supply all of their nutritional needs... and the needs of their young too! In addition to the intentional feeding, there is the unintentional feeding. Trash in paper bags, plastic bags, open containers or no container at all makes for an easy food source for feral animals.

Is there a feral animal problem?

Well, there's a question that may or may not have crossed your mind. Have you tried to picnic at Clearwater Park recently? Have you visited the Botanical Gardens, Warwick Long Bay Park, the Hamilton Bus Terminal or driven by an agricultural field lately? Besides who, what greeted you as you left the airport arrivals area? We do have a problem, and the impacts of our feral animals are diverse and costly.

Impacts

Crop loss

Chickens are a common sight in an agricultural field. Beyond eating seed, the chickens will peck at the growing crop. The bird will not eat the entire crop, but simply damage it enough to render the crop unsaleable. In November this year, one farmer working a field in St. David's, reported the loss of a field of broccoli. The loss translated to a loss of \$25,000 per acre. That was one farmer, one field, one crop, one harvest. Extrapolate that loss to fields throughout Bermuda, 2-3 harvests per year and the broad variety of fruits and vegetables. A conservative estimate of crop losses easily exceeds \$500,000 annually. Who pays? One way or the other, you pay! Either the farmer passes that loss onto the consumer or the farmer absorbs the loss, making the industry less sustainable. Either way, you lose.

Soiling of parks - Disease concerns

Our recreational spaces contain faecal droppings from the large number of feral animals. Whether on grass or in sandy play areas, the faecal matter represent a potential source for bacteria, viruses or parasites and

thus a significant health hazard to users of the parks, especially to the young and those with compromised immune systems. Although no longer in the news, avian influenza remains a concern, as well as other bacteria and viruses that could reside within the feral avian or feline populations. These populations will not receive veterinary care as would your domestic animal. While Bermudians don't have the close contact with chickens as was seen in Asia during the Avian Influenza outbreak, our feral chickens are becoming more brazen and due to feeders, are having increased human contact. Also our indoor/outdoor pet cats will interact with feral cats, and potentially carry disease-causing organisms back home.

Aviation Safety

Bermuda has not seen large populations of Canada Geese such as that which brought down US Airways flight 1549 into the Hudson River. Nonetheless, the persons responsible for the safe operation of the L.F. Wade International Airport have reported an increased number of bird strikes this year. Birds of all sizes, especially in large number, are a clear threat to aviation. The number of strikes must be reported to international airport authorities, and so this cannot be Bermuda's closet secret. The night heron seems to be the main bird when it comes to bird strikes at L.F. Wade Airport. Nesting sites seem to be about the airport area. There is evidence that food left for the chickens and cats is also being taken by herons, thus contributing to their existence and reproduction. While we have had no reports of planes encountering chickens, until recently, chickens were invading the aircraft parking area, and had no further barriers to the taxiways and runway. The chickens have been reduced, nearly eliminated.

Personal injury

There has been an incident of personal injury from a chicken. Circumstances suggest that the bird felt that its clutch of young was being threatened by the little boy. Whether or not the young boy was at fault, these types of interactions will continue as the populations of feral animals grow.

Sleep disruption

The crowing of roosters can be heard throughout the Island around daybreak. However, not all of the roosters have their clocks set correctly, and disruptive crowing can occur during late night and wee hours of the morning. Repetitive sleep disruption adversely affects your mood, your home life, work life and your overall health and well-being.

Susceptible species

An observation by one of Bermuda's professional nature photographers suggests that there has been a reduction in the Island's monarch butterfly population in the Clearwater area. This reduction is suspected to be a result of the increasing number of chickens eating caterpillars. Similarly, pigeons invade the nesting sites of longtails to the detriment of the latter species. These are examples of an indigenous species suffering the impact of an introduced, artificially sustained species.

No importation of exotic species

In terms of importation of exotic species of animals as personal pets, the Government is often seen as overly conservative, even repressive. The stance of Government against the importation of exotic species by individuals is a direct result of the fact that people release unwanted pets into the wild. The detrimental consequences of such releases are clearly seen in Bermuda and around the world.

Forward Plans

In 2006, the Department of Environmental Protection examined the costs and resources needed to tackle feral chickens island-wide. The cost is very high, and in the current economic climate, is economically unfeasible. However, the Department of Environmental Protection is spearheading a less-expensive, cross-Ministry initiative in a coordinated programme. The initiative is a multipronged approach and began with eliminating chickens from the Airport arrival area and adjacent parking and dump areas. While there has been success at the airport, the job is not yet complete. At Clearwater, our efforts are encountering very real obstacles. On many occasions, people sympathetic to the chickens, have freed the birds from the traps, overturned and damaged traps. Alternate modes of operation have been planned in collaboration with non-government organizations. Other strategies have been considered, and are not limited to public education and legislative initiatives. Signage has already been posted asking people not to feed feral animals. Initiatives involving the mass media are also on tap. An aspect of new Parks legislation will bring legally enforceable measures into place. Spay/neuter legislation for cats is under consideration, and the Department is working with farmers to help protect fields from the destructive birds. The Bermuda Feline Assistance Bureau (BFAB) has agreed to remove cats and the feeding station from the airport grounds. While BFAB is sympathetic to cats, BFAB is also sensitive to the impact of unfettered feeding. It has already moved to control its feeding and made statements condemning the feeding of cats in environmentally sensitive areas, like nature reserves.