



Bermuda Audubon Society
NEWSLETTER

Spring
1999

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Long-term Research on Bermuda's Fossil Avifauna Finally Coming to Fruition

From the late 1950s through the '70s, I conducted extensive searches for fossil bird bones in Bermuda's caves, and other sites, with the goal of describing Bermuda's pre-colonial avifauna in greater detail. While most of the bones were found as loose deposits of recent (Holocene) origin on the floors of caves and represented species like the Cahow, Audubon's Shearwater and small owl, which were reported by the first settlers, a few older deposits exposed by blasting in the government quarry in 1960, hinted at a much more diverse avifauna in the early Pleistocene, including a flightless crane, a flightless duck and several species of marsh birds in the rail family.

Of particular interest in the government quarry was a beach rock deposit extending to seventy feet above present day sea-level. A similar aged beach rock on the Castle Harbour Islands contained the bones of adult and nestling short-tailed albatross, confirming that the species once nested in Bermuda, even though albatrosses were not previously known in the North Atlantic later than the Pliocene.

Concurrent geological research on the age of Bermuda's carbonate rocks and their deposition in relation to the sea-level fluctuations of the Ice Age (which is being carried out by Hearty, Vacher, Pascal and other geologists worldwide), has revealed that this high seastand occurred at the end of the interglacial period known in Bermuda as the 'Upper Town Hill Formation'. The recent get-together of Storrs Olson, from the Smithsonian (who is describing the pre-colonial avifauna in collaboration with me), and geologist Paul T. Hearty, who has been documenting evidence for the same seventy-foot high inter-glacial seastand in the Bahamas, brings our work to the final stage of correlating the geology with the different ages of the bird bone deposits. Sophisticated dating techniques now confirm that the high seastand occurred 400,000 years ago, plus or minus 30,000. It is our conclusion that this drowning of most of Bermuda at that time was the main cause of extinction for the more diverse early Pleistocene avifauna.

David B. Wingate

President's Message

Spring is here, and with the mild winter we had for much of the time, some argue that it has been here a while. Bluebirds are investigating boxes and reports of Longtails came in just after Christmas - like the whales, they were early this year.

It is time for you to start dusting out your bluebird box or to purchase a new one. The Audubon Society is making arrangements for the building of additional boxes and they will be available for sale from the National Trust shop on Queen Street.

Switching topics, let me comment on a topic near and dear to all of us 'bird watchers'. Trees are an essential part of the everyday life of humans as well as birds on this island home of ours. The cedar is unquestionably the most well loved - by man and bird (the berries are delicious and it is the birds that are responsible for all those 'wild cedars' that are springing up everywhere). However, we cannot leave it to the birds alone, they are not good at landscaping!

A personal goal of mine is to have a minimum of one cedar on every piece of property in Bermuda. If you don't have one planted in your garden, plant one this week! Give one to your neighbour as a present. Let's make 1999 the 'plant a cedar year'! You will like it, so will the birds.

David J. Saul

Bluebird Support

Two years ago I undertook the challenge to resurrect the Bluebird campaign which had floundered after "Mr. Bluebird" Tommy Outerbridge moved to England. The first step was to recognize the important areas for Bluebird nesting and then to consolidate the boxes already in place. Most of the main golf courses had numerous bluebird boxes but lacked the regular monitoring necessary during the season. Southampton Princess have a system in place, Port Royal have 37 boxes, Mid Ocean boasted 40 boxes, Belmont 6 boxes, Riddell's Bay 10 boxes and Ocean View 6 boxes. Monitoring programmes were set up at each golf course but there always seems to be a need for more diligent monitoring. Special mention should go to the Port Royal and Mid Ocean Golf Clubs who last year reported over 100 fledglings. Government House's 10 boxes didn't fair so well but the south side with 26 boxes shows promise.

This season it is my hope to recruit some Audubon Members to help monitor the golf courses and their local parish trails. As to private bluebird boxes - it seems to be "politically correct" to have a bluebird box in one's yard but the constant monitoring of the box during the season, which is often forgotten, is of paramount importance (to rid the box of mites and the aggressive house sparrow). I would like to propose a registration of all bluebird boxes - island wide, so we can collect statistics and get more public participation.

Many people have attempted to design a sparrow proof box with little success and this will obviously be one of my ongoing endeavours. Let us not forget that we could also provide the bluebird with natural nesting sites by planting lots of cedar trees. If you are interested in monitoring a bluebird trail, building and erecting bluebird boxes or growing cedars please give me a call at home 238-1868 and leave a message.

Stuart M. Smith

Paget Marsh Project Update

Audubon's contribution to the Paget Marsh interpretive boardwalk project is now completed and paid for. Despite rain delays which prevented the trackhoe from returning to the site to complete the grading of the berm until 13-14 November (the same weekend we had hoped to begin some tidy up work with volunteers), we finally completed the grass seeding of the berm and the grading of the farm road and small parking area by early December. Because it was achieved slightly under the agreed contract price with Island Construction, they decided to make a \$5000 contribution back to the society as a donation! At the same time, Works & Engineering contracted with Island Construction to excavate a long soak-away trench between Middle Road and the Paget Marsh farm fields to solve a chronic road drainage problem which was eroding the farmer's fields and depositing runoff into the marsh.

In early January, the family of Daveed Ben Israel (born David Dyer), who died tragically of liver failure at the height of a promising new career in agriculture and conservation restoration work in Africa last September, approached David Wingate with a request for an appropriate site for a memorial tree planting in Daveed's memory. As Daveed had begun his career as a horticultural apprentice and nurseryman in Bermuda, we were delighted to initiate our tree planting on the new reserve in this way. During the weekend of 16-17 January, Audubon volunteers joined members of the Forster and Dyer families in planting a dozen Bermuda palmettos and four scale-resistant Bermuda cedars. Additional planting of southern hackberry and wax-myrtle will be carried out in March. What a beautiful setting the pond presents now that the ryegrass cover has established! Use of the pond by water birds has been extraordinary with more than twenty individuals of several species, including hooded merganser, wood duck and ring-necked duck during November!

The start of boardwalk construction by the Trust has been delayed considerably because the timber ordered has not yet arrived. However, progress on the design and preparation of interpretive signs with Wilderness Graphics has been excellent.

David B. Wingate

Stop Press!

Proposal for a new pond on the Donald French Estate, "Windswept Farm", Southampton, received approval by Planning Department. David Wingate acted as agent for Randy French in designing the pond in response to a chronic flooding and mosquito breeding problem in a large low-lying agricultural field at Frank's Bay. The proposal received the backing of the Health Department Pest Control Division, and the Department of Agriculture & Fisheries, on the basis that rising sea-levels have made this field obsolete for farm use. The new pond will be larger than the Audubon Society's neighbouring Seymour Pond reserve!

Winter Birds 98/99

The winter period (Dec - Feb) is not usually a time of migration. Birds which have arrived here in the Fall migration may well have stayed. Nevertheless, there have been some interesting sightings, perhaps explained by the very warm January when temperatures often reached the high 70's, and a cool February with several days recording minimums in the 40's, not to mention gale force winds.

Shearwaters to Herons:

The first shearwaters to be noted migrating eastwards were seen off Warwick Long Bay on 14th February. **Manx Shearwaters** were passing at about 30 per hour, and two **Cory's Shearwaters** were also seen, the earliest date that this species has been recorded. **White-tailed Tropicbirds** (Longtails) were reported as early as January, but not commonly seen until late February. **Northern Gannet** is an extremely rare visitor from the north, but the one in Castle Harbour on 13th February and present until the end of the month was the first adult ever to be recorded in Bermuda. **Magnificent Frigatebird**, an equally rare visitor from the south, glided majestically over the island on 10th January. Interesting nesting behaviour was taking place between **Great Blue Herons** on an island in the Great Sound. The species has yet to breed in Bermuda, but may well do so in the future.

Wildfowl to Gulls:

With the explosion of Snow Goose numbers in North America, it is no surprise that six **Snow Geese** wintered in Bermuda, including a flock of five at Port Royal Golf Course. Amongst fourteen duck species recorded this winter, **Blue-winged Teal** were the most common (50 were counted on the CBC), whilst a **Common Goldeneye** first seen on Spittal Pond on 6th February, was probably the rarest. Of the birds of prey, a **Peregrine Falcon** in the East End became a most unusual winter resident, still present at the end of February. Unusual wintering shorebirds included single **Greater Yellowlegs** and **American Golden-Plover** amongst the large flock of **Killdeer** and **Black-bellied Plovers** at the Airport. A **Piping Plover** was often seen at Grape Bay or Ariel Sands. An exciting find on 2 Dec was an **American Woodcock**, one of the rarest shorebirds to visit Bermuda. Although found dead on the Railway Trail in Paget, it was in such good condition that it now provides BAMZ was its first specimen for this species. Seven **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** in the West End on 5th February was a new high count for that species. Two **Glaucous Gulls** were much admired in February. This huge all white gull was first seen in early February, but on 15th February the existence of two gulls was confirmed. A **Black-legged Kittiwake** was present in the area of the Great Sound from 2nd to 5th January.

Vireos to Buntings:

A **Red-eyed Vireo** was a most usual find on 31st December on Paget Island. Horned Larks (2) were still present at Dockyard in early January. A flock of at least 13 **American Pipits** spent much of the winter period at the Airport. About twenty species of wood warbler have been recorded this winter, including a **Tennessee Warbler** in Jenningsland. Few migrant sparrows appear to have over-wintered, but there were 15 **Savannah Sparrows** at

Winter Birds (cont.)

the Airport on 26th December. A **Lapland Bunting** on Nonsuch Island 2nd to 5th December was a first for Nonsuch, while others were seen at Dockyard and Ferry Point Park. Up to thirty **Snow Buntings** wintered, with the majority being seen at the Airport.

It wasn't only Longtails which appeared early this year. Mention must be made of **Humpback Whale** of which several were reported in January. One just off South Shore in Warwick was the subject of media attention, having been released from ropes wrapped around its fin and body. Audubon member Paul Watson, involved in its release, described the nylon 9-ply rope as being about 50-60 ft long with floats and markers, exactly the type attached to lobster traps. Further humpbacks were seen off Nonsuch on 24th and 27th January. A **Leatherback Turtle** was found stranded in Somerset. An uncommon visitor to our waters, especially in winter, it was taken to BAMZ but died in captivity.

Andrew le F. Dobson

The Christmas Bird Count

This winter's CBC took place on 2nd January 1999. The recording area of Bermuda was divided up into six sections, with ten Audubon Society members doing their best to record every bird seen. On a day with temperatures reaching a high of 69 degrees and winds between 10-15 knots from the NNE, birds showed themselves in good numbers. 7,437 individual birds of 99 species were recorded, and although no new species were added to the all time list, there were a number of good sightings.

Eric Amos was lucky enough to watch a Sharp-shinned Hawk in aerial combat with a Merlin and two American Kestrels over the Talbot Estate. In fact Merlins (11) were seen in record numbers. Jeremy Madeiros observed all the Cedar Waxwings (87) another high count for the CBC. Twenty species of wood warblers were seen, of which Ovenbirds broke the hundred mark and there were record counts of Northern Parula (35) and Magnolia Warbler (6).

Perhaps the best locations on the day were Spittal Pond and the Airport. At Spittal, I was lucky enough to record almost 40 species by 9 o'clock, including an American Bittern and White Ibis. David Wingate and Joe Furbert's list at the Airport included a CBC record count of Whimbrel (14), nearly 200 Killdeer, American Pipits (13) and Snow Buntings (24).

A Red-eyed Vireo, seen by Paul Watson on Paget Island a couple of days earlier, could not be located on count day, but it was the first time this species has been recorded during count week.

Our results are sent to the National Audubon Society and added to those received from counts throughout the Americas. The first count was held nearly 100 years ago, and the results help to identify population trends of bird species in different regions.

Andrew le F. Dobson

Paget Marsh - Finances

Can I ask all members and friends to consider making a special donation this year to the Audubon Society in order that we can replenish our finances. We have just made our last payment on the Paget Marsh restoration project which has resulted in a gift to the people of Bermuda (and to its resident and migratory bird population) of a beautiful, landscaped pond. When the National Trust boardwalk is complete, it will be a 'must' for a Sunday afternoon or evening walk. However, the \$52,000 price tag has seriously depleted our cash reserves. That payment alone consumed over 60% of our total funds! It is vitally important that we replenish these cash reserves because we use these monies to maintain our current properties and to purchase and restore other bird sanctuaries and resting sites around the island.

Please can I ask you to mail your donations to:

The Bermuda Audubon Society

P.O. Box HM 1328

Hamilton HM FX

Thank you, David J. Saul

Did You Know?

Did you know that the Bermuda Audubon Society was incorporated in 1960 by a special Act of Parliament (nine years before the National Trust Act was passed)! With the objective of protecting Bermuda's natural heritage, the Audubon Society maintains eleven nature reserves spread from Somerset to St. George's. Our nature reserves cover over forty acres in total.

Cahow Finally Makes It To The UK

During a conversation with Dr. Nigel Collar at BirdLife International last summer in Cambridge, England – he suggested that the British Natural History Museum, with one of the largest collections of bird specimens in the world, really ought to have a Cahow specimen. With the full support of David Wingate, arrangements were made to transport a specimen from the BAMZ collection – in fact an advanced fledgling (very similar in appearance to an adult) that had a deformed wing and had to be euthanised (a 1998 bird) - still lying in the deep freeze.

Audubon member George Peterich was able to personally deliver the Cahow during a visit to London on 20th January. Regarding the specimen, the museum will almost certainly make a skin out of it, but would also take tissue samples to store for DNA analysis and retain all other body parts in their spirit and/or skeleton collections.

Andrew le F. Dobson

**Bermuda Audubon Society
Committee 1998/99**

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HOTLINE

235-5513

or

297-2623

Bird News

Society Business

Environmental Concerns

Membership Renewal/Application

(see address label for expiry date)

Name.....Tel.No.....

Address.....

Adult.....\$10.00

New Member

Student.....\$ 5.00

Renewal

Donation.....\$.....

Please return to Bermuda Audubon Society

P.O.Box HM 1328, Hamilton HM FX

If undelivered please return to:

Bermuda Audubon Society
P O Box HM 1328
Hamilton HMFx



Future Events

Sunday 21 March Field Trip. Seymour's Pond, French's Pond and High Point. Meet 2.00 pm Barnes Corner. Park on grass verge. This walk provides an opportunity for members to view the new Barnes Corner government park and the proposed pond at Windswept Farm.

Saturday 27 March Fundraiser for Bluebird and Longtail Homes Sale of plants, seedlings, baked goods, handicrafts, 'gently' used toys, small gifts, household items and of course, Bluebird Boxes. 9.00 am onwards. Location - Junior Hill's J & J produce stand. (opp. Ariel Sands) Any contributions welcome EARLY on the day, or call Helge at 297 2623