



**Bermuda Audubon Society**  
**NEWSLETTER**

**Summer/Fall**  
**1999**

**P O Box HM 1328, Hamilton HM FX Vol.10 No.2**

### **Helium Balloon Insanity**

Helium balloons are a fad, and so obviously bad for the environment. It seems that these days everyone has to have them for birthday parties, public holidays or other special events, with the result that on a global scale helium balloon releases now number in the tens of millions annually and have become a major contributor to the world pollution.

So why then is it so insane? It is insane because by any legal definition the deliberate release of lighter than air balloons which have no hope or intention of being retrieved, is LITTERING, and littering is illegal under the law because society doesn't like having to clean up other people's trash. Yet, society is not only permitting this, it is actually promoting it through advertising. Adding to the insanity is the fact that we now have irrefutable and widely publicized evidence that balloons can be deadly to wildlife, both on land and in the ocean. Sea turtles and cetaceans are especially vulnerable, and this additional problem only adds to the myriad of man caused problems already affecting these species, perhaps tipping the scale towards their extinction.

Why should any logical thinking person wish to impose a litter problem on their neighbour - or on themselves for that matter - and why should they wish to deliberately create a hazard for wildlife, all for a momentary vicarious thrill? The solution is so incredibly simple! Show your intelligence! Defy the fad! Just don't use helium! Use ordinary air-filled balloons which can be retrieved or, better yet, find some other alternative to celebrate with. Bermuda could even lead the world and go one step further. After all, we were the first to pass protective legislation for sea turtles in 1620. Why can't we now pass legislation to ban the use of lighter than air gases in balloons? Sadly, this may be the only way to control the behaviour of those who aren't yet aware or just don't care. Contact your M.P. and express your concern. The Audubon Society has already met with the Environment Minister.

At the time of writing - some great news. The Corporation of St. George's has banned the launch of helium filled balloons within its town limits.

## Two New Honorary Life Members Elected at AGM    David B. Wingate

Andrew Madeiros, the veterinary surgeon of Ettrick Animal Hospital, and Gertrude Gierlinger, who also works at Ettrick, were both honoured for their outstanding efforts on behalf of injured birds in Bermuda. Andrew is one of the first local vets who has taken a special interest in wild bird care - a service that is needed for migrants, in particular, because of the extraordinarily high level of injuries from road traffic, utility wires and cats. Additionally, many migratory birds arrive exhausted and emaciated and need long periods of rehabilitation. The high success rate at Ettrick is due in large part to the dedicated after-care provided by Gertrude at her own home after regular working hours. We would like to share two examples of her successful rehabilitation which have evolved into long-term sagas of dynastic proportions on Nonsuch Island.

"Sparky", a fledgling female cardinal, was retrieved, badly injured, from a cat in July, 1989. In the month that it took to rehabilitate her, she became so tame and trusting that there was little hope of her survival on mainland Bermuda. Indeed, a trial release immediately got her back into trouble with a cat! At Gertrude's request, she was offered sanctuary on the Nonsuch Island Nature Reserve, where cats and rats are absent. There, she was gradually weaned back into the wild, though still readily landing on the hands or head of any visitor to the island. Nonsuch had only one lonesome male cardinal at that time, so, not surprisingly, the two got together and fledged two broods of offspring the next summer. I had hoped her offspring might come to hand as well but, sensibly, she taught them to keep a little distance from humans and withdrew a little herself.

The next summer, Sparky nearly died when she became sick or egg-bound in late spring. She permitted us to feed her by hand again during the ten days that she sat dozing in a bush above a water dish, unable to fly. But she recovered and went on to rear more broods with her mate over the next two years, even though these were inevitably driven off the island to neighbouring Cooper's Island at the end of each season. Apparently Nonsuch was only able to support one family of cardinals at that time. Sparky's mate died either of old age or predation in the winter of 1992-3. For three months she moped, but then began to sing like a male! That same spring I learned of a male cardinal that had been hit by a car and was recovering from an aneurism in the Aquarium Zoo. Hoping that it might recover and replace Sparky's lost mate, I released it on Nonsuch on 29 March 1993. Within a day Sparky was feeding the male sunflower seeds and they have been (happily?) married ever since, rearing two or three broods per season with the aid of sunflower seed handouts. However, I must record that the ungrateful male is much bossier than the previous one and only allows her second pickings at the feeding tray! Sparky is now ten years old and still going strong although she and her mate have conceded much of their Nonsuch territory to two other pairs of cardinals.

Last year I released another cat-injured orphan male, "Paget", into the population of Nonsuch. This one was also reared by Gertrude and completely tame like Sparky. The curious thing is that he seems to have an affinity for Sparky as if recognising a common background through their surrogate mother. A year later Paget is still living in Sparky's territory, even though he is harassed mercilessly by her mate. But better days may come and perhaps he is destined to lead the Nonsuch cardinal dynasty in the future.

Dear Audubon

As a relatively new member, I would just like to take this opportunity to thank you all for helping to make my first year in the Bermuda Audubon Society an enjoyable and educational one. I am looking forward to this year's birding camp and other events.

Last month, I had the opportunity to travel to the Dominican Republic with David Wingate to attend the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Society of Caribbean Ornithologists. The meeting was held from July 30<sup>th</sup> – August 4<sup>th</sup> at the Ambassador Hotel in Santo Domingo. It was a great opportunity to meet other naturalists and birders from all over the Caribbean and to discuss many of the conservation efforts that they were involved with in their countries. There were some 55 presentations given which ranged in topics from educating school children about the West Indian Whistling Duck, to discussions on the proposed rocket-launching site on Sombrero Island. David gave presentations on the Cahow restoration project and the White-Tailed Tropicbird igloo nests. The highlight for me was a hike through the Ebano Verde Constanza-Montane Forest Reserve, where I sighted some 20 species of birds. My best sighting was a pair of endangered Hispaniolan Trogons.

Yours sincerely, Joe Furbert

**URGENT** - over 1,200 birds are now globally threatened - and you have a unique opportunity to help save birds from extinction. BirdLife International is to publish '**Threatened Birds of the World**' a book containing all the up to date information on the status, threats and potential conservation measures for every threatened species. BirdLife International is looking for individuals (\$165), non-profit making organisations (\$430) and commercial companies (\$1,700) to sponsor a species. Sponsors names and logos will appear on the page of their chosen bird. Funds raised will be used to distribute the book as widely as possible. For more information, please contact: Naomi Hawkins, BirdLife International, Wellbrook Court, Girton Road, Cambridge, CB3 0NA, email: [naomi.hawkins@birdlife.org.uk](mailto:naomi.hawkins@birdlife.org.uk)

Just published! **Handbook of the Birds of the World, Volume 5** (from Barn Owls to Hummingbirds). This is an ongoing donation from Audubon to the BAMZ library. The new volume is on its way and should arrive very soon. Please give Penny Hill a call at 293-2727 if you would like to see it.

**World Birdwatch 1999** will take place during October. The Audubon Society will be taking part in this 5<sup>th</sup> World Bird Count sponsored by BirdLife International an NNT-ME (Japanese Telecommunications Company). Please let us know if you see any unusual birds that we can add to the list.

## Cahow Report 1999

by David B. Wingate

Since its rediscovery in 1951 after 350 years of presumed extinction, an endangered species recovery programme has assisted the Cahow. Initially supported by grants from the New York Zoological Society, and since 1966 as a programme of the conservation division of Agriculture and Fisheries and now the Parks Department. This programme has resulted in a slow, but accelerating increase in the population from a low of 18 nesting pairs in 1961 to 56 nesting pairs in 1999. The annual fledgling crop has likewise increased from a ten year running average of 7 fledglings per year in the 1960's to 24 fledglings per year in the 1990's. Indeed the Cahow Conservation Program is one of the most successful endangered species recovery programmes on the planet at present, and its success is beginning to receive global recognition. In May of this year the Cahow and associated Nonsuch Island "Living Museum" projects were chosen to feature as a conservation success story in an ABC Nightline programme on the otherwise gloomy topic of the biodiversity conservation crisis. That programme was broadcast last month.

The Cahow Conservation Programme consists of four major activities:

1. Close monitoring of the breeding islets to protect against human disturbance or colonisation and predation by rats or other potential predators.
2. Protection of the nest sites against nest-site competition from the "Longtail" or White-tailed Tropicbird, (which, at the time of rediscovery was preventing breeding success in two thirds of the cahow's nesting sites). This is achieved by installing a reduced-sized entrance at each nest site which takes advantage of the size differences between the two seabirds and excludes the larger longtail from entering.
3. Provision of additional nest-sites in the form of artificially constructed burrows which meet the cahow's exacting requirement for a burrow so deep and / or curved that the light cannot reach the end of it. It is these artificial burrows, constructed where they are most needed and most likely to be colonised, that have enabled the nesting population to increase on the small islands where the relic populations survived.
4. Protection and preparation of larger islands with adequate soil coverage for burrowing such as Nonsuch Island so that the expanding population can eventually colonise them safely and be in a position once again to dig their own nesting burrows as they did on the main islands of pre-settlement Bermuda.  
The living museum project on Nonsuch began in 1962 with this limited goal but has since been broadened into a holistic restoration experiment for all of Bermuda's pre-settlement flora and fauna.

Following are the highlights of the 1998-99 cahow season:

1. A total of 56 established nesting pairs (one more than last year).
2. Twenty-nine chicks successfully hatched and twenty-seven successfully fledged.
3. While the breeding success was slightly down from the previous two years (when 29 chicks were fledged), the rate of new pair formation was dramatically increased from 4 new colonizing pairs in 1998 to 7 in 1999. Considering that this rate averaged only 1 new pair per year for the first twenty years of the conservation programme, this is very significant progress. As the number of the established nesting pairs only increased by one in 1999 it is necessary to explain the difference between "established" pairs and "colonising" pairs. An established pair is defined as any pair known to have produced a first egg whether or not that egg is successful. A "colonizing pair" is one which has not yet laid a first egg. (For most colonizing pairs it takes from two to four years before they are mature enough to do so). Meanwhile over the same time period established pairs can be disrupted by senility or mortality. Thus the number of new "established pairs" is never as great as the number of "colonizing pairs". Although three colonizing pairs became established with eggs in 1999, this was balanced by the disruption of two previously established pairs.
4. Every year the fledgling crop is monitored closely during the departure period to be sure that they do not have genetic anomalies such as wing deformity and to be sure that they have enough fat reserves to fly strongly on departure. There were no genetic anomalies in 1999, but three of the fledglings were significantly underweight and had to be taken into care for supplementary feeding at the Aquarium and Zoo facility. As previous attempts to help in this was by Wingate (1972 and 1974) and Raine (1997) were successful, Jennifer Gray and Patrick Talbot were keen to accept the challenge and succeeded in making further dramatic improvements in the methodology. Although one of the chicks was too weak and died before stabilizing, the success of the other two was nothing less than phenomenal as recorded in the weight gain charts and comprehensive videotape and photographic record of their progress. After a week of feeding in each case, the recovered fledglings were put back into their original nest sites before departure. The first, returned on 22 June, came out to exercise as soon as it was dark and flew off as strongly as any fledgling I have ever watched depart. The second, put back into its burrow only eleven days later should have done the same, except for one horrible oversight that we failed to anticipate. In retrospect, we are now aware that steadily rising summer ground temperatures within the cahow burrows become lethal by the end of June (which is usually well after the normal fledgling period ends). We placed the second chick back in its burrow on the morning of 2 July, which happened to be an exceptionally hot and dead calm day. When we returned to watch it exercise at nightfall we found it dead of heat stroke – a tragic end to the season but a major new insight for the conservation programme. With global warming bringing summer conditions almost a week earlier on average, I suspect that heat stress has become a contributory cause to late season chick failures in recent years. Now that we are aware of the problem, it should be easy enough to monitor temperatures and to take action to prevent it, such as shade protection when conditions warrant it the future.

## February to May

Notable sightings during the spring season included **Northern Gannet** from 13<sup>th</sup> Feb to 6<sup>th</sup> March on the Castle Harbour Islands. It was the first ever adult in Bermuda but was unfortunately found dead. A **Brown Pelican** 21<sup>st</sup> March to 14<sup>th</sup> April was observed mainly in Harrington Sound, while a **Magnificent Frigatebird** graced South Shore from 28<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> March. A pair of **Great Blue Herons** was seen exhibiting nesting behaviour in the Hamilton Harbour Islands. This species has never been recorded as breeding in Bermuda. A 'Eurasian' **Common Teal** was at Marsh Lane on 20<sup>th</sup> April. **Swallow-tailed Kites** were seen between 20<sup>th</sup> April to 8<sup>th</sup> May, and these sightings may have involved up to 3 birds. One of the most striking shorebirds, a **Black-necked Stilt**, was at Spittal Pond on 17<sup>th</sup> May. A **Gull-billed Tern** on 8<sup>th</sup> March at Warwick Pond provided an exceptional spring record, a species that is rare in Bermuda at any time. The **Black-whiskered Vireo** found at Coral Beach Club on 30<sup>th</sup> March was the first since 1983.

## June to July

The summer is always our least interesting season for birds. Little migration is taking place, but there were some interesting birds which either over-summered or bred. A pair of **Pied-billed Grebes** nested at the society's Somerset Long Bay reserve. As well as the possible breeding of **Great Blue Heron**, a pair of **Green Herons** showed courtship behaviour at Compston's Pond on 24<sup>th</sup> July. . A **White Ibis** remained in Devonshire Marsh, **Virginia Rail** has never been recorded in the summer before, so one on 6<sup>th</sup> June roosting in buttonwood on Long Island was a very good find. A pair of **American Coots** at Spittal Pond raised two broods, the first nesting success at this pond. An **Osprey** was seen regularly at the east end of the island. Eight **Whimbrel** remained on the airfield. One **Laughing Gull** was present throughout the summer and was joined by a second from 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> June. About 20 pairs of **Common Terns** bred, similar to recent years. **American Robin** is rarely observed in the summer, so one singing regularly in Jenningsland between 17<sup>th</sup> July and 6<sup>th</sup> Aug. was quite exceptional. An **Ovenbird** in Jenningsland on 22<sup>nd</sup> June was another unseasonal record. Bermuda's Fall migration starts in July, with the passage of shorebirds. Returning warblers are seldom seen in this month, so a **Yellow Warbler** on Gibbet Island on 10<sup>th</sup> July was very early. Two or three more were seen near Ely's Harbour on 14<sup>th</sup> July.

## August to September

Good numbers of shorebirds arrived in the second week of August following the passage of a frontal trough. A **Piping Plover** (an endangered species) was on the beach at Nonsuch Island on 14<sup>th</sup> Aug. while another was at Elbow Beach on 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. **Black Tern** was first noted at Dockyard on 4<sup>th</sup> August, while another was present in Castle Harbour from 24<sup>th</sup> Aug. to at least 4<sup>th</sup> Sept. A **Sandwich Tern** was amongst a feeding frenzy of **Common Terns** off North Shore on 4<sup>th</sup> Sept. There was an influx of swallows in the third week of August, the main concentrations being found over the dairy farms. One of the most intriguing records of the Fall so far was a very early **Red-breasted Nuthatch** in Jenningsland on 4<sup>th</sup> Aug. The first reported **Common Nighthawk** had arrived by 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept. at Shelly Bay. By the first week of September, at least 20 shorebird and warbler species had been recorded, including a **Brewster's Warbler** at Dockyard on 5<sup>th</sup> Sept.

Many thanks also to Eric Amos, Penny Hill, Jeremy Madeiros, Leila Madeiros, George Peterich, Porter, Penny Soares, Paul Watson and David Wingate for their observations.

## **Riddell's Bay Golf Course Improvement Scheme - the first good example of conservation mitigation work in Bermuda**

Within Riddell's Bay Golf Course are two moderate-sized stands of mangroves, well-known to local birders as one of the best localities for finding early fall migrants. We were dismayed, therefore, when a golf course enhancement application to the Planning Department called for the re-routing of a roadway through one of these mangrove stands. All mangroves in Bermuda are protected, either by Tree Preservation Order or Nature Reserve zoning. The application was referred to the Conservation Officer for comment. After lengthy meetings on site to seek a solution, a mitigation plan was finally approved which in the long run will actually increase the area of mangroves and pond habitat on the golf course. This is being achieved by, 1) removing an old garbage dump in the middle of one of the mangrove stands and creating a shallow pond in its place, which new mangroves can gradually invade, and, 2) by excavating two additional shallow 'water-trap' ponds within the fairways. As of September, the roadway project and mangrove pond were nearly completed and the few black mangroves which were in the path of the road were experimentally transplanted. The trustees and management of the golf course deserve commendation for their willingness to go the extra mile and do the job properly. The contractors, Island Construction, Ltd., also deserve credit for the skill of their machine operators in transplanting mangroves, which might otherwise have been destroyed.

### **Bermuda Audubon Society Committee 1999/00**

President	David Wingate
Vice-president	Andrew Dobson
Treasurer	Ted Cassidy
Secretary	Penny Hill
Officers:	Richard Amos
	Steven Burgess
	Heather DeSilva
	Peter Holmes
	David O'Neill
	Stuart Smith
Newsletter	Andrew Dobson

### **Bermuda Audubon Society**

## **HOTLINE**

**235-5513**

**or**

**297-2623**

**Bird News**

**Society Business**

**Environmental Concerns**

*If undelivered please return to:*

Bermuda Audubon Society  
P O Box HM 1328  
Hamilton HMFx



### **Future Events**

**Sunday 26 Sept** Spittal Pond Field Trip. Eastern car park 8.00 am

**Friday 8 Oct -** Paget Island Birding Weekend

**Sunday 10 Oct** Boat leaves Ordnance Island 6.00 pm Cost \$40  
Reservations: Penny Hill 292-1920 (after 6 pm)

**Sunday 14 Nov** Nonsuch Field Trip. Boat leaves BBSR 1.00 pm  
Returns 4.00 pm. Possible Cahow watch also.  
Reservations: Penny Hill 292-1920 (after 6 pm)

**Wednesday 1 Dec** "An Andean Adventure" - Slide Show by  
Stuart Smith 7.30 pm Venue to be confirmed  
See press for details

**Dec/Jan** Christmas Bird Count. To be decided.