

Bermuda Audubon Society Newsletter Summer 2003 Vol.14 No.2

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Alfred Blackburn Smith Nature Reserve



Jennifer Gray

In February the Bermuda Audubon Society celebrated a very special moment with the opening of the Alfred Blackburn Smith Nature Reserve. Members and friends turned out in fine numbers on a splendid day and we were honoured with the presence of His Excellency the Governor and Lady Vereker, our patron, who planted a cedar tree on site to mark the occasion. The Alfred Blackburn Smith Nature Reserve has been generously donated to the

Audubon Society by Mrs. Elfrida Chappell in her father's name and we were very pleased to see so many of her family also present. Lady Vereker assisted Mrs. Chappell in the unveiling of the reserve sign and Mrs. Chappell's family members then assisted her with the planting of a memorial cedar tree at the entrance to the reserve.

You needed to be on the hilltop on that gorgeous day to appreciate the remarkable beauty of this parcel of land and the tremendous gift Mrs. Chappell has bequeathed to the people of Bermuda. This 8.7-acre reserve is one of the last remaining tracts of undeveloped Bermuda upland forest and should be considered a national treasure. The views from the coastal cliff are breathtaking, the smells are invigorating and you instantly find yourself at peace as you wander along the footpaths through native Bermuda. The windswept cliffs support native and endemic salt tolerant plants while the protected side of the hilltop provides thick woodland to support a host of local biodiversity. Rare plants like the Box Briar, Shrubby Fleabane, Darrell's Fleabane and Turnera thrive in this unharmed habitat alongside recently planted Cedar, Yellow Wood and Olivewood. Removed far enough from the metropolis of Bermuda that many of us share our days with, this reserve offers a rare opportunity to be at one with nature in the absence of intrusion by noise, light, air or ground pollution.



Partial isolation from overuse by humans has protected the integrity of native planting to some degree but the site has been receiving attention from environmentalists for nearly ten years. Back in 1993 horticultural trainees were brought to this site to train in horticulture methods, the removal of invasive species and the planting of natives and endemics continues today through the

training of students from the Bermuda College and the Bermuda Zoological Society and through work parties organised by the Audubon Society. As part of its management plan for the reserve, the Audubon Society works to eradicate all invasive species and restore the reserve to a primary upland forest. Along with the gift of land came a stipulation that the land would be protected from unsupervised human use which can so often lead to abuses such as litter and disregard for or lack of knowledge regarding rare plants. To this end the reserve can be visited by any Audubon member or by appointment through the Audubon Society. This is sensitive land and must be respected as such. Thanks to the tremendous generosity of Mrs. Elfrida Chappell and her family, a piece of Bermuda's natural heritage will remain with us forever.

Cockroach Islands Nature Reserve

Jennifer Gray

It is not very often that an NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) in Bermuda can say that it has acquired property totalling ten islands, but such is the case for the Bermuda Audubon Society which recently secured a lease for the ten islands situated in Harrington Sound known as "Cockroach Island". Through the significant generosity and environmental consideration of Mrs. Josephine Wilkinson-Gould, the Wilkinson Trust has entered into a ten-year lease with the Bermuda Audubon Society whereby we rent and manage these islands for one dollar per year. In the agreement the Audubon Society has pledged to remove all invasive plant species, replant with indigenous plants and install nesting boxes for White-tailed Tropicbirds (Longtails).

For those of you who know Cockroach Island, historically referred to as Cockroach Rock, you will know that the island is a small quaint "piece of the rock" surrounded by a number of tiny islets. While we tend to think of islands as masses of land that rise up

from the ocean floor through volcanic eruption or shifting sea floor we know that this was not the case with Cockroach Island and its associated islets. Rather these islands fell from the cliff coastline and landed picturesquely in the sandy shallows at the base of Abbots Cliff. Once a part of the cliff itself, these huge chunks most likely gave way hundreds of years ago under the pressures of bioerosion. Below the water of this very distinctive steep shoreline lies an incredibly deep undercut, the result of thousands of marine organisms burrowing deeply into the limestone cliffs just below low tide level. This process weakens the cliff and large blocks of limestone fall into the Sound. Through this process the Cockroach Island chain evolved.

The main island comprises an area of 0.068 Ha while the total land of all the islets inclusive is only 0.088Ha. While the acreage of the property is small, the romantic charm of these islands is truly awe-inspiring. Remote from roads or bridges and tucked into the far northern cliff of Harrington Sound, the island sits in a peaceful paradise of calm water, rich marine life and a host of bird species. It was while on Cockroach Island as a teenager that I first scrutinized the magnificent antics of Ospreys as they performed dynamic aerial diversions overhead, alongside countless graceful longtails dancing in the sky. It was here that the 'Mussel-man' Charles Trott would pull his day's dredge ashore to shuck the meat from the turkey wing mussel shells before a row across the sound and delivery to the stores. On occasion he could be found steaming the mussels in an old kettle under the shade of shoreline shrubbery just before dusk. Today, only a beach of mussel shells remains as a reminder of days gone by.

Cockroach Island is by no means infested with roaches, in fact rarely can one be found amongst the craggy rocks and undergrowth and it remains a mystery to this writer how the island came by that name as it is deserving of a much more endearing name. Our thanks and utmost appreciation go to Mrs. Wilkinson-Gould for her generosity and to David Summers and Dr. David Wingate for devising and implementing the plan to preserve these islands for the future.

World Oceans Day

Jennifer Gray

World Oceans Day, June 8th, is a time to remember the life-giving role of oceans worldwide. This international celebration, declared a decade ago at the United Nations Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, has grown from a ripple into a tidal wave of awareness about ocean health. There are four main objectives to World Oceans Day:

- It is a chance to change perspective - encouraging individuals to think about what the sea means to them and what it has to offer.
- It is a chance to learn - many people do not realize the wealth of diverse and beautiful creatures and habitats which are found in the sea, and how our actions affect them.
- It is a chance to alter our ways - people can be encouraged to become caretakers of our seas and to conserve them for the future.
- It is a chance to celebrate - whether you live inland or on the coast you can organize or participate in events focusing upon our seas.

It has been almost two centuries since the poet Lord Byron penned these words:

*Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean – roll!
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
Man marks the earth with ruin – his control
Stops with the shore.*

If only the poet had been right. We find ourselves marking this World Oceans Day today amid news of an impending freshwater crisis, and of the shocking decline of both freshwater and saltwater fish stocks. Today, the seven seas that cover more than 70 per cent of our planet have never faced a greater threat. Unfortunately, far more than 10,000 fishing and whaling fleets have swept the oceans since Byron's time, putting hundreds of species at risk of extinction. The ruin that Byron already saw on land in 1812 has extended into every watery corner of the globe. From mercury poisoning to the



dumping of radioactive waste, the oceans have been continually and thoughtlessly used as a dumping ground for the disposal of dangerous materials.

Speaking of the challenge ahead, the great oceanographer and environmentalist Jacques Cousteau once said, "What we human beings are all living now, whether we are volunteers or not, is an extraordinary, but exceptionally dangerous adventure. And we have a very small

number of years left to fail or to succeed in providing a sustainable future to our species." Otherwise, our capacity to mark the Earth with ruin will not stop at the shore.

Ron Porter releasing Hawksbill Turtle. Photo: A. Dobson

This year, to celebrate World Oceans Day, the Department of Conservation Services is encouraging the public to take to the water, at 3 p.m. on 8 June, to enjoy the recreational opportunities provided by a healthy ocean. In the weeks prior to 8 June, they hope to have a number of articles, relating to the ocean, published in the local newspapers and some radio and television time to promote the importance of the ocean. Also, they will be handing out turquoise ribbons at various locations around the island to increase public awareness of World Oceans Day.

Plan an ocean adventure for June 8, 2003, encourage family and friends to join you. Appreciate our ocean backyard for its beauty and bounty and do your part to protect the ocean and its inhabitants for the future.

(Excerpts from Toronto Globe and Mail)

National Environmental Symbols

Andrew Dobson

Bermuda has been given national symbols to promote the Island and give due recognition to environmental heritage. The national tree is to be the Cedar; the national bird is the Cahow; the national flower is the Bermudiana; and the national vegetable is the Bermuda Onion. "It should come as no surprise that the **Cedar**, a native plant to Bermuda, has been selected as our national tree," said Mr. Lister. "Since the founding of the colony in 1609, the Cedar has been an integral part of the landscape that greeted the early settlers in the seventeenth century." The Minister said the **Cahow** had been chosen because of its qualities of perseverance, strength and endurance. He said as a species, it had met with adversity, but said it had faced it squarely and survived. Mr. Lister said the Cahow was recorded in 1603, and although initially plentiful, they were indiscriminately slaughtered, making them almost extinct. But the discovery more than 300 years later of 20 breeding pairs, and their conservation since then by David Wingate, meant they were starting to flourish again. "The **Bermudiana** is a member of the iris family that was first recognised by Carolus Linnaeus as being different from the American blue-eyed iris. This was confirmed in 1884. Mr. Lister said "the **Bermuda Onion** had come to symbolize the multi-layered complexity of the Island. The first mention of onion seeds being introduced to Bermuda was in 1616, and for many years Bermuda exported its onions to the West Indies and the US".



Bermuda's National Bird - the Cahow or Bermuda Petrel.

Photo: A. Dobson

Report on the 2003 Cahow nesting season - another record year! Jeremy Madeiros

The 2003 nesting season of Bermuda's only endemic seabird (and our newly proclaimed national bird!) the Cahow, or Bermuda Petrel (*Pterodroma cahow*), is rapidly drawing to a close as of the time of this report (18th May). The first of a record number of 40 fledglings are already emerging from their burrows at night to exercise their flight muscles and prepare for the ultimate test of life on the open ocean, although as yet none have actually departed. The Cahow nesting population continues to increase with yet another record-breaking year. A total of five new nesting pairs became established, bringing the total nesting population up to 70 nesting pairs. It is interesting that all of the new pairs established on the same nesting island, including one in a newly constructed artificial burrow finished only last October at the beginning of the nesting season! In addition, with three nesting pairs that had been disrupted with the loss of

one adult, the surviving birds managed to attract new partners to their burrows, with two of them successfully producing chicks.

The ringing (or banding) program for the Cahow is proceeding well with the assistance of Steven Rodwell, with almost 80 adult and fledgling Cahows now sporting their customized leg rings since the program started last year. 29 of last year's crop of 36 fledglings were successfully ringed, so that for the first time, there are known-age Cahows that can be positively identified and followed for their entire lifespan (which is not positively known, but is thought to be as long as 35 to 40 years). The rings are already providing valuable information by confirming that in all instances except for one, that adults are faithful both to home and partner, with ringed birds returning to the same nest burrow with the same mate year after year.



Adult Cahow. Photo: A. Dobson

Preparations also continue for a new stage in the recovery of the Cahow - a program to establish a new nesting colony of the birds on the nearby Nonsuch Island Living Museum. This will be accomplished by the translocation of nearly-fledged chicks from the present nesting islands to a new complex of artificial burrows on Nonsuch, a technique pioneered in Australia and New Zealand to successfully establish new colonies of both gadfly petrels and shearwaters.

At this point, data has been gathered for the last two years on fledgling growth rates by taking regular measurements of both weight and wing chord growth. This information will assist in determining the optimum time to translocate chicks so that supplemental feeding is kept to a minimum while they fixate on the new nest site. Some of the interesting results arising from the weighing program include the fact that there are large differences in growth rates and maximum weights achieved between different chicks. There are also differences in mean maximum weights achieved by chicks during different years. Basically, chicks can be bigger and fatter during some years than other years, probably due to abundance of food (mainly squid and small fish).

Although the Cahow remains one of the rarest seabirds on earth, hope continues to grow that one day we may be able to enjoy the spectacle of hundreds of pairs of Cahows performing their incredible acrobatic courtship flights and producing their ghostly calls off Bermuda's eastern coastline.

Bird Report February - May 2003

Andrew Dobson

There have been a number of interesting birds associated with the water, in a season in which migrant land birds are never numerous. Highlights have included the long-

staying American White Pelican and Reddish Egret, a White-winged Scoter, Red Phalarope, *Catharacta* Skua, and the first flock of Common Grackles to reach Bermuda.

Petrels to Ducks

The **Cahow** continues to make a promising recovery (still separate article). Another *Pterodroma* sp. flying west 28 Apr provided Steve Rodwell to get good enough views to see dark upper-wings and dark under-wings with white body. Probably a soft-plumaged petrel (Fea's?) - but impossible to be 100%. If only Three **Cory's Shearwaters** and three Manx Shearwaters passed Elbow Beach on 23 Feb (AD, SR). As expected, early season shearwater movement was largely confined to Manx Shearwaters with birds moving along South Shore at about one per minute 31 Mar (AD). The best chance of seeing pelagic (ocean-dwelling) birds is to go out at least 4-5 miles off the South Shore. A pelagic trip on the R.V. Stommell 4 May provided the following sightings in 3 hours: **Cory's Shearwater**(1), **Wilson's Storm-Petrel** (1 attracted to cod-liver oil), **Leach's Storm-Petrel** (2 probables), **White-Tailed Tropicbird** (c.10 offshore), **Pomarine Jaeger** (3), **Parasitic Jaeger** (1), **Long-tailed Jaeger** (1), **Arctic Tern** (1) (EA, AD et al). The **American White Pelican** (first discovered 6 Nov 2002) was present throughout the period, seen in various locations in Bermuda but regularly at Spittal Pond. Two **Least Bitterns** were flushed from Paget Marsh Pond 29 Mar (AD, SR). Bermuda's first **Reddish Egret** (discovered 22 Dec) also remained throughout the period - roving between Jews Bay and Mangrove Bay. **Green Herons** were reported in breeding plumage from Mangrove Lake and Trott's Pond 30 Apr (EA). A drake **Northern Shoveler** arrived at Spittal Pond 2 Apr (AD, PS). The **White-winged Scoter** found in Harrington Sound 7 Feb remained for about a week, but the **Surf Scoter** with which it was associating, remained until at least 7 Mar. The wintering **Common Mergansers** were last seen in the Great Sound 21 Mar (DW). A fine male **Ruddy Duck** was an unseasonal arrival at Parsons Road Pond 20 May (DW).



Red Phalarope Photo: A. Dobson

Kites to Terns

A first of several **Swallow-tailed Kites** was seen over the Smiths Hills 4 Mar. With sightings over the following three weeks, there were probably four individual birds, with two circling together over Port Royal GC 11 Mar with the **Red-tailed Hawk** (IF, PW). The hawk has remained in Bermuda since Nov 2001 and was last reported over Hawkins Island 26 Apr (PW). A **Northern Harrier** was still at the airport 22 Apr (AD). The wintering **Virginia Rail** was still at Parsons Road Pond 2 Mar (AD). A **Purple Gallinule** was at Somerset Long Bay reserve 2 May (PJH). A **Black-necked Stilt** was at Spittal Pond 21 Mar to early Apr, at North Pond 16 May (DW), and two at Spittal Pond 26 May (SR). A **Solitary Sandpiper** was watched being hotly pursued by **Merlin** at Spittal 26 Apr (AD, SR, PJH). Seven **Sanderling** were at Elbow Beach 31 Mar (AD). A female **Ruff** turned up at Spittal Pond 2 May (EA). A

scattering of other spring shorebirds included **Lesser Yellowlegs**, **Semipalmated Sandpiper**, **Least Sandpiper** and **Wilson's Snipe**. A **Red Phalarope** was found at Horseshoe Bay 23 Feb with a broken wing. It died in captivity but provided a very rare spring record. Another interesting corpse was discovered 27 Apr. A dead skua was found in Tucker's Town by Judy Clee. Almost certainly a **South Polar Skua** (*photo left*) its identity will be verified by DNA analysis. Two recent records of *Catharacta* skuas in Britain caused doubt as to whether they were dark Great Skuas or South Polar Skuas. DNA testing revealed both to be Brown Skuas (previously unrecorded in Britain!). Jaeger species were recorded from late Apr, with 16 **Parasitic Jaegers** recorded from



Elbow Beach 22 Apr (AD, SR). All three jaeger species were seen off Cooper's Point 28 Apr (PW) with a flock of 5 **Pomerine Jaeger's** off Elbow Beach on the same day (SR, PJH). An adult **Laughing Gull** was seen in both Dockyard and St. Georges Harbour 22 Apr (AD, PJH, SR). A **Royal Tern** was on the outer arm at Dockyard 13 Apr (PJH). The first **Common Terns** returned to Castle Harbour 31 Mar (DBW) and a **Forster's Tern** was in the same location 12 May for at least a week

(DBW).

Flycatchers to Waxbills

The wintering **Eastern Phoebe** was still at Spittal Pond 25 Mar (AD). An **Eastern Kingbird** photographed at a bird bath in a Warwick garden (NC) was the earliest ever spring record – present for the last week of March and into April. **Chimney Swifts** were spotted in Apr and May with a maximum of three over Somerset 25 Apr (PJH). The first **Purple Martin** was at St Georges Dairy 24 Feb (DW). A small influx of **American Robins** was noted in Feb with eight at Clearwater 9 Feb (KR) and 12 at Heydon Trust 15 Feb (DBW). The wintering **Northern Mockingbird** remained until at least 5 Apr in Botanical Gardens (AD). Singing warblers are never numerous, but on 2 Mar, a **Yellow-throated Warbler** was heard singing in Botanical Gardens, **Pine Warblers** were in song at both Government House and Port Royal GC while a **Common Yellowthroat** was singing at Paget Marsh. A skulking **Kentucky Warbler** was hard to view in Ord Road woodlands (SR). A trickle of spring warbler species included **Blue-winged**, **Magnolia**, **Black-throated Green** and **Northern Waterthrush**. A **Summer Tanager** was in Botanical Gardens 23 Apr (DW). The wintering **Swamp Sparrow** was still present at Spittal Pond 3 Apr (DW). Two **White-throated Sparrows** were singing in the Arboretum in late Mar (GH). A smattering of other spring migrant passerines included **Red-eyed Vireo**, **Dickcissel**, **Rose-breasted Grosbeak**, **Blue Grosbeak** and **Baltimore Oriole**. **Common Grackles** became one of the birds of the spring. A very rare bird in Bermuda with only about six individuals having ever been recorded in Bermuda. Ian Fisher and Paul Watson were thrilled to discover two in Paul's garden in St. Georges on 7 Mar. Other individual sightings were made in the East End, 12 were seen over Mid-Ocean GC 11 Mar, but on 19 Mar a flock of about 20 grackles was seen in Jubilee Road. The birds, in stunning breeding plumage, remained in Devonshire Marsh until early April. The last reported sighting was from Pitman's Pond on 12 Apr. A **Brown-headed Cowbird** (IF)

was at Spittal Pond Farm 11 Mar. Both **Orange-cheeked** and **Common Waxbills** still survive in Devonshire Marsh, with a flock of more than 12 birds seen in Mar-Apr.

For the record, in reply to certain information being published in the local press – neither David Wingate or myself have advocated the shooting or killing in any way of the parrot flock on the loose in the West End. Our message is to educate the public as to the potential dangers of releasing non-native animals into the wild. Claims this flock has been in the wild for 6-7 years are debatable. Reports of this noisy flock of **Blue-fronted Amazons** first surfaced to the Society in Nov 2001.

Observers: Eric Amos, Judy Clee, Neil Couper, Andrew Dobson, Ian Fisher, Wendy Frith, Peter Holmes, Peter Hopkin (PJH), Bruce Lorhan, Jeremy Madeiros, Steve Rodwell, Keith Rossiter, Penny Soares, David Wallace (DW), Paul Watson, David Wingate (DBW).

Society News

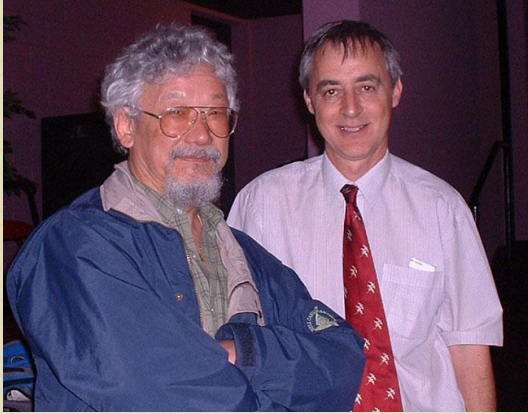
Bluebirds in the news

A glossy 'bluebird factsheet' has been produced by the Society providing advice on the construction and monitoring of bluebird boxes. The publication was made possible by a kind donation from the family of the late Dr. Raymond Smith. The publication featured in the latest edition of Bermuda Homes and Gardens.

The May edition of the RG magazine featured an article on both the Cahow and Bluebirds with assistance from members of the Audubon Society.

Audubon Bermuda owes a BIG Thank You to our bluebird loving members out there who carefully monitor their own boxes or those on organized trails. The season is well underway and the wonderful call of bluebird parents encouraging their young out into the world is prevalent around the island. A very special thank you goes to Malcolm and Diana Smith and Dr. Bob Steele who donated their time and resources to create the bluebird boxes the society has sold this season and to our committee members and Peter Drew who helped put together the fifty boxes we sold at the Farmers Market this year.

'A Sense of Direction'



The Society was thrilled to co-host the international environment conference on conservation in UK Overseas Territories and other small island communities (March 2003). The Bermuda National Trust, Bermuda Zoological Society, Bermuda Audubon Society and Bermuda Ministry of the Environment liaised with the UK Overseas Territories Conservation Forum for more than a year in putting on a conference which was received very favourably by the delegates. The conference provided a forum

for governmental agencies and NGOs to discuss key conservation issues, to highlight success stories, exchange ideas, and to forge partnerships. One of the highlight of the conference week was the visit of environmentalist Dr. David Suzuki, who not only addressed the conference delegates but also addressed an audience of over 500 students from the Island's schools at the Ruth Seaton James Auditorium.

Photo: Dr. David Suzuki with Audubon Vice-President, Andrew Dobson

If you are interested in reading the proceedings of the conference, they will be posted on the Conservation Forum's web site www.ukotcf.org

Future Events - For information on any of the events: tel. 238-3239

- **Tuesday 10 June**
A.G.M. - Government House - 5.30 pm. Enter from Langton Hill.
Pre-registration is required: Email info@audubon.bm or tel. 238-3239
Followed by an illustrated review of the Birding Year presented by Andrew Dobson
- **Sunday 15 June**
Field trip to Nonsuch Island. 1.00 to 5.00 pm Mem. \$20 Non-mem \$25
Depart Bermuda Biological Station dock 1.00 pm
Bring your own lunch, snorkel gear etc.
Email info@audubon.bm or tel. 238-3239
- **Saturday 22 June to Saturday 28 June**
Audubon/BZS Natural History Camp for students
- **Sunday 31 August**
Field trip to Spittal Pond - Early Fall migration. Meet in car park at 7.30 am. Venue is subject to change if water level is high.
Email info@audubon.bm or tel. 238-3239

- **Friday 10 October to Sunday 12 October**
Paget Island Bird Camp. Cost approx. \$40 per person. For more details:
Email info@audubon.bm or tel. 238- 3239

Executive Committee 2002-2003

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