



Bermuda Audubon Society NEWSLETTER

Vol.1 No.1

P. O. Box HM 1328, Hamilton HM FX

Christmas 1990

A Year in Review

The Audubon Society has had a very active year. The highlight was the acquisition of three new reserves, Seymour's Pond, Sears Cave and at Devonshire Marsh. The details of these properties were given in the last newsletter, and the Society now owns over 38 acres.

The 1990-91 Executive Committee was formally elected at the A.G.M. in May, and following this meeting Mr. Andrew Dobson gave an illustrated talk on the "*Natural History of Malawi*". Our other speaker this year was Mr. Ben Walter from the Bermuda Biological Station, who presented a lecture on "*Coral Reefs and the Future*".

As usual, Nonsuch Island featured in the Society's programme of events. In June, an Audubon "Open Day" was held on the island. It attracted about 100 people who not only enjoyed perfect weather, but also barbecued food, tours of the island, and a chance to sail aboard Bobby Doe's "Christian Venturer".

Nonsuch also hosted the annual Audubon Natural History Camp, held for a week in July, for senior school students. Sixteen students from eight schools enjoyed an active week - even being struck by lightning!

The Bermuda Audubon Society Committee 1990 -1991

- President Dr. David Wingate
- Vice-President...Mr. Francis Stephens
- Treasurer Mr. Ted Cassidy
- SecretaryMr. Andrew Dobson
- Members Mr. Robert Chandler
Miss Virginia DeSilva
Mr. David O'Neill
Mrs. Helge Trapnell

Audubon members, helped by the National Trust's 'A.N.T.S.' and Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme students from Warwick Academy and Northlands formed working parties at reserves - notably the fence construction at Sears Cave.

At the end of December, a number of Audubon members will help in the annual Christmas Bird Count, organised by the American Audubon Society.

A very
HAPPY CHRISTMAS
to all members.

We look forward to your continued support in 1991.

What's that bird ?

Few people on their way to and from work can have failed to notice a large white heron-like bird standing next to Middle Road by Paget Marsh.

It is in fact a GREAT EGRET - the largest of the egrets which visit Bermuda mainly in the winter months.

The very large egret is all white except for a yellow bill and black legs. It might be confused with the Snowy Egret (often seen at Spittal Pond) which also has white plumage, but a black bill and bright yellow feet. The Cattle Egret is white with a yellow bill and pale legs, but is only half the height of the Great Egret.

The population of Great Egrets was greatly reduced by plume hunters at the turn of the century, but now seems to have recovered. Wet habitats, such as those maintained by the Bermuda Audubon Society, are vital for this species to find suitable feeding sites.



First Record for Bermuda

This fall David Wingate was out birding at the Talbot Estate in Southampton, when he spotted a

Lark Sparrow,

Chondestes grammacus

never before recorded from Bermuda.

This bird can be identified by the rounded white-tipped tail, black breast spot, and chestnut head markings.

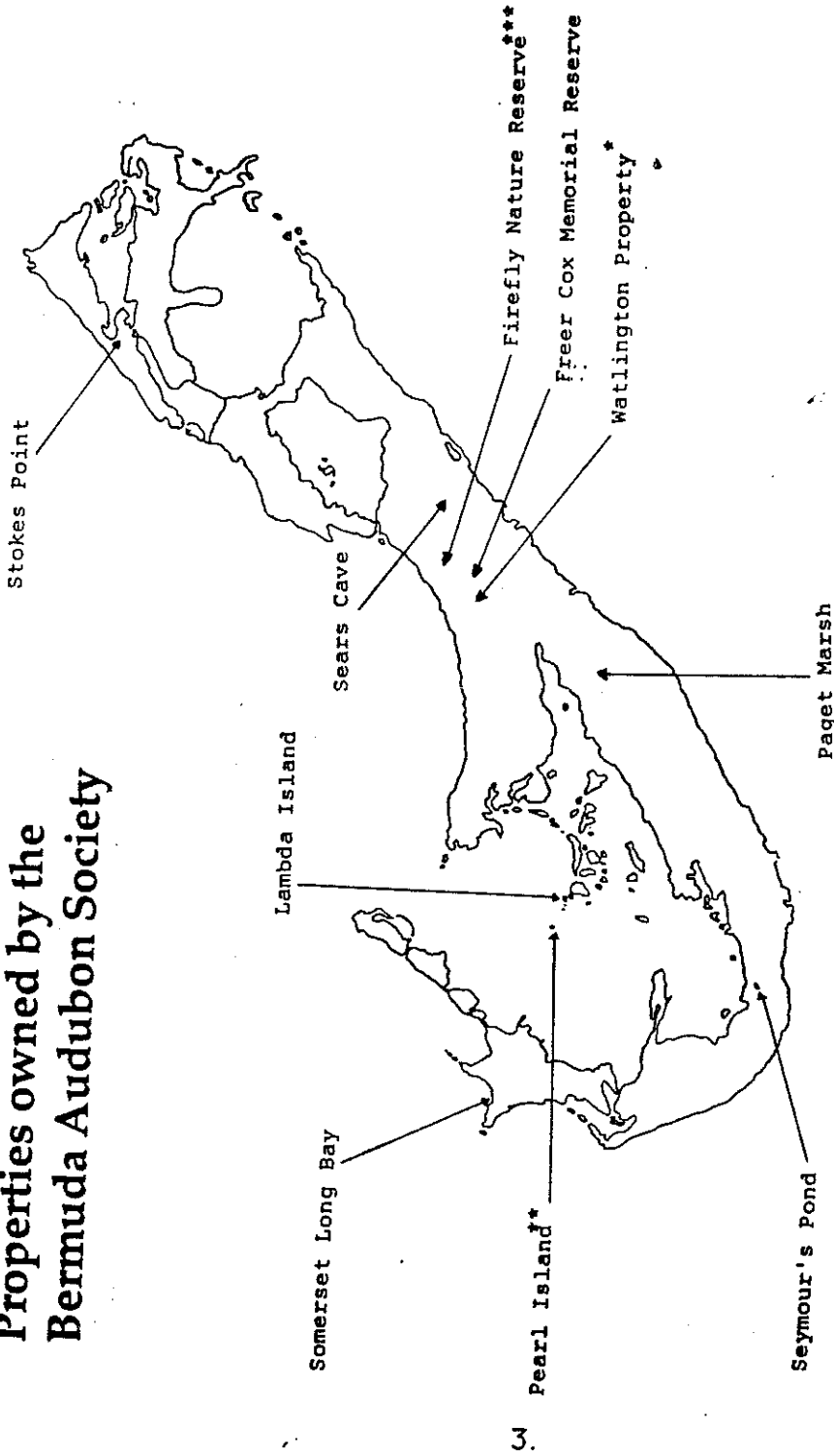
Bermuda Audubon Society

HOTLINE

236-6483

to report any environmental problems especially in relation to birds.

Properties owned by the Bermuda Audubon Society



- * Watlington Property is jointly owned with the Bermuda National Trust
- ** On long lease for \$1 from Dudley Butterfield
- *** On long lease agreement with Devonshire Church Vestry

Barn Owls in Bermuda _____ by Jeremy Madeiros

Many species of Raptors (birds of prey) stop over on Bermuda during the Spring and the Autumn migrations. Ospreys, Merlin Falcons and Kestrels are common sights at this time, and even Bald Eagles and Snowy Owls may put in rare appearances. Bermuda's only resident breeding bird of prey is the Barn Owl *Tyto alba*, which is one of the most widespread birds in the world, being found on every continent except Antarctica.

The Barn Owl is a large bird measuring 14" in length and having a 40" wingspan. It is mostly white underneath and a beautiful tawny or cinnamon colour on top with grey markings. It has a characteristic 'heart-shaped' white face disc, which helps to focus faint sounds towards its ears. Its night vision and hearing are both about 100 times more sensitive than man's.

Barn Owls were not found on pre-colonial Bermuda, and colonised naturally from the North American continent in the early 1930's, preying mainly on rats and mice introduced accidentally by man. Between the 1940's and the 1980's, the Barn Owl maintained a stable population of 15 - 20 nesting pairs. In recent years, long-used nestsites have been abandoned and the population seems to have undergone a decline.

Since April 1990, I have been undertaking an island-wide survey of the local Barn Owl population. This proved to be very difficult because of the bird's nocturnal and secretive

habits. In fact the Barn Owl has been described as being one of the most difficult birds to survey.

Throughout the summer, over 100 sightings of Barn Owls were either personally observed or reported by members of the public. Through these observations almost all active nestsites were located and information gained about the size of territories and the types of habitats favoured by the owls for hunting. Some of the results of the survey are as follows:

Prey items have been identified by analysing the regurgitated pellets of prey remains obtained at nests and roost sites. There is a substantial variability of prey taken by Barn Owls on different areas of Bermuda. For example, pellets from a roost site in Somerset contained 100% rat remains (Black Rat and Norway Rat), while pellets from a nest in Warwick contained only 55% rat remains, the remainder consisting of Anolis lizard (20%), mouse (13%) and bird remains (European Starling and House Sparrow (12%).

The survey found 12 active nestsites around Bermuda during the 1990 breeding season. Most nests were located in natural caves in high coastal cliffs, but one was in an artificial Tropicbird burrow in a quarry face. Another unusual nestsite was on the ground beneath a Palmetto palm in Devonshire Marsh. Old, unused nestsites were located in a variety of locations ranging from church steeples to limestone 'sinkhole' caves.

In addition to nesting pairs of Barn Owls, there is also a percentage of unpaired or singleton adult birds. These usually comprise 25 - 30% of the adult population, which seems to be confirmed by the number of sporadic sightings in areas of Bermuda with no nestsites. Based on this, the number of adult Barn Owls on the island is estimated to be 30 - 38 birds (not counting the annual crop of juvenile birds).

Nestsites should never be disturbed, as this may cause abandonment. Some of the most favoured hunting areas in Bermuda are around the grassy edges of peat marshes and along drainage ditches, and arable and fodder fields. The hunting territory of a nesting pair averages about one square mile, however, Barn Owls are not highly territorial and some hunting areas overlap significantly.

The main threats to the Barn Owl on Bermuda are the loss of hunting habitat, entanglement in kite string and the use of more powerful 'second generation' anti-coagulant rodenticides. If an owl eats a poisoned rat, it can easily succumb to secondary poisoning. Barn Owls at the east end of Bermuda seem to be suffering more from poisoning deaths, perhaps because of the use of more powerful rat

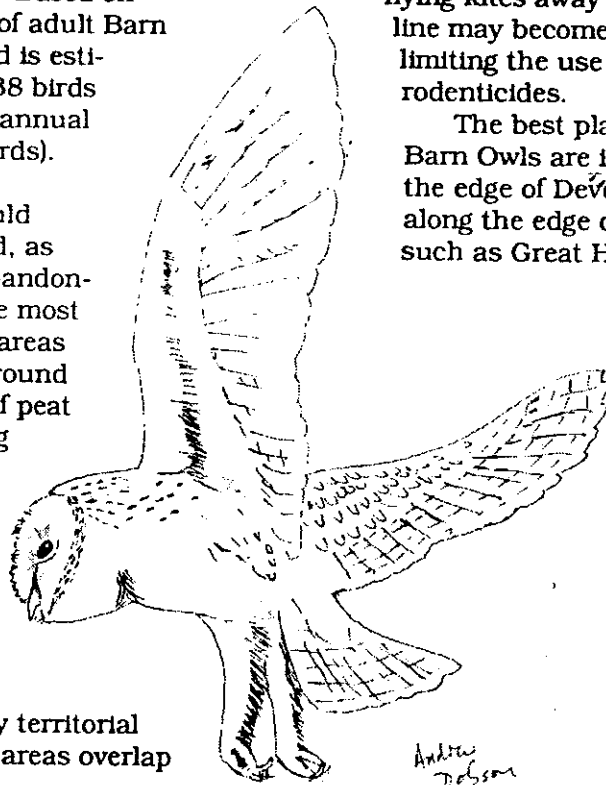
poisons such as Talon on the U.S. bases.

The Barn Owl deserves protection as an important predator of pest species on Bermuda. This can be accomplished by preserving hunting areas, flying kites away from trees in which line may become entangled, and limiting the use of more toxic rodenticides.

The best place to watch for Barn Owls are in the fields around the edge of Devonshire Marsh, and along the edge of high coastal cliffs such as Great Head Park, St.

David's and Abbot's Cliff. First dark or late dusk is the best time to see this most secretive and graceful of Bermuda's land-birds.

Any sightings or information about Barn Owls would be greatly appreciated and would be most useful to the survey.



BARN OWL
Tyto alba

Illustration by Andrew Dobson

The Fall in Bermuda _____ by Andrew Dobson

Apart from the few breeding species, Bermuda remains relatively birdless during the calm summer days. Birdwatchers wait eagerly for the southward fall migration, and actually hope for bad weather! Frontal weather systems moving off the east coast of North America can and do bring a wealth of bird species.

About 30 species of shorebirds regularly visit the islands, and these start arriving in July. I found Warwick Pond the most rewarding viewing. On several days in September more than 100 birds were present, especially the small "peeps" - Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers being the most abundant. The shorebird of the fall was undoubtedly an American Avocet - a large black and white shorebird with an upturned bill - only the sixth ever recorded in Bermuda. It graced Spittal Pond for a week, accompanied by Yellowlegs (one of our regular visitors).

The small warblers, of which about 40 have been recorded, turn up all over the island, peaking in late September and October. Yellow, Nashville, Chestnut-sided and Bay-breasted Warblers can often be seen actively feeding before continuing their

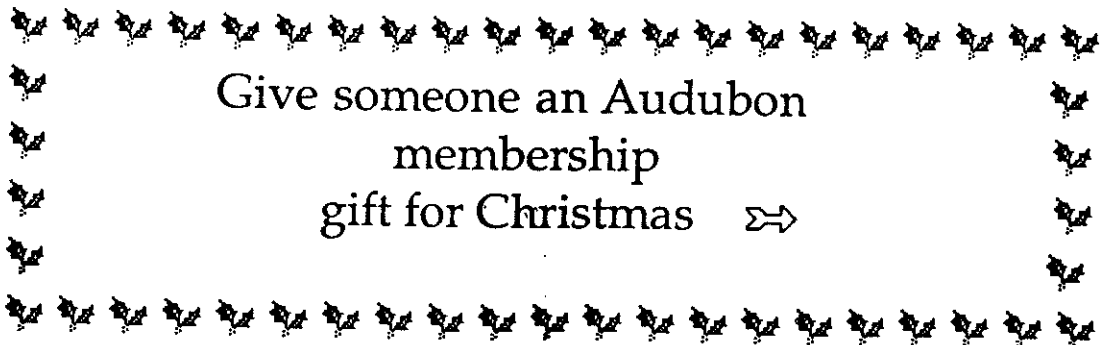
journey south. Others, such as the creeper-like Black-and-White Warbler, Ovenbird, and Palm Warbler stay with us throughout the winter.

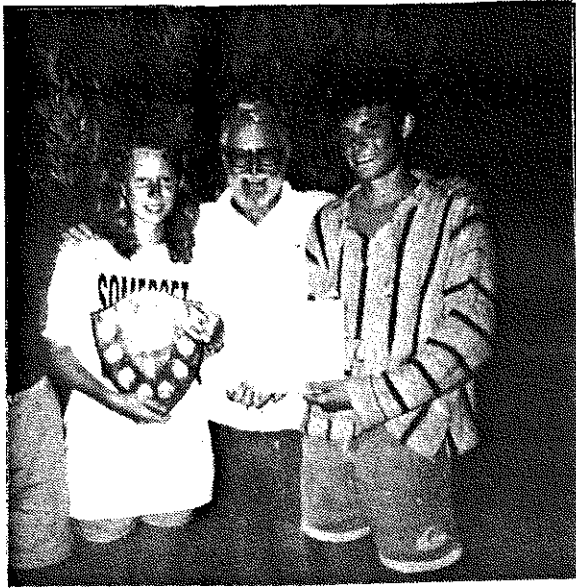
Cuckoos, Kingbirds, flycatchers, swallows, thrushes, vireos, orioles and tanagers all make up a rich variety of avian fauna - but when out birding, binoculars at the ready, there's always a thought that there might be something extra special in the next tree!

Highlight for me was a Red-breasted Nuthatch on Port Royal Golf Course - the first record for several years.

A species that is now being seen annually, unlike the 1950's to late 1970's, is the Brown Pelican. An adult stayed at Dockyard for several days - often resting on the sea next to the cruise ships. This species certainly suffered from DDT poisoning in recent times, but appears to be making a comeback.

It is amazing how many hours of enjoyment can be gained from a pair of binoculars, a good field guide, and some obliging birds!

 Give someone an Audubon membership gift for Christmas ➡



Audubon Natural History Camp 1990

From left to right:
 Alison Shadbolt (Warwick Academy) top student and winner of The Mervyn White Memorial Shield;
 Dr. David Wingate, Chief Instructor;
 and Tim Hasselbring (Roger Chaffee) student runner-up.

Membership subscriptions - a reminder

Many Audubon Society members have not paid their 1990 membership fee.
 Please would you complete the form below and return it as soon as possible.

Name _____

Address _____

_____ Tel. No. _____

Adult \$5.00 Life \$100

Student \$2.50 Patron \$250

(Cheques payable to Bermuda Audubon Society)

Existing member New member

Please return to: The Bermuda Audubon Society
 P.O. Box HM 1328,
 Hamilton HM FX

**ABBOT'S CLIFF
FIELD TRIP**

Sunday
20th January
2 p.m.

Park on Abbot's Cliff Road

An opportunity for a short walk and close look at the fauna and flora of the area.

If you stay 'til dusk, there is a good chance of watching Barn Owls.

**COSTA RICA
SLIDE SHOW**

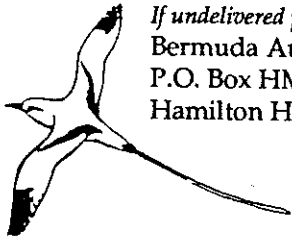
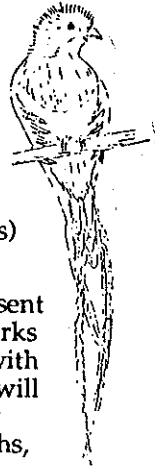
Wednesday
6th February
8 p.m.

Horticultural Hall (Botanical Gardens)

Andrew & Katrina Dobson will present an illustrated talk on the National Parks in Costa Rica, including their work with Green Turtles at Tortuguero. You will be entertained with some fascinating slides of turtles, birds, monkeys, sloths, anteaters and tropical rainforest.

An evening not to be missed.

Adults \$5 Students \$2.50



If undelivered please return to:
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