

Neotropical News



CARIBBEAN More reserves for the Cayman Islands

The Department of the Environment and the National Trust of the Cayman Islands are cooperating to safeguard areas of natural terrestrial and wetland habitat in the islands. The human population of the islands has increased from 18,000 in 1984 to an estimated 33,000 in 1995 and, as a result, natural habitats are under increasing threat. The Trust has therefore directed its efforts to acquiring and protecting areas of pristine terrestrial and wetland habitats. Areas recently acquired include 240 acres of dry limestone woodland in central Grand Cayman. Known as the Mastic Reserve, it provides breeding habitat for all the island's endemic birds. Further areas of this habitat will be bought as funds allow and owners are prepared to sell. An historic right of way has been re-opened as a trail through the reserve, which is increasing the ecotourism potential as well as providing young people with the opportunity to learn about the natural history of their island. The Trust has also acquired 135 acres of Crown property in the Booby Pond and Rookery on Little Cayman, a Ramsar wetland site which has one of the largest breeding colonies of Red-footed Booby *Sula sula* in the Western Hemisphere and the Cayman Islands' only breeding colony of Magnificent Frigatebirds *Fregata magnificens*.

Nature reserves under Trust ownership have increased by 19% over the last year and now comprise 1,214 acres including woodlands and wetlands on all three islands. This brings the

total amount of land protected to 3,056 acres (4.7% of the total land area). Approximately half of this total is comprised of the Environmental Zone Mangroves on the shores of Grand Cayman's Little Sound.

- *El Pitirre* 9(1): 8, 1996 and *National Trust for the Cayman Islands Annual Report*: 23-27, 1995

Cuban Parrot shows increase on Cayman Islands'

A spring 1995 survey indicates that the Cayman population of Cuban Parrot *Amazona leucocephala caymanensis* has risen from 1,500 birds in 1992 to 1,900. Factors contributing to the increase may include its removal from the Game Bird list in 1990, increased nest site availability due to cavity formation in trees damaged by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988, and high breeding success resulting from favourable rainfall patterns leading to abundant fruiting of wild trees. However, the woodland habitat this bird relies on is still being destroyed and they are very unpopular with farmers as they damage fruit crops; they are also still illegally taken from the wild as pets. The Trust will therefore continue to monitor the parrot populations, which are an indicator of the overall ecological health of the islands.

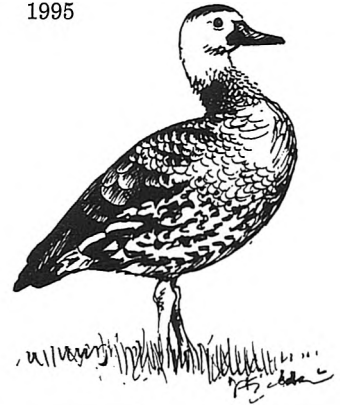
- *National Trust for the Cayman Islands Annual Report*: 36, 1995

West Indian Whistling-ducks continue to increase

The population of the West Indian Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna arborea* on Grand Cayman is now estimated to be at least 360 individuals. The previous

estimate was 100 pairs (*Cotinga* 4: 8). The most recent estimate was obtained by banding (ringing) ducks visiting the farm of Mr. Willie Ebanks at Malportas Pond by Fiona O'Brien, with the help of Willie and his son Jim. Radio transmitters were attached to six birds, which have indicated that the birds also rely heavily on the Central Mangrove Wetland, probably for breeding as well as feeding.

- *National Trust for the Cayman Islands Annual Report*: 37, 1995



West Indian Whistling-duck *Dendrocygna arborea* (Jon Fieldså)

First record of "Brewster's Warbler" in Hispaniola

A "Brewster's Warbler" (the hybrid produced by Golden-winged *Vermivora chrysoptera* x Blue-winged Warbler *V. pinus*) was observed in shade coffee plantations near Manabao, La Vega province, Dominican Republic on 2 November 1994 by Steven C. Latta. This appears to be the first record of this genotype in Hispaniola. Both parent species are rare in Hispaniola (with several records of Blue-winged

but only two of Golden-winged). The bird was searched for, but not relocated, the following day. Warbler species commonly wintering in these coffee plantations include Cape May *Dendroica tigrina*, Black-throated Blue *D. caerulescens*, Black-and-white *Mniotilta varia*, American Redstart *Setophaga ruticilla* and Ovenbird *Seiurus aurocapillus*. Rarer species include Tennessee Warbler *Vermivora peregrina*, Northern Parula *Parula americana*, Magnolia *Dendroica magnolia*, Black-throated Green *D. virens*, Yellow-throated *D. dominica*, Prairie *D. discolor* and Palm Warblers *D. palmarum*, Louisiana Waterthrush *Seiurus motacilla* and Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*.

- *El Pitirre* 9(1): 2, 1996

Cuba hosts first crane count

More than 400 Cubans and a dozen Americans counted the endemic species of Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis nesiototes* and Cuban Parrot *Amazona leucocephala palmarum* from 105 watchpoints across Isla de la Juventud, Cuba's second largest island, as part of Cuba's first "Love the Sandhill Crane and Cuban Parrot festival". The count, on 17 December 1995, produced 126 Sandhills and 1,384 Cuban Parrots. Both subspecies are endemic to Cuba and are considered endangered.

The festival also promoted environmental education among local people and a celebration of the island's natural heritage. Crane calls and counting instructions were broadcast over local radio and television each night during the week prior to the count. Local hunters were especially active and provided the majority of the manpower for the count, putting their identification skills to the test. Luis Hernandez Garcia, the president of Cuba's hunting association, was positive about this, explaining that it would help to make hunters more conservation-minded.

Xiomara Galves, the festival organiser, hopes that future counts will expand onto the main island and possibly include other threatened species such as crocodiles and iguanas.

- *The ICF Bugle* 22(1): 3, 1996

MEXICO

New parrot reserve in Mexico

In August 1995 purchase of the El Taray Sanctuary in north-eastern Mexico was completed. The reserve, near the city of Monterrey, includes 360 ha of montane pine forest habitat as well as the most important known nesting cliff of the threatened Maroon-fronted Parrot *Rhynchopsitta terrisi*, which is endemic to the Sierra Madre Oriental in Mexico. This species has one of the smallest ranges of any continental parrot, occurring only in a 200 mile (320 km) stretch of these mountains, with all 24 breeding colonies known occur within a 60 mile (100 km) stretch. An estimated 100 pairs nested in El Taray Sanctuary in 1995 – a quarter of the nesting population (although the total population was estimated at 1,000-2,000 pairs in the 1970s).

Acquisition of the reserve was made possible by financial contributions from CONABIO (the Mexican Committee on Biodiversity), the US State Department, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Zoological Society of San Diego. Purchase of the new reserve will facilitate habitat protection, education, research and ecotourism. Title to the land will be held by CONABIO, but administration of the reserve will be the responsibility of the Museo de las Aves.

- *Psitta Scene* 8(1): 8-9, 1996

Mexican waterfowl catastrophe update

Most of the 40,000 waterbirds that died at a reservoir in central Mexico in October-November 1994 (see *Cotinga* 4: 8) died of botulism according to the findings of a North

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) inquiry. Originally it was thought that the birds had been killed by heavy metal poisoning, as the reservoir is downstream from tanneries and other industries near León. However, the panel did find that exposure to heavy metals, especially chromium, lead and mercury, played a role and could have contributed to the botulism. They suggested that explosives be detonated at the site to deter birds from using the reservoir and that a feeding programme be established at an alternative site. The National Audubon Society and two Mexican environmental organisations had filed a request for an inquiry under the terms of the NAFTA environmental accord.

- *Field Notes* 49(3): 215, 1995

BELIZE

Britain backs logging in Belize rainforest

The Belize government, on the advice of British officials, has approved large-scale logging operations in a remote primary rainforest reserve near the Guatemala border. The Columbia River Forest Reserve in the Toledo District of southern Belize covers 103,000 acres and Atlantic Industries, a venture financed from Hong Kong and Singapore, has been granted a 20-year licence to log an area of 10,000 hectares.

Under its licence, Atlantic Industries should implement a "sustainable forest management plan" permitting it to extract only marked trees, totalling no more than 17 cubic metres of trees per hectare on a 40-year rotation. The licence also requires it to consult with the local Maya people and avoid protected areas. However, Atlantic Industries has already apparently flouted the terms of the licence, failing to tell local people of its plans, cut trees untagged by the Forestry Department, bulldozing logging roads in prohibited areas and failing to mark stumps. It has also emerged

that the Minister for Natural Resources, Eduardo "Dito" Juan, signed Atlantic Industries' concession despite the Forestry Department having filed 11 objections. As with all logging concessions in sensitive areas, this one threatens the homes and livelihood of the local Maya people, who have hired lawyers to seek judicial reviews of the Belize government's actions and the advice by Britain's Overseas Development Administration that the rainforest was suitable for logging.

A survey of the Columbia River Forest Reserve by Conservation International estimated that it contains at least 1500 plant species, 10 species of frog (including three new to Belize and one new to science), 29 different mammals and 224 bird species. They recommended establishing a national park in the region.

- *BBC Wildlife*: 14(4), 1996

COLOMBIA

More on the Andean Condor reintroduction scheme

The reintroduction of Andean Condors *Vultur gryphus* in northern South America continues. This year the Peregrine Fund and its partners plan to release 4-6 birds at a new site in the Parque Nacional Los Nevados in the Department of Caldas, Colombia. Last year saw the first confirmed breeding effort by reintroduced birds when a pair laid an egg at a site in the Andes near Bogotá, Colombia. This year several more of the released birds will reach sexual maturity and further

breeding is hoped for.

- *Peregrine Fund Annual Report*: 11, 1995

VENEZUELA

Amazonian forests under threat in south-eastern Venezuela

Large areas of the pristine rainforests of south-eastern Venezuela are threatened by new government sponsored oil, mining and logging concessions. These concessions, if they are all taken, will have a devastating effect on the enormous forested regions of Amazonas and Bolívar states, as well as on the native people dependent on them.

These findings are presented in a new report by Survival International and the World Rainforest Movement, in which the Venezuelan government has been charged with "serious violations" of the International Labour Office's Convention on Tribal and Indigenous Populations, which was officially incorporated into Venezuelan national law in 1983. There are 315,000 native people in Venezuela but only 1% of native communities possess legally binding land titles; this recent avalanche of land concessions apparently ignores even these.

For example, in Estado Bolívar around 60 foreign mining companies, including the Canadian-owned Yellowjack Resources and Solomon Resources, have been granted concessions, which in many cases encroach on native lands and supposedly protected forests. This is a double blow to local people because they had previously been denied permission to carry out small-scale mining to protect headwater

catchments, due to the threat to the forests. They respected this and are now seeing massive mining and logging operations about to start by foreign companies which will cause far greater deforestation and water pollution and threaten to destroy their lands and their livelihoods.

The threat to the native people is the main concern voiced in the report, but the effect on the wildlife and the forest ecosystem, from the ranchers and other settlers who move in along the access roads, as well as from the direct results of logging and mining, are only too apparent. The major concern is that this pristine area could witness the same huge-scale destruction which occurred in Brazil in the 1980s – a fate which most people previously thought this unique area would be spared.

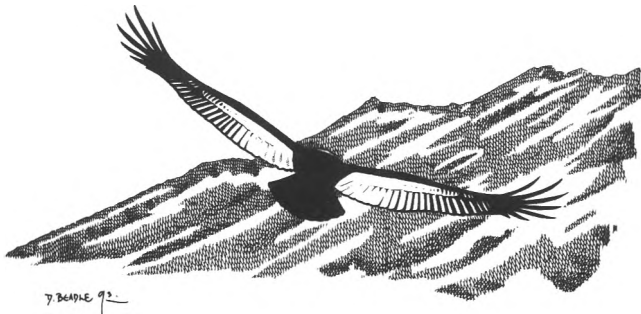
- *BBC Wildlife* 14(1): 59, January 1996

Breeding Greater Flamingos in Venezuela

A Greater Flamingo *Phoenicopterus ruber* colony was discovered at the Ciénaga de Los Olivitos in the Maracaibo Basin in Zulia state, western Venezuela, in 1987. Breeding was also confirmed in 1988 and 1989. The highest numbers were in 1987 with 4,015 nests (about 8,000 adult birds) containing a total of 3,000+ pulli. A total of 5,000+ birds is estimated to have fledged from the colony over the three years.

Greater Flamingos have declined throughout the Caribbean area and this is an important discovery. Phelps and Phelps Jr. knew of only one Greater Flamingo colony in Venezuela: on La Orchila Island where a colony in 1952 contained 50 nests, all of which were abandoned due to human disturbance. This is the first record of breeding in Venezuela since 1952 and the first mainland colony to be discovered.

- *Colonial Waterbirds* 17(1): 28-34, 1994



Andean Condor *Vultur gryphus* (Dave Beadle)



Harpy Eagle *Harpia harpyja* (Dave Beadle)

Harpy Eagle Conservation Program

In 1995 the Harpy Eagle Conservation Program discovered seven new nesting sites in Venezuela, bringing the national total found during their surveys to an impressive 18. Three of the seven contained chicks by the year end and another had an almost fully grown fledgling still accepting food from its parents. Sadly, they also report that one of the juveniles radio-tagged 27 months previously was shot by a poacher. Their detailed study of nesting Harpy Eagles *Harpia harpyja* in Venezuela continues.

- *Peregrine Fund Annual Report*: 15, 1995

ECUADOR

Flocking and feeding behaviour of Waved Albatross poses a potential threat

The world population of Waved Albatrosses *Diomedea irrorata* was estimated at about 15,000 pairs in 1994¹, of which 99% breed on Española Island in the Galápagos. Using satellite transmitters, it has been demonstrated that the birds forage over the continental shelf of Peru². However, a survey by Godfrey Merlen, David Parer and Elizabeth Parer-Cook in 1995 indicates that scavenging near the Galápagos breeding grounds may constitute an important part of their feeding behaviour and as this brings them into close contact with local tuna fishermen could pose a potential

threat to the species.

The survey was carried out between 1-14 September 1995 and involved dawn-to-dusk watches on nine full days and casual observations on the other days. It was found that flocks of Waved Albatrosses frequently associated with feeding groups of Common Dolphins *Delphinus delphis*, Blue-footed Boobies *Sula nebouxii*, Masked Boobies *S.*

dactylatra, Magnificent Frigatebirds *Fregata magnificens*, White-vented Storm Petrels *Oceanites gracilis*, Wedge-rumped Storm Petrels *Oceanodroma tethys* and Galápagos Sea Lions *Zalophus californianus* which regularly form in the vicinity of the islands. Large concentrations of albatrosses were observed on many occasions, always with feeding groups, with the largest flock recorded during the survey being 389. However, taking the survey as a whole, 1-3 together was a more typical sighting.

The feeding groups always occurred offshore in deep water and seemed to follow a fixed pattern. The dolphins would locate the food with Blue-footed Boobies following overhead. Once the food was accessible to the boobies, they would begin to dive on it. Frigatebirds, which had been keeping an eye on the proceedings, would descend to mob the boobies, forcing them to disgorge their fish. However, the albatrosses which were attracted by the activity were observed on dozens of occasions to move in and grab the disgorged food. On one occasion up to four albatrosses were seen round one "downed" booby. The albatrosses appeared to rely on the frigatebirds to initiate the attack but would then try and seize the disgorged food. Storm petrels fluttered amongst these birds and picked up whatever morsels were left over.

Similar feeding groups also

occurred close inshore, involving a different set of species, but Waved Albatrosses were not associated with these.

Waved Albatrosses were also observed scavenging in other situations. On one occasion several albatrosses, plus frigatebirds and storm-petrels, were attracted to the remains of an attack by seven Killer Whales *Orcinus orca* on a school of Common Dolphins. On another, three albatrosses were seen feeding on the remains of a large squid *Angistrocheirus leseveri*.

During the entire survey no albatrosses were seen feeding on live prey. Thus (and *contra* to most of the literature) it seems that scavenging may be an important feeding strategy for Waved Albatrosses at certain times of the year. This means that the structure of feeding groups and the well-being of all their components (fish, dolphins, boobies and frigatebirds) is perhaps of importance to the feeding success of the albatrosses.

There is a potential threat in that fishermen, as well as dolphins and seabirds, are also attracted to schools of tuna. Until very recently the fishing fleet in the area has been slow, local and primitive in its methods. However, there is enormous pressure to allow local fishermen to increase the tonnage of their fleet. The fleet is also modernising and one of the "new" techniques to be introduced is the use of longlines for the valuable Yellow Fin Tuna *Thunnus albacares* and other pelagic fish in the waters surrounding the Galápagos. The effects of longlining on albatrosses in other parts of the world has been catastrophic (the albatrosses scavenge from the baited hooks as they enter the water - with disastrous results) and there is a very real threat that the same thing may now occur around the Galápagos; especially given that Waved Albatrosses are not just scavengers, but are also heavily reliant on squid³, a popular bait

for longlining. One way of diminishing such a threat is to prohibit longlining and other potentially dangerous fishing techniques in the waters within the Marine Resource Reserve (15 nautical miles seaward from the perimeter of the archipelago).

References

1. Anderson, D. (1995) Census of Waved Albatross, 1994: Final report to the Charles Darwin Research Station, June 19 1995. Unpublished report, Charles Darwin Research Station.
 2. Anderson, D. (1995) Ecological and population dynamics of Waved Albatross: Preliminary report to the Charles Darwin Research Station, June 23 1995. Unpublished report, Charles Darwin Research Station.
 3. Harris, M.P. (1973) The biology of the Waved Albatross *Diomedea irrorata* of Hood Island, Galapagos. *Ibis* 115: 483-510.
- Godfrey Merlen, *Puerto Ayora, Galápagos*.

Galápagos Penguin census: 1995 results

The 15th census of Galápagos Penguins *Spheniscus mendiculus* was carried out on 22-23 August and 27 September-3 October 1995 by the Charles Darwin Research Station and the Galápagos National Parks Service. The census produced a total of 844 penguins, of which 402 (47.6%) were adults, 145 (17.2%) juveniles and 297 (32.5%) of indeterminate age. 538 (63.7%) were on Isabela (with most of these on the western side), 271 (32.1%) on Fernandina, and just 35 (4.1%) on other islands. The percentage of juveniles were 16.2% for Isabela, 17.3% for Fernandina and 22.9% for the other islands. The largest flock was 21 in south-western Isabela. Two active nests were found, one with a nearly fledged chick and one with two downy young. Twelve birds were in active moult, two pairs were seen

courting and one pair was observed copulating.

The total was slightly lower than the 873 counted in 1994 but significantly higher than the 398 counted during the 1982/83 El Niño. The relatively high total and high percentage of juveniles suggest the population is slowly recovering from the 1982/83 El Niño, when it declined by an estimated 77%. However the data indicate that the population is still 50% below that prior to 1982.

The number of goats has increased recently in western Isabela, where penguins are abundant, and their nesting habitat may be being damaged through continuous soil erosion by these animals. An eradication programme is being planned to remove the goats. There is also concern that massive extraction of sea cucumbers in the area may affect other trophic levels in the Galápagos, as well as penguins.

- *Penguin Conservation* 9(1): 2-4, 1996

Texaco sued for damage to Ecuadorian rainforest

A group of native Ecuadorians has filed a £1 million lawsuit against Texaco in the New York courts. The oil company is accused of "large-scale disposal of inadequately treated hazardous wastes and destruction of tropical rainforest". The Rainforest Action Network estimates that Texaco may have spilled 17 million gallons of crude oil in the Amazonian region of Ecuador, which is more than half as much again as in the *Exxon Valdez* disaster of 1989.

- *BBC Wildlife* 14(1): 55, 1996

BRAZIL

Scarlet Ibis colony discovered in Brazil

In April 1991, during shorebird research, a breeding colony of about 2,500 Scarlet Ibises *Eudocimus ruber* was found on Cajual Island, Maranhão, Brazil. The nests were 8-12 m high in young mangroves (mainly of *Avicennia* sp.). All the

nests observed contained eggs or young. This is the most recent breeding record of Scarlet Ibis on the north coast of Brazil.

- *Ararajuba* 3: 67-68, 1995

ARGENTINA

Pesticides in Argentina affecting populations of Swainson's Hawks

An extremely potent organophosphate pesticide has been linked to the death of up to 20,000 Swainson's Hawks *Buteo swainsonii* in La Pampa region of Argentina. 700 dead Swainson's Hawks were found in 1995. This led to a more detailed survey this year, led by Brian Woodbridge of the US Forest Service, as a result of which 3,900 dead Swainson's Hawks were found in January 1996. This followed the spraying of fields in the area with monocrotophos for grasshopper control. 2,729 of these were found at a single site following a pesticide application. These hawks, which breed in northern North America, spend their austral summers in Argentina, where they feed primarily on grasshoppers. They are subject to direct mortality through skin contact with the pesticide, as well as secondary poisoning through the consumption of contaminated insects.

In recent years, much of the winter (austral summer) habitat of Swainson's Hawk has been changed from range-based livestock to intensive crop production using pesticides. There are fears that other insectivorous birds in the region are suffering the same fate as the Swainson's Hawks. Monocrotophos is highly toxic to birds and banned in the US and Canada. Despite this, it is in widespread use worldwide and is manufactured by many companies under varying brand names, including Nuvacon by Ciba-Geigy of Basel, Switzerland, one of the largest producers. This and many other incidents illustrates the pressing need to establish a global protocol dealing with persistent and bioaccumulative chemicals.

- Gerald W. Winegrad, American Bird Conservancy