

Searching for Banded Iguanas in the Lau Islands, Eastern Fiji

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Although the Banded Iguana (*Brachylophus fasciatus*) is the most familiar of the two species of *Brachylophus* found in the South Pacific, its status in the wild is virtually unknown. Based on published and verbal distribution records, the species is known to occur on 34 islands in Fiji. In addition, it is found on four islands in Tonga and an introduced population is established on Efate Island in Vanuatu. Currently, this iguana is the only *Brachylophus* species kept in zoos outside of Australia and Fiji.

Banded Iguanas are still regularly reported from many islands within Fiji, even inhabited islands where cats are common and forest remnants are few. Popular wisdom has always declared that Banded Iguanas are easiest to find on the large and heavily forested islands of Kadavu and Ovalau. However, after many weeks spent on these two islands over many years, I have yet to find a wild Banded Iguana on either. They are certainly there; a boy with a pet Banded Iguana can be found in many villages. Fijians still occasionally find them on forest paths, when they are clearing bush for new gardens, or when high up in an Ivi or Bau tree picking ripe, edible fruit.

In November 2000, a Portuguese bat biologist on sabbatical in Fiji, Jorge Palmeirim, contacted me to say that he had seen three Banded Iguanas in just a few hours while searching for bat caves on a tiny limestone island in eastern Fiji. Jorge had visited over 20 islands while working in Fiji, and these were the only Banded Iguanas he had seen. I was immediately excited by the possibility of an island where Banded Iguanas are common, and, as I had worked with Jorge surveying for Crested Iguanas in the Yasawa Islands earlier that year, I knew his information was accurate. Many Fijians and expatriates who have never seen an iguana often refer to the common arboreal green skink, *Emoia concolour*, as an “iguana.”

In September 2002, National Trust Crested Iguana Sanctuary ranger, Pita Biciloa, and I flew to the large inhabited island of Lakeba, 300 km east



A male Banded Iguana from the island of Ovalau.

of Fiji's capital, Suva. Jorge had seen the iguanas on one of the two Aiwa islands; these are small, uninhabited islands (total size 121 ha) separated by 50 m of deep water, that lie about 12 km southeast of Lakeba. Like most islands in Fiji, they are owned by a traditional Fijian clan (Mataqali), and any request to visit must first be approved by the local regional governmental administrator, and then permission obtained from the head of the Mataqali.

From Lakeba, the Aiwa islands are only a short trip by outboard motor boat. We landed first on the tiny beach at Aiwa Levu, the island where Jorge had seen the Banded Iguanas. We spent only two hours there, while we waited for midtide, so we could land on the adjacent, beachless island of Aiwa Lailai. Our local Fijian guide, Cakacaka, assured us that Aiwa Lailai had even more Banded Iguanas than Aiwa Levu, so we had decided to base our three-day survey there.

A walk around the rocky limestone island revealed some scattered and dried iguana egg shells and many distinctive iguana scats. I soon spotted a female Banded Iguana in a low and bushy Cevua Tree (*Vavaea amicorum*) over-

hanging a cliff of razor sharp limestone blades, with crashing waves below. Cevua leaves are a favorite food for Crested Iguanas, so it seemed a likely place to find a Banded Iguana. The boatman soon returned from his reconnaissance of Aiwa Lailai and was shouting at us to hurry to the boat. As we waded out to the waiting boat, he assured us that the tides, wave conditions, and currents were now suitable for us to attempt a landing on Aiwa Lailai. If we did not land within half an hour, we would miss our chance and would have to try again tomorrow.

At the landing site a few meters from the shore of Aiwa Lailai, we all jumped overboard on the orders of our boatman. Two of us held the bucking and tossing boat in chest deep, choppy water, while the other two quickly carried our gear ashore and tossed it on top of the undercut, two- to three-meter high limestone cliff that encircles the island. This included a large plastic barrel of fresh water, as both Aiwa Islands lack fresh surface water. As the last bag of camping gear was removed, the boatman jumped back in, started the motor and disappeared towards the fringing reef.



A gravid female Banded Iguana from the large inhabited island of Kadavu, where occasional sightings still occur.



The limestone island of Aiwa Levu, seen from the neighboring island of Aiwa Lailai.

He promised to return in three days — if the ocean was calm. If not, he smiled as he left, we could survive by eating the plentiful vokai (iguanas) and goats.

Pita and I undoubtedly looked puzzled, standing in waist-deep water under the two-meter high, undercut cliff of razor sharp limestone that confronted us. The thought of having to climb over the limestone blades that encircle the entire island was worrying. However, Cakacaka walked to a nearby cut in the cliff, reached high, and pulled down a sturdy tree trunk with convenient foot holds cut into it. It was kept there for just this purpose. Happily, we clambered up this three-meter “ladder” and began the task of carrying our supplies to a flat area at the top of the island, where we set up camp.

Both Aiwa Islands have been heavily grazed by goats for three or four decades and, although the tall forest appeared mature and diverse, the forest floor was completely open, with only an occasional sign of undergrowth or forest regeneration. Besides the goats, we noticed no other signs of human interference; no indications of forest fires, and certainly no cats or introduced rats (although the Pacific Rat, *Rattus exulans*, is present). This is an island of birds. Hours of searching that first day

revealed five species of pigeons and fruit-doves, including the rare (and tame) West Polynesian Ground Dove (*Gallicolumba stairi*), Pacific Harriers, and Barn Owls, plus over a dozen other bird species and just two Banded Iguanas.

Our night surveys, however, revealed a different story. In the beam of our powerful spotlights the bright yellow-green belly color of Banded Iguanas causes the sleeping lizards to stand out from the dark background vegetation. In the first few minutes of surveying that night, we spotted over a dozen Banded Iguanas; some as high as 18 m in the forest canopy. In three nights on Aiwa Lailai, we counted over 200 Banded Iguanas along our 2 km of transect lines. A wonderful result for the first systematic survey ever.

Although not as abundant as Crested Iguanas are in optimal forest habitat on the Crested Iguana Sanctuary island of Yadua Taba, Aiwa Lailai appears to support a very healthy population of Banded Iguanas. If Aiwa Levu has a similar number of Banded Iguanas per hectare (which seems possible, due to the similarity in vegetation and goat grazing pressure), then these two small islands may have a total population of 6000–8000 iguanas. Small, remote and virtually inaccessible islands are abundant around Fiji. Their remoteness



Our local guide, Cakacaka, on Aiwa Lailai with a female Banded Iguana easily captured with the aid of a very long stick.

may be their greatest asset, and hopefully will continue to keep feral animals, invasive plants, and destructive agricultural practices away.

References

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The author with a pair of Banded Iguanas captured during night transects on Aiwa Lailai.

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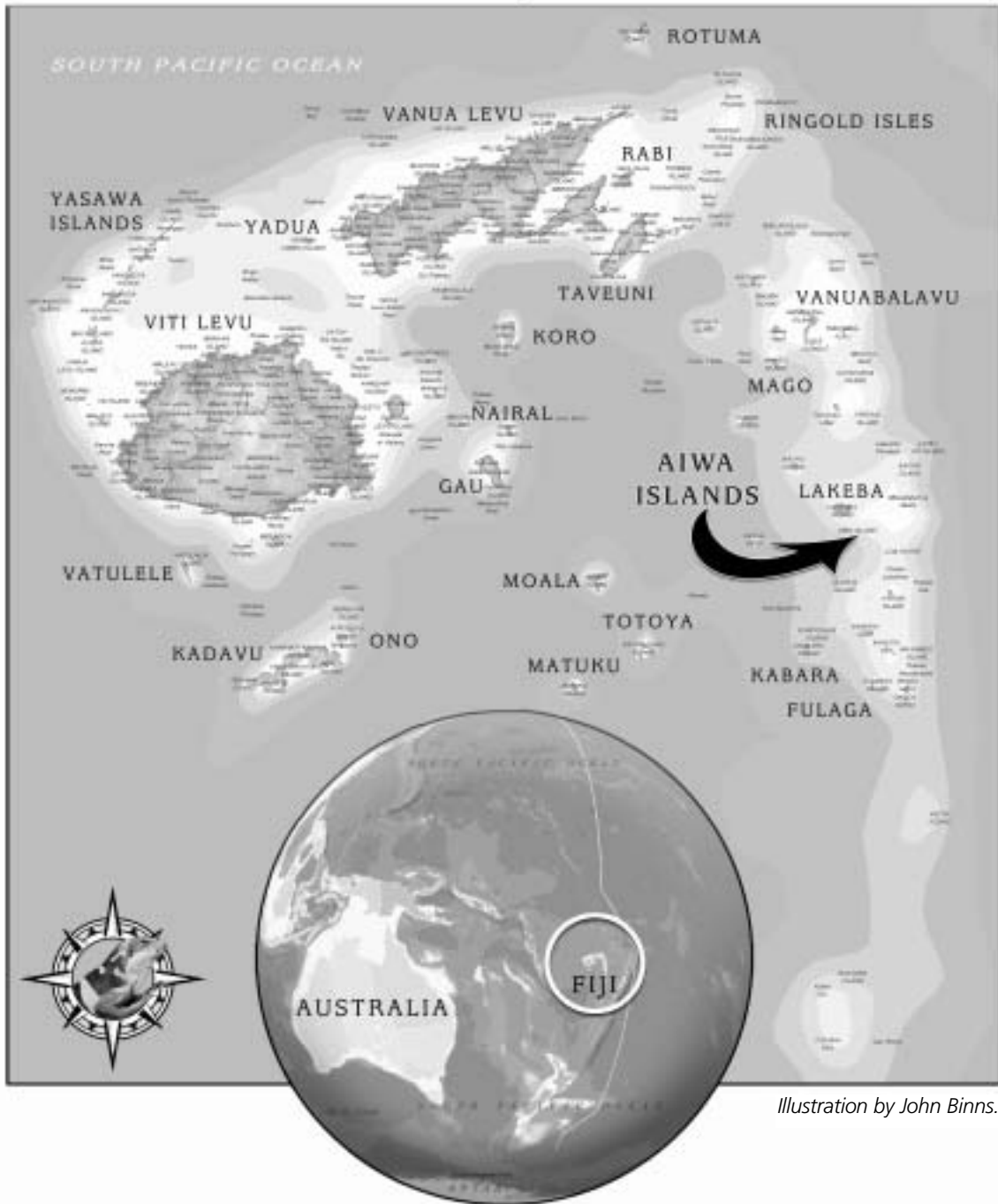


Illustration by John Binns.