

# Collecting Herpetological Specimens in Haiti<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Barbour

I landed one morning from the *Utowana*<sup>2</sup> on the Island of Saona, off the coast of Haiti.<sup>3</sup> It is a rather flat, uninteresting little island and I was not prepared for what I found. I knew that there was a high degree of endemism on all these islands around the Haitian coast. I knew, also, that Saona had never been visited by anyone in search of reptiles, so I walked around the confines of a small open garden patch, knowing that this was the sort of terrain where one might expect to find *Ameiva* lizards. Lizards of this genus have a way of splitting up, so novelties may be expected.

I hunted a long time before I heard a noise in the dead leaves. *Ameiva* lizards are ant eaters and scratch with their paws among the leaves, throwing them about in their search for the insects which may be below them. I approached the sound as stealthily as possible and could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw a perfectly typical *Ameiva*, and by the same token one utterly unlike any which I had ever seen. I have collected countless numbers of lizards of this genus. I shot this lizard on April 8, 1934. It was lilac gray on the back, washed with fawn colour on the head and turning to pale blue on the tail. A black band, beginning with the eyes, ran along the side of the body and the tail, which was azure blue beneath, while the undersurfaces of the body were glaucous blue, suffused anteriorly with cream colour. The sides of the head were buff yellow. All in all, it was one of the most beautiful and strikingly coloured reptiles which I have ever seen.

I sent the specimens to Miss Cochran of the National Museum in Washington, who was writing a herpetology of the Island of Hispaniola,<sup>4</sup> although I fairly itched to describe it myself. I realized it was new the second I saw it, as I have said before, and I asked her if she would name it for my wife. She not only named this species *Ameiva rosamondae*,<sup>5</sup> but without my knowing it she named the *Ameiva* from La Gonave Island for me.

The Haitian peasants are so poor that they will struggle hard to catch lizards, snakes, frogs, and toads — which they do

not really like to do — if they can sell them for five cents each, and I mean five cents of a Haitian gourde, which is only worth fifteen cents to start with. We often had as many as a hundred people collecting for us. In this way, on the islands that were populated of course, it was possible to secure in a few days as much material as a single person could have gotten during a long stay, so that while we stopped at innumerable different localities during these voyages on the *Utowana* and never had very much time at one place, all around Haiti and in the Bahamas we got big collections. You can do this in Jamaica, but not in Cuba.

We stopped on one occasion at Isle Tortue. I went ashore in the morning and passed word around that we would be back in the latter part of the afternoon prepared to purchase what might be forthcoming, explaining what we wanted. I had a sack of Haitian five-cent pieces on board the yacht. We found that we got much better results from our collectors if we ourselves did not stay where they could watch us. It was so much more fun to stand and stare at strangers than it was to do anything else that the temptation was quite overwhelming. But if we went ashore in the morning and spread the news of what we were prepared to do, then disappeared on board and hauled up the gangway, by the middle of the afternoon we could go ashore and be overwhelmed by a rabble of men and women, boys and girls, with snakes and lizards dangling at the ends of dozens of little lassoes which they fashioned cunningly from shredded palm leaves.

On one occasion a poor old man came up to us with a gourd full of fat white grubs. These he had dug out of a rotten palm trunk. I recognized them at once as the larvae of a big weevil which lives in decayed palm wood. Of course he brought them feeling sure we would buy so succulent a dainty, for the Haitians are extremely fond of these grubs fried. Rosamond was utterly disgusted by their very appearance and I was not allowed to take them on board and eat them, which I should have greatly enjoyed doing. I have no right to complain, however, for the family did not relish the intimacy with a wide variety of reptiles which they patiently endured.



*Ameiva taeniura* is widely distributed across the relatively mesic lowlands of Hispaniola. The population on Isla Saona (*A. t. rosamondae*) was named for Thomas Barbour's wife by Doris Cochran of the National Museum. Photograph by Father Alejandro J. Sánchez Muñoz.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from Barbour, T. 1950. *Naturalist at Large*. Robert Hale Limited, London.

<sup>2</sup> A 210-foot yacht owned by Allison Armour, on which Barbour toured the West Indies and adjacent areas of the American mainland in 1929, 1931, 1933, and 1934. See also the excerpt from Barbour's *Allison Armour and the Utowana*, which follows this account.

<sup>3</sup> Actually part of the Dominican Republic; the island, Hispaniola, was often referred to as "Haiti" at that time.

<sup>4</sup> Cochran, D. 1941. The Herpetology of Hispaniola. *Bulletin of the U.S. National Museum* (177):1–398.

<sup>5</sup> Now considered a subspecies of *Ameiva taeniura*.