

Allison Armour and the Utowana¹

Thomas Barbour

Visits to Saba, St. Kitts, Nevis, Antigua, Guadeloupe, Marie Galante, Dominica, St. Lucia, Barbados, St. Vincent, Cariacou, Grenada, Tabago [*sic*], Trinidad, followed, then La Guaira and Puerto Cabello in Venezuela, Curacao, Santa Marta, and Cartagena [*sic*] in Colombia, Colon in the Canal Zone, Port Limon in Costa Rica, Tela, Honduras, and Cienfuegos, Cuba, where we fetched up on the 15th of April. The collections from the West Indies in the Museum of Comparative Zoology are extraordinarily rich and varied, so that in many localities there was nothing especially for me to do but to see the sights. This always gave me the greatest possible enjoyment. Next to vigorous collecting in a new locality, nothing is so interesting to the naturalist as the opportunity to see those places from which he has studied material gathered by other collectors. That was the case with all these islands in the Lesser Antilles, which I myself had never visited before.

From Beata Island,² however, we had no material whatsoever in the Agassiz Museum so that everything which we got there was new to us, and we made a fine haul, too, all pure gold. This is one of those islands where one of those great and strange looking rhinoceros iguanas³ once abounded. The big, bulky lizards crept about the high limestone hills not far inland from the beach. Harmless and inoffensive nevertheless they look like

fearsome dinosaurs on a miniature scale. Each about three feet long and weighing perhaps fifteen or more pounds they walk slowly about browsing on buds and leaves and before scuttling away with surprising alacrity when they are approached, they first stare at the intruder and bob their heads up and down in a singularly truculent way. This might be a bit disconcerting to one unfamiliar with the ways of lizards in general and iguanas in particular. We preserved several. I am glad we did, for observations made during this visit, and subsequent ones as well, forced the conclusion that they belong to a doomed race.⁴ No young individuals were to be found and tracks in the sand showed that feral cats, escaped from the abandoned camps of fishermen, who go to Beata to dry fish or catch turtles, were responsible. I may add that the fishing off the west coast of the island near our anchorage was splendid.

¹ Excerpted from Barbour, T. 1945. *Allison Armour and the Utowana*. Priv. Published, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

² Off the southern tip of the Barahona Peninsula of Hispaniola.

³ *Cyclura cornuta*.

⁴ The population on Beata is extant and doing well, despite Barbour's pessimistic assessment.



Barbour's conclusion that the Rhinoceros Iguana population on Isla Beata was a "doomed race" was premature. *Photograph by John Binns.*