

IRCF ON THE MOVE

Endangered Blue Iguana Population Doubles

The Blue Iguana Recovery Programme, on the small Caribbean island of Grand Cayman, has just doubled the wild population of the critically endangered Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*).

A giant, turquoise blue lizard unique to a single island, the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana skirted with extinction in 2002 when its wild population sank to between 10 and 25 individuals. Habitat loss and road kills are still compounding long-established pressures from feral cats and roaming dogs that attack and kill hatchling and adult iguanas, respectively. This magnificent reptile was once the Cayman Islands' largest land animal, but has been in decline since the first years of human colonization.

The Blue Iguana Recovery Programme has embarked on a large-scale population restoration effort for the iguanas, in Grand Cayman's Salina Reserve. By 2006, two major releases of captive-reared Blue Iguanas had brought the Reserve's iguana population to 92 individuals, aged three and four years. Some of the four-year-olds began to breed in the summer of 2006, when researchers documented three successfully hatched nests, and observed the first hatchling to be seen wild in the Salina Reserve for well over a decade.

A group of international volunteers converged on Grand Cayman in late 2006, to help the Programme's staff release 103 more Blue Iguanas, which were available thanks to the Programme's highly successful captive-breeding and head-starting operation. Dubbed "*Team Blue 2007*," the volunteer team is the latest in a series that is coordinated by the Programme's main U.S. partner, the International Reptile Conservation Foundation, which also underwrote a portion of the operation's cost through a generous grant from a donor through the Maine Community Foundation. Primary funding for the release effort has come from the Programme's main British partner, the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust.

Team Blue 2007 began work in late November, building artificial retreats based on a Programme-developed design, which encourages the iguanas to stay in the areas in which they are released. Made variously from wood and lightweight concrete, and weighing up to 35 lbs. each, the retreats were backpacked into the Salina Reserve, placed strategically in predetermined positions, and mapped precisely using GPS.

Simultaneously, a team of veterinarians from the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York, examined the 103 iguanas scheduled for release, checking blood smears, droppings, and



HRH Prince Edward, Earl of Wessex, visited the Salina Reserve trailhead on 4 February to see three young Blue Iguanas about to be released. Here he responds to an adult Blue ("Pedro") as BIRP Director Fred Burton explains the threats that Blue Iguanas face in the wild.

growth rates, to ensure that no parasites or other diseases were being introduced from the captive population to the wild.

By mid-December, the first retreats were ready for occupancy, and the iguanas were certified fit to go free. Team Blue then expanded into a local community affair, as Christmas and New Year holidays freed environmentally concerned residents from their day-to-day jobs. School students, staff from the Department of Environment, and staff from the National Trust for the Cayman Islands were among those who risked the extraordinarily harsh terrain of the Salina Reserve to release the young Blue Iguanas into their designated retreats. As the release reached a peak, the Governor of the Cayman Islands, Mr. Stuart Jack, with his family and later his staff, also joined the team.

By New Year's Day 2007, the population of Blue Iguanas in the Salina Reserve had risen from 92 to 195. Combined with the smaller numbers of Blue Iguanas the Programme has released into the QE II Botanic Park, the total wild population of Blue Iguanas now stands at approximately 214 individuals, an order of magnitude greater than only five years ago.

The Blue Iguana Recovery Programme, which operates under the auspices of the National Trust for the Cayman Islands, has a goal of restoring and maintaining at least 1,000 Blue Iguanas in the wild. That target will require acquisition and protection of additional dry shrubland habitat in eastern Grand Cayman, and will require the Programme to develop ways to sustain itself financially for the long term.

For more information, see the following websites: www.BlueIguana.ky, www.nationaltrust.org.ky, www.ircf.org, and www.durrell.org.



MICHAEL KERN

Some of the TeamBlue volunteers (from left): Doug Bell, Fred Burton, Raffi (last name unknown), Molly Cavanaugh, Andrew McAfee, Nick Louis, Memory Mays, Lorraine Scotson, Jude Bryja, and Kadie Frasier.

Project Palearis

The initial phase of Project Palearis (see the Focus on Conservation, p. 64), which the IRCF is undertaking in partnership with Zootropic and Zoo Atlanta, will begin in May 2007. The IRCF has purchased a vehicle and provided seed money for research investigating the distribution, ecology, and conservation status of the Guatemalan Black Iguana, *Ctenosaura palearis*. Zootropic's Daniel Ariano and an undergraduate student, Paola Coti, will bead-tag and release all animals that are captured. Five males and two females are already under observation at the research site in the Motagua Valley of Guatemala. Thanks to the efforts of Zootropic, *C. palearis* has been granted protection under Guatemalan law, and animals may no longer be exported from the country.



DANIEL ARIANO

The IRCF purchased this vehicle for use by personnel involved in Projects Palearis and Heloderma.



DANIEL ARIANO

Guatemalan Black Iguana (*Ctenosaura palearis*).

Project Heloderma

A proposal to transfer the Guatemalan Beaded Lizard (*Heloderma horridum charlesbogerti*) from CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna) Appendix II to Appendix I has been submitted, with a decision scheduled for the Fourteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the CITES Agreement on 3–15 June 2007 in The Hague, Netherlands. If ratified, the transfer will confer a much higher degree of protection on this critically endangered species. Project Heloderma, the conservation program on behalf of *H. h. charlesbogerti*, is a joint undertaking of the IRCF, Zootropic, and Zoo Atlanta (see also *IGUANA* 13(2), p. 176 and 13(3), pp. 178–191).



DANIEL ARIANO

Guatemalan Beaded Lizard (*Heloderma horridum charlesbogerti*).

Argentine Sand Dune Lizard

The IRCF is providing equipment and funds for a research project on behalf of the Argentine Sand Dune Lizard (*Liolaemus multimaculatus*). This small reptile is uniquely adapted to its sand dune habitat, able to “swim” in the sand in search of its insect prey and perfectly camouflaged by its matching coloration. The Sand Dune Lizard and many other inhabitants of this fragile ecosystem in Buenos Aires Province of Argentina are endangered by habitat destruction. *Liolaemus multimaculatus* will be featured in an article in the June issue of *IGUANA*.



FEDERICO KACOURIS

Argentine Sand Dune Lizard (*Liolaemus multimaculatus*).