

suitable for either amateurs or professional herpetologists, and the price is eminently affordable.

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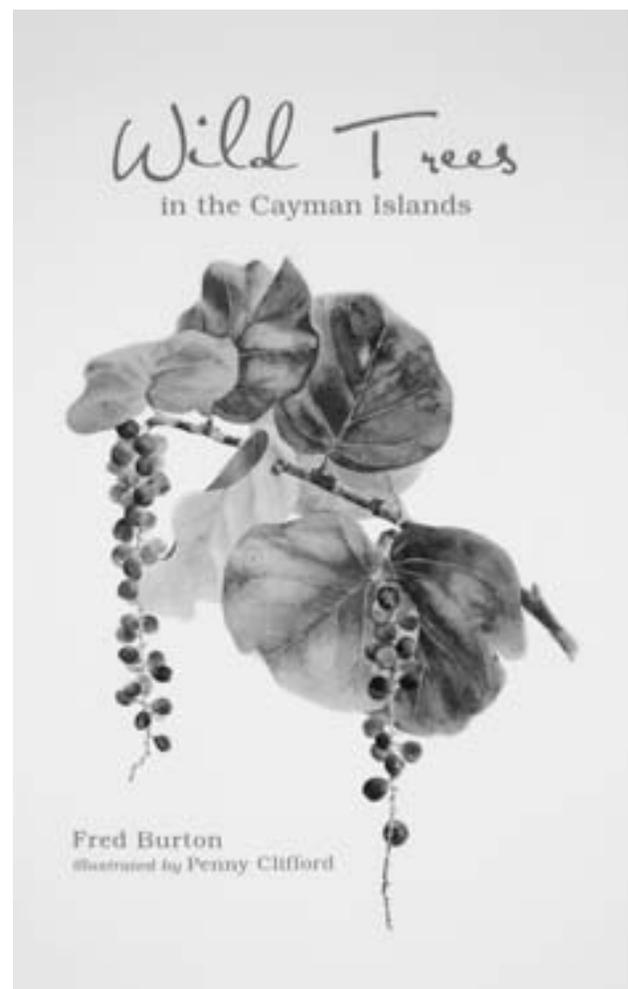
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Plants and the Animals that Eat Them

Wild Trees in the Cayman Islands. 2nd ed. 2007. By Fred Burton, illustrated by Penny Clifford. International Reptile Conservation Foundation (IRCF), San Jose, California, on behalf of the National Trust for the Cayman Islands. 240 pp. Softcover – ISBN 987-1-4276-2168-9 – \$ 20. Copies may be ordered from the National Trust (www.nationaltrust.org.ky) or from the IRCF (www.IRCF.org).

I once defined biology as the study of animals and their food, when an acquaintance, who happened to be a botanist, corrected me by saying that biology was really the study of plants and their parasites. Regardless of whose definition you favor, the reality is that all life forms on earth are inextricably intertwined, which explains in a round-about fashion how the International Reptile Conservation Foundation (IRCF) came to publish a book about trees. In fact, the Foundation's statement of purpose says that the organization works both for the conservation of reptiles and the natural habitats and ecosystems on which they rely. So, a book about trees, especially "wild" trees is not such a bizarre concept, particularly when one considers that the book also is about the Cayman Islands, home of the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana (*Cyclura lewisi*), the conservation of which the IRCF has supported from the organization's inception. In fact, all proceeds from the book are earmarked for the Blue Iguana Recovery Programme.

The most obvious purpose of a book about the trees of the Cayman Islands is to help the reader identify the myriad different species found on the three islands that comprise the nation. How well does it work? I'm not sure, but am inclined to think it does quite well. Unfortunately, I could not put it to a real test, since I haven't had the good fortune to visit the islands in several years. However, using photographs of trees and leaves and some material gleaned from herbaria that contained Caribbean species, the keys worked reasonably well, even for a biologist more inclined toward animals than their food. The only problems I encountered involved specimens from other West Indian islands, which might well have represented different varieties than those found in the Caymans (common, cosmopolitan



species were easily and accurately identified). Regardless of my success, the choices were obvious, the language clear (even to one not entirely familiar with botanical jargon), and the options provided at each step generally corrected mistakes before venturing too far along the wrong path. The individual descriptions were



adequate to confirm (or deny) a proper identification, with drawings of the most critical features nicely complemented by the same clear language I found in the keys. An additional feature is that the bark of all species covered is illustrated in color. In some instances, bark can be definitive, but in many others, one looks just like the next. I might have preferred color photographs of flowers or fruits to those of the bark, but that's quibbling over a minor point. In the end, the tool worked, at least to the extent that I could test it. Maps and indices to common and scientific names round out the utilitarian features of this volume.

A less obvious purpose of the book, especially if you skip the introduction and go directly to the key and species descriptions, is to promote an appreciation of nature and stress its value to an island nation. As in so many other West Indian nations, the impact of European settlement was felt much earlier here than on the mainland, and ongoing development to accommodate population growth and a burgeoning tourism industry is threatening the few remaining wild places. As the Governor of the Cayman Islands stated in the preface to this second edition, nature "will become increasingly valuable, only if it is conserved." The destruction caused by Hurricane Ivan in 2004 clearly illustrated how an appreciation of trees is most intense when no trees are standing. Consequently, however, Ivan renewed interest in propagating native species, which generally are more tolerant of the hurricanes with which they evolved than more recent arrivals that never had to cope with 150-mph winds. A very brief section on propagation acknowledges that interest, less with detailed instructions than by pointing readers to resources available at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park.

Aside from the principal functions, I very much enjoyed the historical perspectives presented in the introduction (presumably frustrated by impenetrable forests and an inability to find water in 1586, the men in Sir Francis Drake's fleet set fire to the woods and sailed away, beginning the deforestation that continues today). I laughed at the inclusion in the instructions on how to use this book the very prominent warnings about those trees that can cause considerable discomfort to those foolish enough to handle them (Maiden Plum, Manchineel, and, if you're on Little Cayman, Poison Tree). The reason for my wry humor is that many West Indians fear reptiles, especially snakes,

but I've never encountered anyone who fears trees. Apparently, people distinguish between trees that can inflict pain and those that don't, but do not make the same distinction for animals... I also sympathized with the need to explain the use of names. Despite an effort to use local names when possible, that just didn't work in all cases. Sometimes a name applied to several species, sometimes a species had several names, and sometimes a species was so insignificant (no obvious utility and/or rare and inconspicuous) that it had no name at all. Having encountered similar situations that apply to animals, I long for the day when we all learn only the scientific names of species. Could that be so much harder? As a child learning to speak, I can only guess that one name is as good as another. I realize that scientific names sometimes change when we reclassify plants or animals to accommodate new information about their relationships, but at least each species generally has only one name. I also appreciated the necessary subjectivity of having to distinguish between trees and shrubs, which represent a continuum in which some species straddle the line (like lizards, trees and shrubs apparently don't read the textbooks that tell them what they are and how they should behave).

Criticisms essentially boil down to a single issue. I understand the reasons for including only wild trees (endemic and native species along with several "naturalized" forms, such as Coconut Palms, Mangos, and Tamarind, that are reproducing and sustaining populations in the wild), and I can relate to the desire to push people onto trails and into the bush where they can encounter and maybe learn to appreciate nature. However, I also face the reality that the animals I study often associate with introduced orchard or ornamental species in the less than pristine habitats in gardens and on the grounds of hotels and businesses. To truly understand these associations, I need also to identify the "real" interlopers in paradise. Including all introduced forms might quickly have become unwieldy, but the most common ornamentals surely could have been accommodated for those of us who often work along the boundaries between nature and artifice. Maybe in the third edition...

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