

# Mayaguana Blues

John Bendon

**A**fter riding at high speed over choppy seas to reach Booby Cay, I saw *Cyclura carinata bartschi*, out in the hot Caribbean sunshine. There they were, same as always, but now—how many remain?

## 17 March 1997

Amongst the great sprawl of the Bahamian islands, way over to the south-east, north-east of the flamingo-populated isle of Inagua, sits the little known island of Mayaguana, 25 miles (40 kilometers) long, 6 miles (10 kilometers) wide, at about 22°N and 73°W. To the east of this sits a small island known as Booby Cay, upon which exist a small population of the West Indian Rock Iguana, *Cyclura carinata bartschi*. This is the only known place on earth where they are found. Just how many there are remains to be seen. The last survey was carried out by David Blair (see *Iguana*

*Times Vol. 1, #6*), about 8 years ago. He saw a fair number of iguanas (about 40), but even so, classed them as very seriously endangered. Perhaps only 200 existed at that time, less than *Cyclura rileyi rileyi* found in 1995 (J. Bendon, *Iguana Times Vol. 4, #4*). The cay is 2000 meters long and 500 meters wide (1¼ miles x ½ mile) and iguanas were only spotted on the western side in 1988. I'm going there because nobody knows what has happened in the interim and it's certainly time for another look. It involves taking a boat from the main settlement of Abraham's Bay and travelling about twenty miles east, a two hour journey for a small, fast seacraft.

## 18 March 1997

When the next day dawned it was obvious that I would not be going anywhere. Fierce winds and showery squalls were doing their thing. So I chat-



Large male, *Cyclura carinata bartschi*, in habitat on Booby Cay. Photograph: John Bendon

ted with the locals, as much information can be gleaned from sitting on a front porch in the Caribbean with local folk.

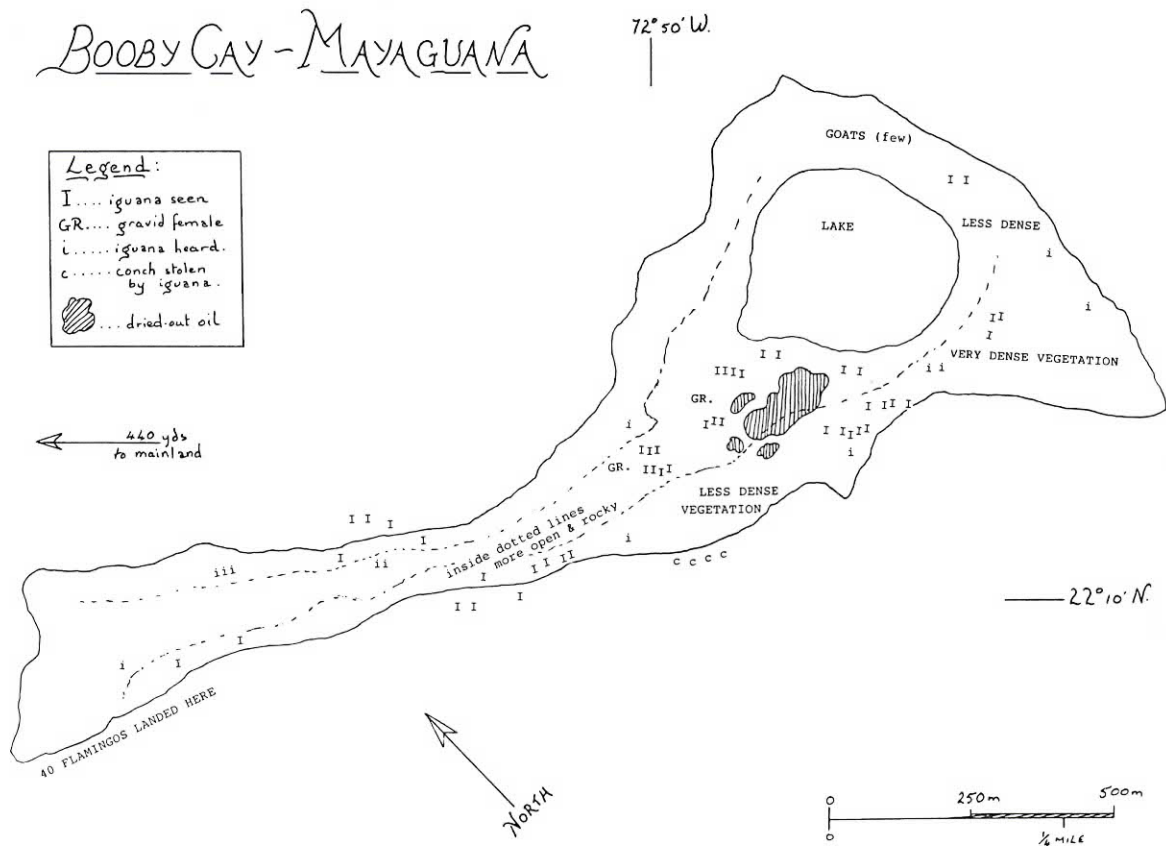
The first thing I learned was that the iguanas on Booby Cay will eat small amounts of conch! I was assured that the reptiles indeed still existed, but I would have to see it for myself to believe it. Apparently, when the fishermen go down that way, they catch conch, extract it from the shell, and leave it out to dry in the sun. Normally it is left out quite high off the ground, not on rocks, perhaps on tree branches or bushes. This is because the moment their backs are turned iguanas rush out from nowhere to steal and eat it! "Gwanas, dey steal de conch!"

Usually on small islands the stories one hears which sound like rumors are actually truths. One local resident told me his uncle used to catch iguanas with a forked stick, pinning them to the ground by their necks. He would then take them back to the mainland, put them in a cage and, after a few days would cook and eat them. Once, he told me, two iguanas escaped and were wandering around the immediate area for a few days. His



Southern shore of Booby Cay looking to the West and Mayaguana. Photograph: John Bendon

uncle noticed that usually they got sick and died. However if he kept them in cages and fed them, they stayed healthy until he would kill and eat them. He seemed to think that it was not possible for them to live on the mainland of Mayaguana.



I questioned him about the vegetation and discovered that there are certain things growing on the cay that don't grow on the mainland. Maybe they ate something that poisoned them. Perhaps they were attacked by cats, or perhaps a more reasonable explanation is that they were not in their proper habitat. Nobody alive, apparently, has ever seen them running around the mainland, even the part just opposite Booby Cay (separated by water just two feet deep and four hundred yards wide). Another woman told me that when they were kids they used to bring "gwanas" back from the cay and set them free by the coastline away from the town; but they always turned up dead, she said.

The other thing I discovered was that the locals didn't really understand anything about conservation. When I suggested that a breeding program might be needed, if there weren't many animals left, they asked, "what use are they, the iguanas?" Apparently it didn't matter to them if the iguanas died out. It turns out they didn't realize that this subspecies exists only on Booby Cay. They thought it would also occur elsewhere—in

fact they thought that iguanas were iguanas wherever they were—all the same species. They also thought that iguanas and lizards were different entities. They knew the flamingoes were protected by law and not to be touched, but were surprised to hear that iguanas had the same status. This is why it is up to us, the iguana-lovers, the I.I.S., and the Bahamas National Trust to do the conservation work. This island is very remote, very poor, and sparsely populated (about 500 people). Even the two policemen I met had nothing much to do.

### 19 March 1997

I finally got out there, even though the sea was a bit rough. I had to beat the weather and the locals went out of their way to get me a boat and a couple of fishermen who wanted to earn some money "taking this gwana man to Booby Cay."

After what I would call "the boat ride from hell," which in actual fact was quite exciting, as well as a little dangerous, because of the waves, they dropped me off and went fishing. I had about six hours. As soon as I got onto the beach, a



Adult gravid female. Photograph: John Bendon



Large male, *Cyclura carinata bartschi*, retreats into habitat on Booby Cay. Photograph: John Bendon

1-year-old grey iguana tripped lightly past me. I didn't realize it was an iguana at first, because I wasn't expecting much from this trip—I feared that they were, perhaps, extinct.

I went up over the dune that surrounded the cay and stepped into another world. Walking around, I found nothing. I thought, “None left? Exterminated by egg-eating rats? Starved out by voracious goats?”

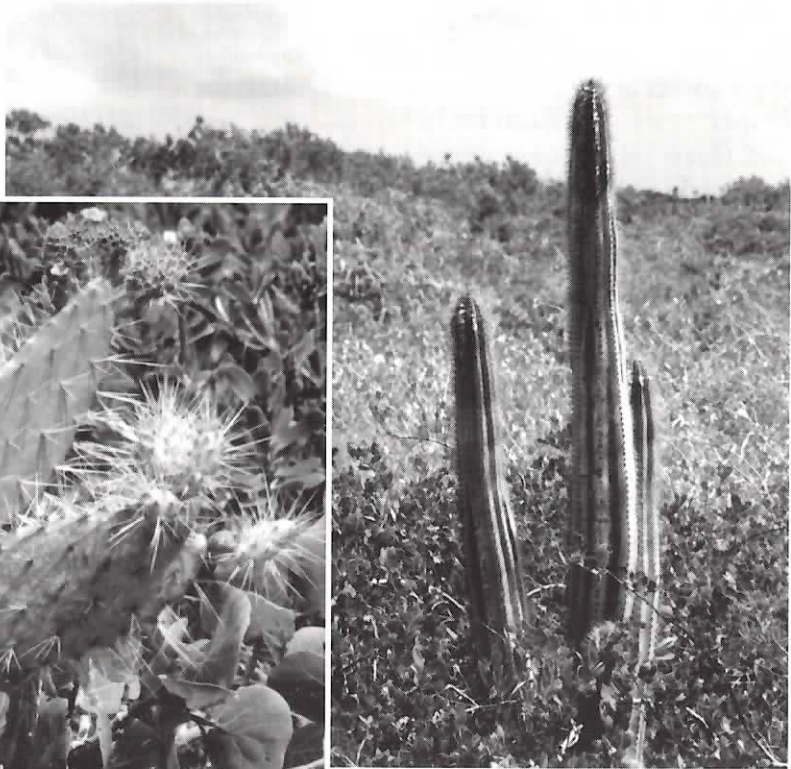
Then I heard the unmistakable snorting noises that indicated iguanas. They cannot sweat through their non-porous skin and so they snort salty water through their nostrils. I stood very still. Suddenly a bush rustled and a female iguana ran out. Next, a large male came charging out after her and they both disappeared into another bush, which shook violently. Everywhere I went, I disturbed lizards of all sizes.

After a while I sat on the ground to get out the camera and eat a sandwich. After a few minutes I noticed a female sunning herself. She must have been there all the time. I wanted to get some pho-

tos and so I crept nearer and nearer while she, in accordance, crept away. I broke off some bread and threw it her way. Iguanas seem to have a penchant for bread even when they've never seen it before. This one was no exception and came nearer to eat it. I laid a trail towards my lunch-rock, then went back and sat there with the camera. The creature ended up two feet away and looked up at me. I got some really good shots.

One male that I saw was about two and a half feet long and had enormous jowls with large round scales on them. He posed for me for quite a while. His color was basically grey, no stripes, white spines on the crest, dull yellow to orange tail, the jowls being pinkish white. The best female I saw was much the same, but with much smaller jowls and crest spines. None of these animals, upon spotting me, compressed themselves laterally. I obviously was not a threat, which led me to believe that they were easy to catch. I did not try this—I had no desire to do so—it was just nice to see them operating in their natural environment.

*Cephalocereus bahamensis*, Columnar Cactus on Booby Cay (right). Photograph: John Bendon



*Opuntia Millspaughii* (right), is a cactus limited to distribution in the southern Bahamas. Photograph: John Bendon



The flora of Booby Cay is actually more similar to the vegetation of the Turks and Caicos Islands. *Melocactus* sp, Turks Cap Cactus (right) is not found in the central and northern Bahamas. Photograph: John Bendon

I found no rat droppings and saw no rats, but spotted a few grey anoles. The few goats on the cay were on the opposite side of the lake from the lizards.

Goats are put on the cay by Mayaguana residents to avoid having to build fences, although it seems a long way to come to do this. The settlement at Abraham's Bay is overrun with the noisy creatures, who jump up onto cars. They are put on the cay to fatten them up for eating. Every now and then, a resident comes along and removes a couple of them for the dinner table. Then someone else comes along and puts one or two back there. So the very small population goes up and down, but never steadily increases. This is a lot better than was thought—that there was a large breeding herd there. This is not true.

Where I found iguanas, I found little evidence of destruction of habitat. I saw plenty of room for the animals to live and reproduce, although there is a physical limit as to how many iguanas can occupy a certain square footage. They occupy much

more than just the western part of the island, as was assumed in the last survey, perhaps because the lake was smaller. The vegetation on the cay is quite varied; there appears to be plenty to eat. It includes *Opuntia* cactus, but unfortunately it seems to be afflicted with the same predator found in San Salvador, home of *Cyclura rileyi rileyi*, the larvae of the South American moth *Cactoblastis cactorum*, and seems to be cay-wide. Curiously, I saw no such infestation on the mainland.

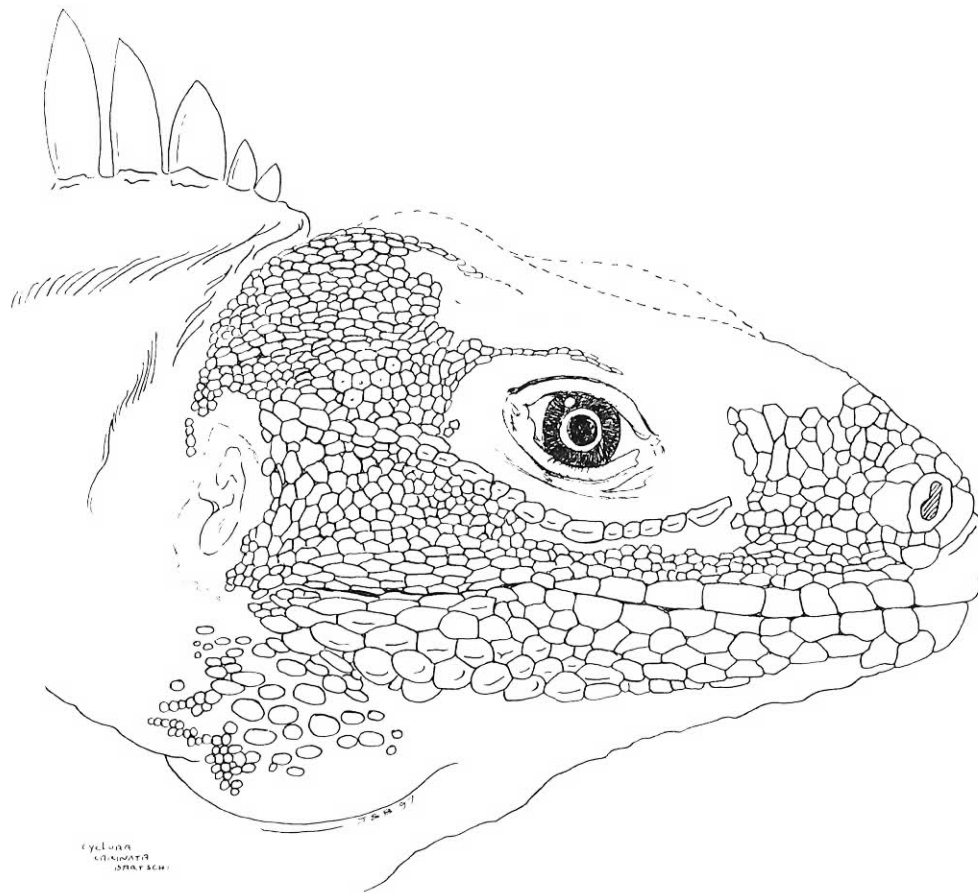
I watched the iguanas go about their daily business for a long time, and although I saw only 46 individuals, I heard lots of snorting coming from bushes and under rocks. I am convinced that there are many more than I saw.

### 20 March 1997

Before leaving, I spoke with three schoolteachers on Mayaguana, promising to send them photographs of my visit to Booby Cay. I asked them to teach their students about the iguanas out there, and the fact that they are something unique



Adult female in habitat on Booby Cay. Photograph: John Bendon




Scalation rendering of female *Cyclura carinata bartschi*. Illustration: John Bendon

that they should be proud of, and that they should be left there, and indeed be left alone.

### Conclusion

The trip out there was exhausting, but I returned confident that these creatures, the last of their species, were not dying out, but living happily and healthily in the environment that they know, as they always have done. There is another subspecies, *C. c. carinata*, that lives in the Turks and Caicos Islands fifty miles to the southeast, and it prompts me to think that, cons ago, some of them somehow floated over to Booby Cay and became the *Cyclura carinata* known as *bartschi*.

Whatever happened, I'm glad they are there. When I'm back home and thinking of the trip, I will be happy knowing that there are iguanas on Booby Cay—in their prime, running around and living without too much threat. Live long and prosper, *Cyclura carinata bartschi*. 

### List of Iguanas Spotted on Booby Cay, Mayaguana, Bahamas, 17-20 March, 1997

Adults:	23, including 2 large males
Babies (6 months old?):	9
Yearlings (18 months old?):	4
3- to 4-year-olds:	7
Gravid Females:	3
Total Seen:	46
Probably Exist:	200
Plus Babies:	30 (estimate)
Possible Total:	230