

# Searching for *Iguana delicatissima*

Janet Fuhri

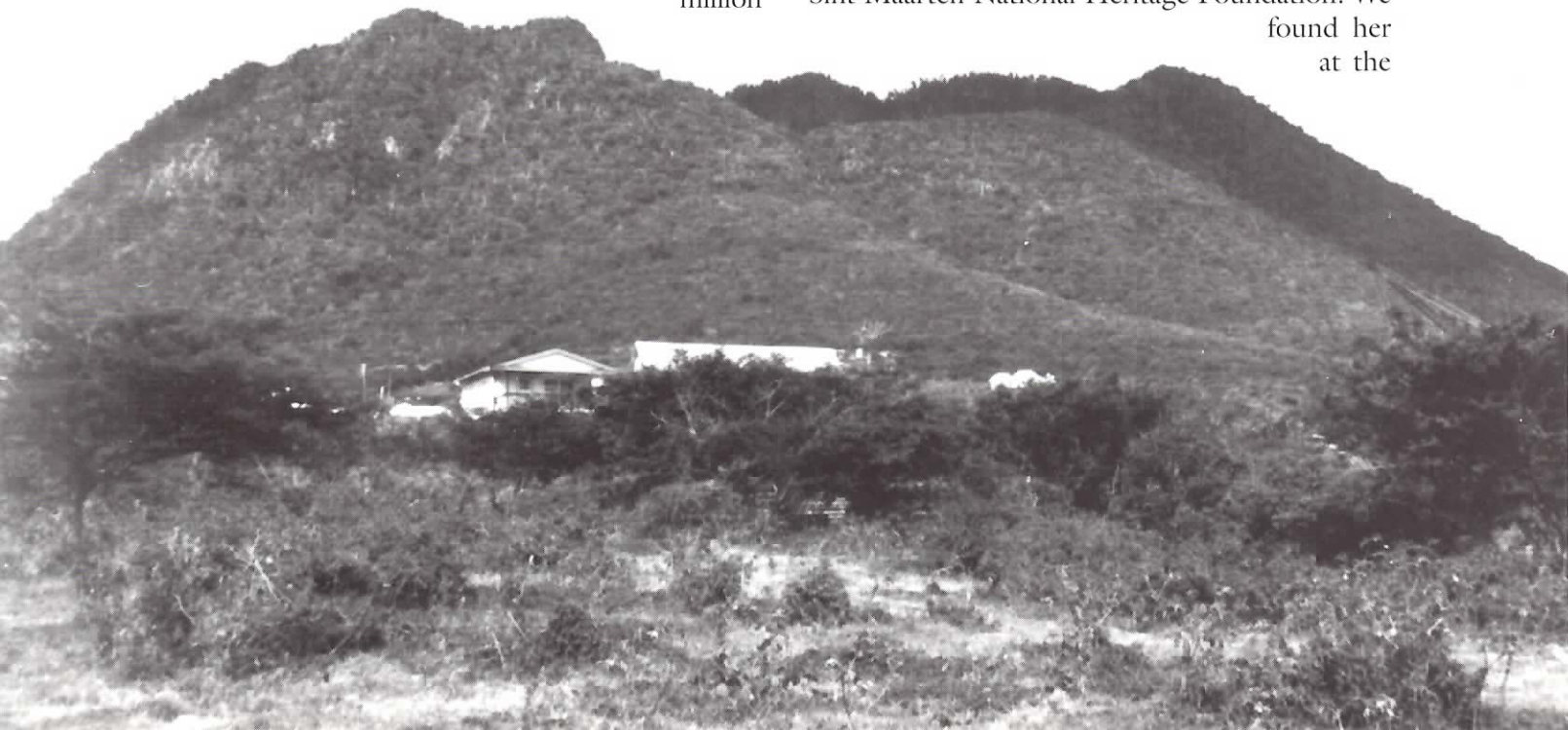
The Lesser Antilles are home to *Iguana delicatissima*, or more accurately the few that have survived the imposition of man and the havoc of natural events. My husband, Carl, and I traveled to Sint Maarten/Saint Martin in July 1997, a trip originally planned as a restful vacation. Prior to leaving home we learned of the Antillean iguana, and with sketchy reports of the proximity of possible habitats to our destination, our restful intent vaporized as excitement and purpose materialized.

Sint Maarten, the Dutch side of the island, was our base during the week long trip. Multiple volcanic peaks form the island, with deep valleys and a surrounding coastline of beaches and rocky precipices. What must have been magnificent and bountiful iguana habitat is now recovering from almost total devastation by Hurricane Luis in 1995. Islanders spoke of a perfectly brown landscape with all mature trees lost. The fate of *Iguana delicatissima* here had been sealed long before the hurricane by overwhelming man-made stressors. The island is a thirty-seven square mile magnet for international tourism, with seventy percent of the population involved in the industry. Over one million

travelers visit each year. Traipsing over the hills, valleys, and beaches are free roaming, ubiquitous goats and an impressive army of canines. Mon-goose were introduced in the past, effecting a merciless predation on the iguanas.

The French Saint Martin presents as a gentler rolling landscape to the north. Peaks and valleys are stripped of forests to a large extent, providing abundant pastures for a few sleek cattle. Civilization here has left no allowance for cohabitation with iguanas. We spoke with many people of the island, seeking information about the iguanas, to be told repeatedly how good they were to eat and how tourists had come seeking the delicacy in the past, a story we came to dread. Several people, including our first taxi driver, told us of iguanas living around the airport and crossing the outlying road at times. It seems a large crate of iguanas, species undetermined, had been damaged or dropped with many escaping. Our repeated attempts to locate even a hospitable refuge in the area of the airport left us convinced that this tale had been long and often told to embellish island lore.

Sint Maarten was kind to us, however, in the person of Elsje Wilson-Bosch, the president of the Sint Maarten National Heritage Foundation. We found her at the



Sint Maarten Museum in Phillipsburg, where she valiantly crusades to involve local and visiting people in appreciation for the history and historical remnants on the island. Elsje is part archeologist, part curator, and total educator, with a great zeal for preservation of treasure of all sorts. Although flora and fauna are not her first interests, she was drawn in by our enthusiasm for *Iguana delicatissima*. She offered us a bound survey of the local plants and animals written after Hurricane Luis. We were told to peruse this while she finished a discussion with a group of local children. This was a challenge since neither of us speak or read Dutch, the language of the text. We obediently strained to the unfamiliar and were pleased to identify nearby island names and references to iguana populations, albeit rather vague. Elsje then translated for us, confirming our conjecture, and we had the birth of a plan for our search. She was generous with flight and ferry information as well. As an educator, Elsje travels to the surrounding islands for the local governments. We left her museum feeling encouraged and richer for having spent time with her, her enthusiasm matching our own.

The second treasure bestowed on us by the island was our first contact with *Iguana delicatissima* at the Sint Maarten Zoo. She appeared to be a robust, serene female who shared a free form enclosure with a pair of *Iguana iguana*. Her colors were vivid green and yellow. The differences between her and her pen mates were obvious

given their close proximity. The most striking was her lack of the subtympanic shield. Other differences included a prominent row of submandibular scales, a full body conformation more reminiscent of *Cyclura*, and the lack of banding on her tail. While Carl shot a roll of film of her, I discovered to my astonishment that my camera was nonfunctional, even with new batteries installed for the trip. This commanded a second trip to the zoo days later with a new camera. On the first trip we had hoped to speak with the zookeepers, but found they were at a conference in New York. Unfortunately, they had not returned by our second visit. This was an opportunity missed, and many questions went unanswered. Without a same species mate, would she breed with *Iguana iguana*? We would hope that an *Iguana delicatissima* mate is planned for the near future.

The following day we travelled by ferry from Marigot, the largest town in French Saint Martin, north to Anguilla, a British territory. Anguilla is a narrow, rather flat island about sixteen miles long. The highest rise is just over two hundred feet. Here we began to discover what a truly valuable asset the taxi drivers of the islands are. All are friendly, and helpfulness seems an integral part of the occupation. We again told our story of the search for their Antillean iguana, and although our driver and his cabby friends were highly amused by our request, he shifted into a thoughtful mode and told us where he knew there had been iguanas

when he was a boy. We figured boyhood memories were worth checking into. At one point he dropped us off at a trail leading into a valley with a bat cave. At the beginning of this rather easy trail Carl spotted what he believed was a juvenile iguana and, although it ran and was not to appear again, our hopes were up for more sightings as we walked. As it turned out, for the next eight or so hours we were on the island, that was



Female *Iguana delicatissima* at the Sint Maarten Zoo. Photograph: Carl Fuhri



Mt. Scenery, Saba, Lesser Antilles. *Photograph: Janet Fuhri*

our only encounter with an iguana, too brief for identification. Goats, bats, cows, ameivas and anoles, but no more iguanas and no evidence by way of tail drags, shed, or feces even on secluded beaches.

The most remarkable day of the trip was spent traveling to Saba and Sint Eustatius, the islands mentioned in the Dutch survey. We flew to Saba first, landing on a runway much resembling an aircraft carrier with cliffs and crashing waves at either end, an experience that alone was worth the price of the fare.

Saba is the top of a volcano rising 2,854 feet at the highest peak. The island is five square miles and the only road has two main directions, up and down, with a few hairpin turns where absolutely necessary. Again we were blessed with a wonderful taxi driver, measuring up to Elsie in helpfulness with his own brand of enthusiasm for our search. He was sure that he could take us to iguanas, "there's lots of them," Eddie kept repeating. He was able to point out the animals perched on distant high cliffs and determinedly drove up to a cliff where we could approach one from above.

This animal appeared to be an ancient male, nearly all black with red flecks around his mouth.

He was quite skeletal, however, his tail did not show signs of atrophy. He slept as we approached, and stirred little as I got close enough to stroke his head. We communed and took photos for about ten minutes until he reached his limit for company. He then leapt over the cliff to observe us from a small cave entrance about twenty-five feet below. Touching and viewing him from above, it was difficult to examine him for the presence of a sub-tympanic shield.

Although it would have been initially easy to catch him for examination, I refrained in awe, leaving him his dignity.

Another animal was spotted in a ravine. It appeared to be female and was robust in body. She was too distant to distinguish detail, but Carl photographed her with the largest zoom in tow. His slides later revealed a lack of visible banding on the tail. In all we saw seven individuals from the taxi without actually entering habitat. We heard multiple first hand accounts of sightings. Several people told of iguanas curiously entering buildings through open doors. Although Sabans seem to know little about their iguanas, they displayed admirable pride and respect for them. Overall they go unmolested. There are no mongoose on the

island, although goats are present in limited numbers. We found many opportunities to educate islanders about the need to protect their iguanas and they were eager to listen.

Worth mentioning is the panther anole, *Anolis sabanus*. Along our climb into the rainforest on Mount Scenery, we found an abundance of these beautiful creatures. The males are flamboyantly spotted and each was invariably accompanied by a dull colored female.

The second half of the day was spent on Saint Eustatius, a ten minute plane ride from Saba. Stacia is roughly twelve square miles. Volcanic peaks dominate the North and South with flat land between, that had once been sugar plantations. We presented our iguana query to our new taxi driver and she told us that although there were iguanas wild on the island, we should visit a woman who had some “preserved” as a guaranteed sighting. After a brief discussion and to our relief we learned that they were captive, not pickled. As promised we found six *Iguana delicatissima* at the Kings Well Resort in Oranjestad. Win and Laura, the resort owners have supplied their wild caught guests of two years with a landscaped



A nearly black iguana on the volcanic island of Saba. Photograph: Carl Fuhri

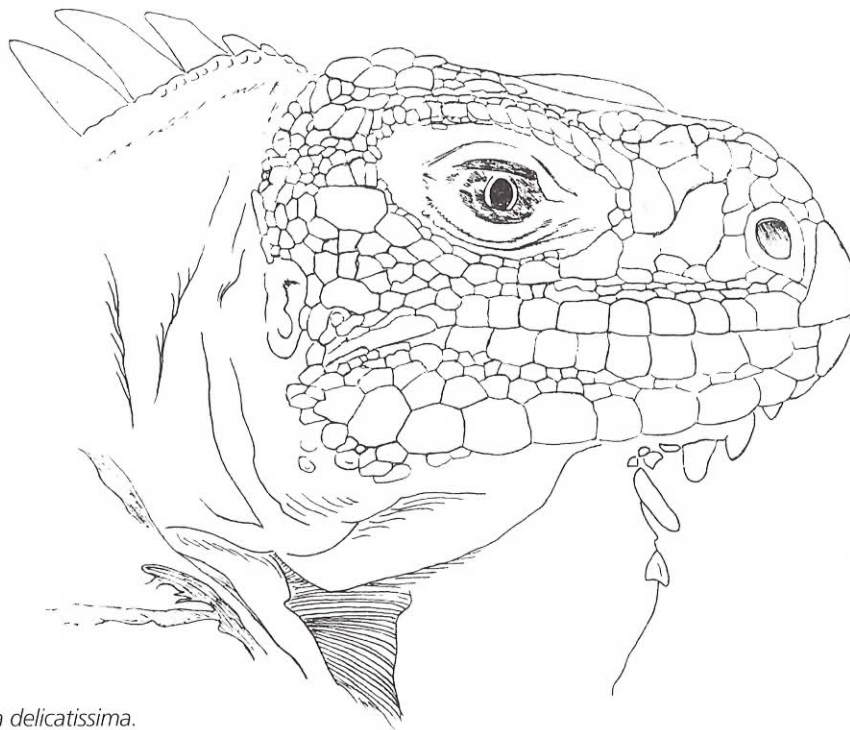
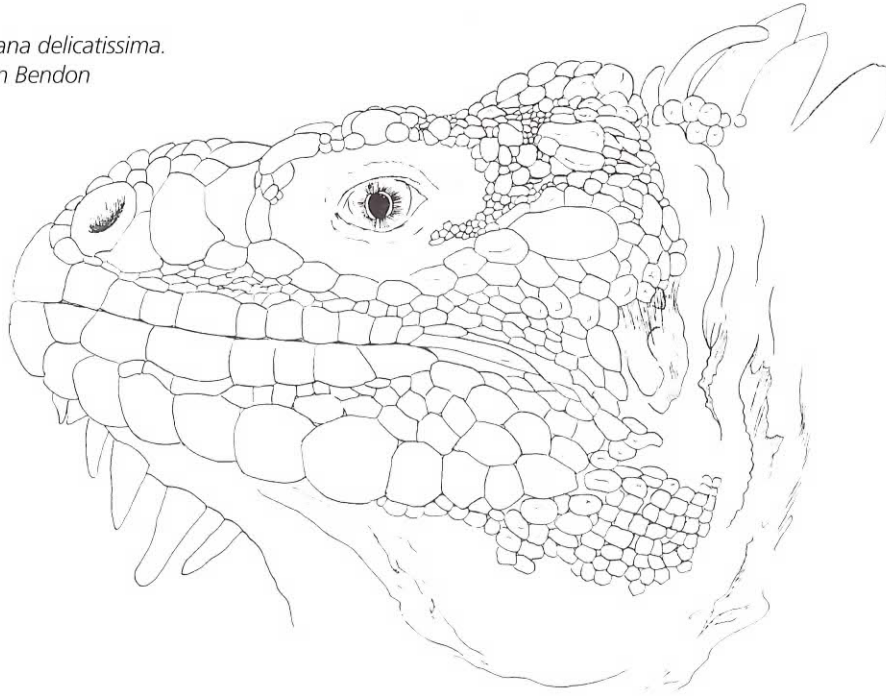
enclosure approximately twelve feet by twelve feet, including a small pond in one corner. Within were two obvious adult males, one dominant and robust, the other fearful and thin. Three of the others were females, two adult and one subadult. The sixth animal was also subadult of undetermined gender. The young animals were a glowing yellow green. The adults were much darker and neutrally colored. The most immediate and impressive physical characteristic was the presence of frontoparietal horn scales, more developed in the males. Although four of the iguanas came readily to us, climbing on our feet, they resisted our touching them.

Their diet consisted of papaya, mango, bananas, and daily fresh hibiscus leaves. They also received a weekly portion of dog food. We found Win and Laura to be very concerned about the wild population, and well aware of the scarcity of the animals. Laura spoke of the yearly hatchling population dwindling rapidly due to local traffic. They also vie for habitat and vegetation with goats and cattle who roam the island, indeed the public streets, at will. Laura and Win are a force for public education on the Antillean iguana. On the way through the town of Oranjestad a small billboard reads “Save Stacias’ Treasures” with a painting of the iguana. Unfortunately, Win and Laura have had no success with an iguana breeding program to date. Last year’s eggs were disturbed by a hurricane. The World Wildlife Foundation will be sup-



Panther anolis, *Anolis sabanus*, on Mt. Scenery, Saba. Photograph: Janet Fuhri

Adult male *Iguana delicatissima*.  
Illustration: John Bendon




Adult female *Iguana delicatissima*.  
Illustration: John Bendon

porting a marine preserve at Stacia according to Laura and she intends to direct their attention to *Iguana delicatissima*.

Following the visit to the resort, we hiked the Southern volcanic peak known as The Quill with local expert guide, Raphael "Charley" Lopes. Charley is paid by the government as caretaker for the island's many trails. He leads groups to the rim and into the interior rain forest of The Quill with unmatched energy and zeal, sometimes three and four trips a day. We questioned him about finding iguanas along the way and although he assured us there were iguanas in the trees, none were sighted. This left us thankful for the hospitality at King's Well Resort which afforded us our only opportunity on Sint Eustatius to photograph *Iguana delicatissima*. The regular foot traffic on The Quill has no doubt pushed the iguanas back to untrafficked areas of the forest. The woods here are lush, less stripped by man and hurricane than on Sint Maarten. We left the island feeling that here, of all the Antilles, *Iguana delicatissima* may have a

decent chance to survive through the diligence of a few, and hopefully the tolerance of many.

We will be travelling back to Saba and Saint Eustatius in the Spring of 1998, planning to intensify our search, giving all of our time to these two islands. Our goals will include determination of species on Saba and finding *Iguana delicatissima* in the wild on Sint Eustatius. In the meantime, I intend to be in communication with the Sint Maarten Zoo and to enlist our Saban friend, Eddie, in photographing the iguanas as they appear along his taxi route. I greatly look forward to our next landing on Saba's cliff runway. 



Antillean iguana at the Kings Well Resort, Oranjestad, Sint Eustatius. Photograph: Carl Fuhri