

NEWS OF THE SOCIETY

Searching for the Gwaya-Maga in Belize

It was the trip of a lifetime! Our cast of characters: the entire Board of Directors of the International Iguana Society, a handful of scientists, conservationists, writers and artists, and a few of us, just rank and file lizard lovers. Our destination: Belize, a country of some 8,900 square miles south of the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. Our purpose: the 1999 International Iguana Society Conference.

One of our original intentions for this trip was to engage in two iguana-related conservation projects. The first was to produce and distribute a brochure, co-sponsored with the Belize Zoo and Tropical Education Center, and Red Creek Biological Preserve. Its purpose would be to discourage the local people from hunting green iguanas for food. Because the females are so vulnerable when they are gravid, they are much easier to catch than the males. Hunting male iguanas, however, has much less impact on the iguana population. The local Garifuna name for iguana is *gwaya-maga*. It is also called "bamboo chicken" by Creole Belizeans.

The other project was to translocate a population of spiny-tailed iguanas, *Ctenosaurus similis*, to the Red Creek Biological Preserve. Our "population" was supposed to have been pre-caught by two brave iguana-stalkers before the rest of the group actually arrived. As it turned out, they had only been able to capture two *Ctenosaurs*, and over the course of the next few days we came to understand their lack of success. Time and again we were tantalized by the wily beasts from their unreachable perches high atop trees and buildings from where they could spy

our approach and rocket to the freedom of their burrows.

Day One

By the end of our first day, all 20 conference participants had made their way via Miami, Houston, and San Pedro Sula, Honduras to Belize City. Early arrivals were treated to a side trip to the spectacular Mayan ruin of Altun Ha, a short drive north of Belize City. This well-excavated site was constructed between 1100 BC and AD 900, and consists of 13 temple pyramids arranged in two large plazas, each the size of a football field.

As became our pattern, members of the group found themselves busy tracking down any herps, invertebrates, or other wildlife they could find. We had people who could find the most interesting specimens in the most unusual places, to the immense delight of everyone who had brought cameras.

Back at the airport, we all climbed aboard our chartered yellow school bus for a 3-hour drive south, along the washboard, red-dirt Manatee Road, to our accommodations in the Stann Creek District. There



At 60 ft. high, the Temple of the Masonry Alters is the tallest structure at Altun Ha. Inset: Detail of one of the faces at the foot of the pyramid. Photographs: Mike Ripca

Right: I.I.S. members, Joe Wasilewski, Jim Suskie, Lisa Marshall, Lauron Roark, and Mark Keoppen rest at the top of the Tiger Fern trail, before heading down to see the waterfall.

Below: Overlooking the Cockscomb Range from the top of the trail.

Photographs: Mike Ripca



are few paved highways in southern Belize, and we were only privileged enough to travel on one of them on our next-to-last day. The group was split amongst two sites—the Toucan Sittee Lodge, set amidst lush vegetation along the Sittee River, and the Sandy Beach Lodge, a couple miles east, just outside the village of Hopkins, set on the Caribbean. Both locations were well run and provided delicious local cuisine.

Day Two

Our first full day in Belize was spent at the renowned Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, site of the world's first jaguar preserve. It covers 162 square miles amidst the Maya Mountains in central Belize. Cockscomb actually consists of two smaller basins, each a complete watershed for two of Belize's major rivers, along with Victoria Peak in the Cockscomb Range, the second-highest elevation in the country at 3,675 ft.

Cockscomb hosts a remarkable selection of flora and fauna typical of the tropical rainforests of Central America. We climbed winding trails lined with spectacular 60 ft. cohune palms (*Attalea cohune*), treacherous spiny palms (*Bactris*



mexicana), and sturdy swamp bloodwood (*Pterocarpus officialis*) with broad trunks that look like sets of revolving doors. Over 4,000 species of plants exist in Belize (70 kinds of forests, 68% of which are broadleaf forest).

Cockscomb houses an incredibly diverse group of wildlife,

including jaguar, jaguarundi, puma, ocelot, and margay, as well as Baird's tapir, black howler monkeys, kinkajoo, gibbon, peccary, the king vulture, and of course, iguanas. 55 different mammals, and 300 species of birds live there, along with 54 species of snakes and an abundance of other reptiles and amphibians. On this particular day, we didn't spot many of these animals because our troupe of humans was just too large and boisterous, but we did see a lot of tantalizing tracks and a spectacular 70 ft. waterfall. Some members of the group cooled off with a swim in the pool at the foot of the waterfall.

In the mean time, one of our members, Connecticut emergency physician, Michael Gutman, volunteered to run a clinic for the residents of Maya Centre, a small village at the entrance to the jaguar preserve. Some of these Mayan families had been relocated here from inside the preserve.

Now unable to pursue hunting and milpa (slash and burn agriculture), which formed their traditional way of life, the Mayans living here benefit directly from a portion of the entry fees to the jaguar preserve. They also sell Mayan slate carvings and other crafts at the souvenir shop.

Most of Dr. Gutman's patients had predictable ailments, bruises, belly aches, and itching, but an uncommon number seemed to complain of headache and backache, which had persisted for a number of years. This seemed perplexing to both Dr. Gutman and his assistant, Netti, a young volunteer from Sittee Village—until later when they observed some of the Mayans going about their daily chores. Many were carrying 100 lb. bundles



The 70 ft. waterfall on the Tiger Fern trail in the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary. Photograph: Mike Ripca

of wood on their backs, fastened to a band which they wore across their foreheads!

We were all exhausted after an exciting day, but nevertheless managed to pull ourselves together for our evening speakers. After dinner at Sandy Beach, Steve Reichling, an invertebrate specialist from the Memphis Zoo, began his talk with a show and tell. He had caught a beautiful red-rumped tarantula just outside his cabin, a finding that expanded the range of this animal, having previously only been known to extend throughout Mexico and northern Belize. Steve spoke about the declining populations of *Iguana delicatissima* on the island of St. Eustacius. Steve's experiences will be the subject of an article in the next issue of *Iguana Times*.

Next, Chuck Knapp, from the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, treated us to the more cheerful results of his studies with a translocated population of *Cyclura cyclura inornata* from Leaf Cay to Alligator Cay in the Exuma Cays Land and Sea Park between 1988 and 1990. From eight initial individuals, a healthy population of 70-80 iguanas has emerged. He also spoke about the work of the Shedd Aquarium with *Cyclura cyclura figginsi* in the central Exumas.

Day Three

The next morning, most of the group loaded up in canoes or boats for a half-day, six-mile trip up the Sittee River. Many spectacular green iguanas were spotted high in the trees. Although these animals must have been 30-60 ft. off the ground, they were large enough that their very high crests could easily be seen. Brown basilisks (*Basiliscus vittatus*), keel-billed toucans, yellow-headed Amazon parrots and Morelets crocodiles were also sighted, as well as a remarkable flight of more than 50 scissor-tailed fly catchers. This is a small, finch-sized bird with flowing tail feathers. In one memorable incident, our famous Joe Wasilewski was spotted by an irate individual on shore while attempting to capture *Ctenosaurs* from the boat with his catch pole. We deliberately tracked this fellow down later. He turned out to be an American from Indiana who now lives in Belize. He had been very concerned about the well-being of the spiny-tailed iguanas. There was a small group of remarkably tame specimens that lives in and around the front porch, with one iguana retreating to a hole in the side of his house. He was



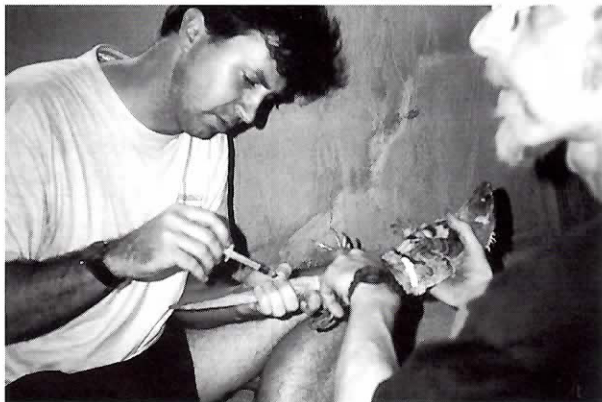
Left: John Bendon, Lisa Marshall, and Carl Fuhri canoeing up the Sittee River.

Below, left to right, front to back: Bill Bowden, Jim Suskie, Chuck Knapp, Georgette Suskie, Angela Saunders, Lauron Roark, and Mariana Urbina cruise back down the river with their guide Evan McDougal.

Photographs: Mike Ripca

relieved when we explained who we were, and what we were doing and graciously accepted an invitation to attend our iguana lectures the next evening.

Before lunch that day, the captured *Ctenosaurs* had colored beads attached to their nuchal crests for future identification. We then traveled to the Red Creek Biological Preserve, which is adjacent to Cockscomb, to release them. The preserve is owned jointly by Bob Ehrig (the founder of the I.I.S.) and his partners, Richard Moyroud and Marcie Ehrig. Still under construction, it will be an ecotourist lodge and iguana sanctuary. Red Creek is an extension of the Cockscomb Basin ecosystem and a biological corridor for wildlife to the Sapodilla Lagoon to the east. After a tour of the varied



Glenn Gerber and John Bendon drawing a blood sample from one of the *Ctenosaurs* released at Red Creek Biological Reserve. Photograph: Mike Ripca

ecosystems at the preserve, blood samples were drawn from each iguana, which were then released into their new habitats. The blood samples will be sent for analysis, and the results kept on file to monitor the gene pool of the *Ctenosaur* population at Red Creek. Habitat has been constructed for the *Ctenosaurs* in the remains of an old rock mine. Trees and shrubs have been planted in pockets of soil and boulders brought to the site.

The fate of *Ctenosaurus similis*, locally known as the "wishwilly," is somewhat better than that of the green iguana due to an unusual circumstance. Because of a high water table, Belizean cemeteries are often above ground. *Ctenosaurs* enjoy the readily available basking platforms provided by the sarcophagi, and have become associated with the spirits of the dead in popular folklore.

Dinner that evening was at Toucan Sittee, after which Carl Fuhri did a slide presentation on the status of *Cyclura rileyi cristata*, which was followed by our annual Board of Directors meeting. We kept it short, but we also took care of business, discussing several ways to improve the Society.



AJ Gutman gives a Baird's tapir some friendly reassurance at the Belize Zoo. Photograph: Mike Ripca

Day Four

The next day we boarded our bus again for a trip to the Belize Zoo. The zoo was started in 1983 with a collection of 17 animals left over from the filming of a wildlife documentary, and now houses a fairly complete collection of native species kept in appropriately landscaped habitats. We finally got to see the jaguars, tapirs and peccaries up close along with toucans, scarlet macaws, the imposing king vulture, the curassow, and many others. Dr. Gutman managed to thoroughly impress the staff of the zoo, as well as the apes, with his remarkably authentic howler monkey vocalizations.

After lunch, we were able to make a quick trip to the Tropical Education Center, and their green iguana breeding project. Gravid female green iguanas caught by locals are bought and brought here to lay their eggs, which are then artificially incubated. The females are then returned to the wild, and the hatchling green iguanas are raised for release.

Our next stop was Monkey Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, a research and teaching facility run by our delightful bus driver and incredibly knowledgeable guide, Matthew Miller. Monkey Bay is truly an inspiration for the conservation-minded: computers are run by solar power, and fuel for cooking comes from biogas composting toilets. The facility teaches conservation and watershed ecology courses at all levels up to university.

On our way back to base, we finally got to travel on a paved highway, much to the relief of our compressed spinal columns! The scenery was absolutely spectacular, with outstanding views of the Maya Mountains, including a portion known as "the Sleeping Giant." Along the way we passed

through the community of St. Margaret, where many of the inhabitants make their living by burning locally mined limestone in large, wood-fired kilns to produce agricultural lime for the ubiquitous Belizean citrus industry.

Upon our return for dinner at Sandy Beach, we were fortunate enough to catch some of the entertainment scheduled by a student group also staying there—three young boys from Hopkins Village (south of Dangriga) playing traditional, hand carved, Garifuna drums.

Dangriga, which, loosely translated, means "here, the sweet water is close at hand," is the largest town in the Stann Creek District, and lies along the banks of the Stann Creek River. The Garifuna settled there in the early 19th century, a unique blend of escaped African slaves and Caribbean Indians.

Following dinner, Glenn Gerber, a Doctoral student at the University of Tennessee spoke to us about his research over the past six years throughout the Caribbean. Glenn has done iguana population surveys on Jamaica, the Cayman Islands, the Netherlands Antilles, and San Salvador, Bahamas, as well as on many of the 200 islands of the Turks and Caicos group. His slide show included *Cyclura* and other iguana species of the area, but also other reptiles, birds and wildlife.

Joe Wasilewski then spoke to us about his trip to Booby Cay with John Bendon last fall. He presented a wonderful slide show on the *Cyclura carinata bartschi* of Booby Cay, that included examples of the flora and fauna, as well as a few interesting slides demonstrating the division of labor between John and himself, while on the trip.

Our last speaker of the evening was our own inimitable John Bendon, iguana artist extraordinaire, and our goodwill ambassador to the Caribbean. John delighted us with some of his magnificent illustrations of *Cyclura*, and a description of some astonishing territorial behavior that he had observed amongst the male *Cyclura carinata bartschi*.

Day Five

On our last full day in Belize, we returned to the jaguar preserve for further explorations. The group split up in several different directions, and predictably, our list of sightings was much lengthier. Among other things, sightings included endless

numbers of leaf-cutter ants, howler monkeys, a gigantic Blue Morpho butterfly, and an 8 ft. long indigo snake.

In the afternoon, a small number of people chose to investigate a Mayan ruin and undertake a fairly challenging hike to a spectacular 230 ft. waterfall. One lucky member from this group ended up being followed briefly by a jaguar! The rest of the conference participants chose to stop at the Old Sittce Serpon Sugar Mill. They found large numbers of bats that spent their days clinging to the lower trunks of the giant Ficus trees at

this site, as well as, inhabiting the aging, massive pieces of machinery that had been used to manufacture sugar. Other animals captured for brief study (and on film, of course) included a tarantula, a beaded lizard (*Xantusiidae lepedophyma flavemaculatum*) and a beautiful pink-spotted boliloglossa salamander.

After dinner that evening, we were joined by another group of about nine Garifuna youths, who provided us with an unexpected treat—more traditional Garinagu percussion and vocal music. Our lovely volunteer nurse from Toucan Sittce provided dancing lessons, and the women from the Sandy Beach Garifuna Women's Cooperative, who had prepared so many delicious meals for us, spontaneously joined in. Most of our group, stimulated by the African rhythms, joined in the dancing as well.

Afterward, we toasted many of our members and took time to thank Bob Ehrig and Richard Moyroud for all of the time and effort spent organizing this incredible trip. A group discussion and informal Directors meeting followed during which we were all urged to go forth and seek new recruits for the International Iguana Society. The party afterwords at "the big house" on the Caribbean was a climactic end to a great evening. *Buite gooyang!*



The whole group gathered for this photo at Red Creek Biological Reserve. *Left to right, First row:* Maximo Navarro, Chuck Knapp, AJ and Michael Gutman, Bill Bowden, Glenn Gerber, Lauron Roark, and Mike Ripca. *Second row:* John Bendon, Georgette and Jim Suskie, Lisa Marshall, and Carl Fuhri. *Third row:* Richard Moyroud, Matt Miller, Bob Ehrig, Steve Reichling, Angela Saunders, Mariana Urbina, and Joe Wasilewski. *Fourth row:* Mark Keoppen, Wendy Townsend, and Jayme Gordon. *Photograph:* Carl Fuhri

Day Six

As we gathered for breakfast and the trip home on our last morning, everyone agreed that this qualified as the "Trip of a Lifetime." All, whether professional or amateur herpers, ended up learning something and making new friends. And many of us vowed to return to Belize to further explore and enjoy its varied ecosystems, culture, and treasures.

The I.I.S. would like to acknowledge the absence of a number of intended conference participants. Both Janet Fuhri, our Fulfillment Coordinator, and Lori King-Nava of the Chicago Herp Society were unable to attend. We all missed them terribly and hope that they can at least derive a little vicarious pleasure from this account of our adventures. And our best wishes to Horst Haneke and Janette Miller who were unable to attend due to illness.



Look for an article highlighting the history of Belize, it's people, flora and fauna, in a future issue of *Iguana Times*. Also look for an extensive collection of color photographs from the trip on our Web site at: www.members.home.net/iis/IISHomePage.html