

The Queen of Andros

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The 2001 International Iguana Society Conference was held on North Andros Island in the Bahamas. Twelve enthusiastic participants were determined to find native *Cyclura cyblura cyblura*. What none of us could have anticipated was just how hard we were going to have to work or how much excitement, anticipation, and drama would be involved.

We had been at Forfar Field Station since Saturday, and so far we had spent one full day and two half days scouring various sites that had been recommended to us as likely iguana habitat. With all 12 of us searching, that amounted to a lot of man hours with little to show but a handful of other animal sightings: a couple of species of anoles, an ameiva, and a few assorted birds. We also found plenty of evidence of the kind of thing that would drive the iguanas away: feral cats, dogs, and pigs, and human garbage riddled with spent shotgun shells. Chuck Knapp, one of our group leaders, has been working on his doctoral thesis on *C. c. cyblura*. Chuck has been working with the University of Florida, the Shedd Aquarium, and the Bahamas Department of Agriculture, which had issued the appropriate permits to capture and release iguanas for this population study. He kept assuring us that it was just as important to know where the iguanas weren't as where they were. Few of us found this especially encouraging.

From the moment we arrived, all of us had been asking questions

of the local people and the Forfar staff to gather as much information as possible about the iguanas, and to get a feel for the attitudes people had toward these large lizards. In general, Androsians were unaware that this particular iguana was unique to this one island. They knew that the iguana was protected, but also believed that hunters continued to pursue them despite the regulations. No verifiable iguana sightings had been made within the past year, yet everyone felt that the iguanas were still plentiful. Indeed, the iguanas had been plentiful as little as ten years ago when surveys determined that thousands of animals still existed.

Monday afternoon in Red Bays we met a man perched on a tree stump outside his hut deftly weaving palm fronds into baskets. His name was Jagger and he wasn't too certain how old he was since he couldn't recall the year in which he had been born. He claimed to know exactly where the iguanas could be found and told us several ways to prepare them for eating. We needed to go to the Middle Bight, and he would be willing to show us the spot if we had a boat. This sounded way too good to be true and, indeed it was. As our conversation continued, it turned out that the price he wanted us to pay for his services was very steep; he intended to kill any iguanas that we found and bring them home for food! Did he know that the iguanas were protected? "God put them there for people to eat," he responded. How prevalent could



The big one that didn't get away—a large male, Andros iguana. Photograph: Carl Fuhri

such an attitude be? Did this explain the demise of thousands of animals? We proceeded to explain that we were doing a scientific survey sanctioned by the Bahamian government. We wanted to capture the animals, measure them, draw blood for DNA analysis, attach beads to their nuchal crests, and insert pit tags under the skin on the right dorsolateral side. Surely such activity seemed nothing short of absurd to such a man, but he agreed to eat the food that we would bring along for the trip.

After a good bit of negotiation, by the end of the afternoon we had put together a plan. We had scrounged up a boat we could borrow from a fellow named

Matt. It would hold four of us along with Jagger and a relative of his named Desmond, who would be our captain. The trip couldn't take place until Wednesday since Matt needed another day to repair his trailer.

Tuesday was spent searching Mastic Point, which proved to have the best terrain we had encountered to date. Some forest cover existed, but plenty of scrub vegetation was there for iguanas to eat, along with likely spots for burrows and sunny areas for basking. Unlike the other sites we had searched, we found little evidence of human intrusion or feral animals, and we had plenty of sightings of other reptiles, including the local racer, *Alsophis vudii*.

Wednesday arrived, and we were ready to go by 5:30 AM. The plan was for Jagger and Desmond to pick us up at Forfar by 6:00 and drive us to Grave's Landing to pick up the boat. We anxiously waited as the clock ticked past 6, then 7 and 8. We couldn't imagine why they hadn't come for us. Finally, about 9:30, we were able to phone Matt, only to find out that the trailer hadn't been repaired yet. He assured us that if it wasn't ready by tomorrow, he would simply borrow a trailer from someone else and the trip would go ahead as planned.

That afternoon we investigated the tidal flats of Fresh Creek. The terrain was pretty muddy inland, but by sticking to the shoreline and walking through the shallow water, we were able to



Above: The beach at Forfar Field Station, Andros Island, Bahamas. Photograph: Michael Ripca



Left: The group aboard one of the boats made available by the Forfar staff, who were as anxious to find iguanas as we were. Photograph: Janet Fuhri

cover a lot of area, even wading across to some of the smaller islands. As at other sites, evidence of feral dogs and cats was plentiful, but we also spotted tracks in the sand that looked like tail drags to our iguana-starved eyes.

Early Thursday morning, I remember sitting on the bench in front of the station waiting for the others, feeling the warm breeze, and watching the moon that had not yet set. Had hunting really led to such a profound drop in the iguana population? Could we somehow influence this hunter and the other remaining iguana hunters? We had to find a way to educate the populace to the value of keeping these animals alive. While I pondered, we once



Chuck Knapp and Joe Wasilewski listen while a long-time Andros resident speaks proudly of hunting iguanas. Photograph: Janet Fuhri

again were left waiting. At least we had a contact number this time and we were able to find out much earlier in the day that the trip was off. What had happened? Had Jagger become too suspicious of us, thinking we were with the Bahamian authorities? Did he think that tagging the animals would somehow keep him from being able to eat them? We never found out.



Above: One of many drags found in the sand, most left by the abundant land crabs of Andros, though some were thought to be iguana tail-drags.

Right: A large termite mound — the perfect spot to incubate *Cyclura* eggs (this one had not been touched by an iguana, though).



Below: Spent shotgun shells were easy to find. Photographs: Michael Ripca



Our group split up for the rest of the day. Some people went snorkeling and were treated to a wealth of interesting sea creatures. Another group went to check the ridge behind Forfar. Banana slices, which had been set out the day before at a number of spots that looked like likely iguana burrows, had clearly been disturbed by something, although it was unclear whether this had been done by birds or reptiles. We found no iguanas, but saw plenty of anoles, ameivas, and several species of birds.

Thursday evening we all went out for dinner. As we piled into the dining room, Joe and Chuck struck up a conversation with a couple of people sitting at the bar. One man turned out to be the brother of Rivean, a talented young artist and staff member at Forfar. He listened to the story of our aborted journey and told us about some of the old fishermen he knew at Grave's Landing. If we could get our group down there in the morning, he would arrange with one of his friends to take us out to Crab Cay to see the iguanas. Was it really this simple? Could this really be our big opportunity?

Friday morning I again waited on my bench with the breeze and the moon. I refused to give up hope. We would see iguanas today. Some had to be left somewhere. A little later, at Grave's Landing, we met our fisherman, Cap'n Johnny. He could take us to Crab Cay, but we wouldn't find any iguanas there. For iguanas we had to go to the Middle Bight but, since we were pay-

ing for the gas, he was willing to take us as far as we wanted to go. Our group of eight, which included Rivean, set out in high spirits.

The trip was over an hour long and the speed of the boat left me chilled to the bone, but none of that was important — nor were the heavy rains that hit just as we were dropped off at our destination. I refused to be daunted. We huddled



Left: Soaking rains did not deter this group, determined to find iguanas on North Andros.

Below: On the last day of the conference, the first live iguana we spotted saw us first and ran for the safety of its burrow. *Photographs: Janet Fuhri*



under a tarp that Cap'n Johnny had lent us. We were all together, enjoying each other's company, and telling the most dreadful jokes knowing that our opportunity would come soon.

Our first foray out from under the tarp was short lived, and we had to make another mad dash for cover as a second deluge poured forth. After another 20 minutes, upon spying just the tiniest bit of blue sky overhead, we set out again. Our first sighting came almost immediately when we spotted a tail sticking out of a burrow. Pulling off the iguana's tail seemed like a bad idea, so we posted a sentry and continued searching. Things happened very quickly after that. I recall a fair bit of noise and scrambling as Joe leaped into the bushes and came up holding one of the most remarkable creatures I have ever seen!

It was a big-jowled male, 44.6 cm long and weighing 4.45 kg. Everyone crowded around with cameras to photograph this remarkable beast. A mere photograph wasn't enough for me. I needed to hold him, to feel the texture of his scales and the life force in his powerful body. It was a moment of tremendous elation for all of us.


Joe was convinced that more animals were to be found, so we left Chuck and Carl to process this one. "So what do you think?" Joe asked me as we continued through the bush. "I think that we mere humans do not appreciate the privilege of living among such magnificent animals. God put us here to care for each other and to care for them, not to

destroy them." "I'm not going to disagree with you. It's people like Jagger who need to be convinced."

We soon spotted another iguana, but it quickly slipped off into the underbrush. Very shortly, Joe spotted yet another animal that was sitting still. He signaled to Rivean and me to come around from behind. No one else was nearby. As I came around the bush, I spotted her. She was as long as our first iguana, but had a slighter frame and was less jowly and less dramatically colored. She heard me behind her and looked over her right shoulder across the length of her body and made eye contact. She showed no fear and gave me a calm head bob. Three carefully metered up and down strokes. "I am the queen. This is my realm. You will respect me." What could I say? I had so much to say to her. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her, and how much I wanted to protect her and her children. All I could do was bob back. I knew then that she would make her escape. We wouldn't capture her and violate her with our beads and pit tags. My heart skipped a beat as she bolted for safety while Joe and Rivean ran off in futile pursuit.

Chuck had spotted a juvenile that had slipped off inside a hollow tree, but that was the only other sighting. Our trip back to Grave's Landing was cold and wet, and we even ran out of gas. We were all still too entranced to notice. Our euphoria continued through the evening as we ended our last night at a local festival celebrating the Chicharney, a legendary beast, half bird and half man. The story goes that if you see the Chicharney, your wish will come true. I wished that my grandchildren could some day come to this island to enjoy the grandchildren of the Andros iguana.

What will it really take to educate Androsians about these gravely endangered animals? Do we have any hope of influencing the behavior of a generation of people who are hunting for food that they feel God provided for them? Perhaps our best hope lies with educating the young people of Andros and with artists like Rivean. The IIS proposes to sponsor the construction of a large sculpture of an Andros iguana to be placed outside Forfar Field Station. Rivean and the other students in his art class have created many other beautiful animal sculptures that grace the outskirts of almost every village in the area. I wish that everyone could

share the poignant image I have in my mind and in my heart of the beautiful Queen of Andros. Surely then we would be able to convince the younger generation of Androsians to respect the uniqueness of this remarkable animal. 



A juvenile *C. cyathura* is found hiding in the hollow trunk of a dead palm tree. *Photograph: Michael Ripca*



Left: Joe Wasilewski displays the catch-of-the-week, a large male Andros iguana. Photograph: Janet Fuhri

Below: Having been processed, tagged and released, our "big one" pauses for a moment before heading to a better hiding place. Photograph: Carl Fuhri

