

IN SEARCH OF THE MYSTERY IGUANA

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During a phone conversation earlier this year with I.I.S. Newsletter editor Richard Montanucci, he briefly mentioned rumors of the possible existence of a population of Rock Iguanas (Genus *Cyclura*) from an area where they had never before been recorded. The unsubstantiated reports told of iguanas which had been seen by local fishermen on one or more of the small cays off the west coast of Long Island in the Bahamas. These cays are only ten miles from Sandy Cay, southernmost cay in the Exuma Island chain on which *Cyclura rileyi cristata* is found. Could these rumors be of another natural population of this species, as yet unknown to science? Was it a recently introduced population? Or was it a new species or subspecies never before described?

I checked the most detailed map I had of Long Island and saw that the western extension is actually a jumble of dozens of cays separated by extremely shallow water, mud flats, and sand bars. Such areas are often very difficult to approach, accessible only to shoal draft boats and often only at high tide. A thorough literature search of numerous publications pertaining to the genus *Cyclura* revealed nothing--no mention of iguanas from Long Island whatsoever.

Several weeks later I was reading Bahama Islands - A Boatman's Guide to the Land and the Water, by J. Linton Rigg (originally written in 1949) and revised by Harry Kline in 1973. In the section on Long Island mention is made of an area near the western tip of the cays named "New Found Harbor." A small hand drawn map indicated two good anchorages between three cays which were labeled "Sandy Cay," "Dollars Cay," and "Long Cay." Mr. Kline talked of laying here at anchor for as long as a week in May "watching the endless parade of sharks maneuvering their way through the anchorage onto the banks." Of the nearby cays he adds, "The ubiquitous curly-tailed lizards rattle through the underbrush and the tracked furrows of iguanas can sometimes be seen." Here it was at last--apparent corroboration of the rumors by a well-known authority on the Bahamas.

I dialed Florida information and was able to get Mr. Kline's phone number. He graciously answered all my questions about the area, but had to admit that he had never actually seen any iguanas on the cays, that he had only assumed at the time that that's what had made the tracks. Somewhat disappointed that I was unable to actually confirm the existence of iguanas, I nevertheless felt there was enough evidence to warrant a visit to the cays myself.

Arriving in Nassau, capital of the Bahamas, the second week in June, I visited the Land and Survey Department where I was able to obtain a very detailed map of the Long Island Cays. The official government maps named the cays somewhat differently than had Mr. Kline's book, labeling them from west to east as "Grapetree Cay," "Sandy Cay," "Dollar's Cay," and "Conch Cay." Several days later I was winging my way on Bahamasair to the small airstrip at the largest settlement on Long Island which has the somewhat ominous name of "Deadmans Cay." The only accommodations to be had in this area are at a small guest house run by the Carrol family. They were able to arrange a car rental for me and my first stop was at the home of a local fisherman who agreed to take me in his small boat to the cays the next morning. When asked about the presence of iguanas there, both he and another fisherman present said they had never seen any on cays off of Long Island. However, they both knew of the existence of iguanas on Sandy Cay in the nearby Exumas.

I left the fisherman's house and began a driving tour of the island, where I was taken by the emerald-green rolling hills and marvelous views of the surrounding turquoise seas. Around almost every turn of the single road that runs the length of Long Island was another picturesque old church. Many of these were built well before the turn of the century and most are still in use. In June the mango trees are in full fruit and the ripe purple or yellow ovals were hanging heavy on every tree throughout the settlements. I stopped at one small roadside stand to purchase some and asked the vendor, an older man who had lived all his life on the island, about the presence of iguanas on the cays. "Oh yea, mon," he said, "Day on all da Cays." Surprised at his answer, I pushed him for specific dates and places he had seen them. He mentioned Sandy, Dollars, and Middle (the local name for Conch) Cays by name and indicated he had seen them as recently as two years ago. "You sure they weren't just curly-tails?" I asked. "Oh no, mon," he insisted. "Day like dis." He indicated with both hands that they were over half a meter long.

The next morning, as I loaded my camera gear into the boat, I had no idea as to what I might actually find, but now at least I had renewed hope that iguanas might really exist on Long Island's Cays. We made our way slowly through the narrow channels running between the cays, heading toward their westernmost tip and the open sea. It was somewhat overcast that day and the wind was moderate. We decided to stop at the furthest cay out and then work our way back, cay by cay, toward Long Island. What had been described by my guide Archie as a half hour trip turned into an hour and a half as the wind came up and the seas rose and we began to leave the protection of the jumble of cays and narrow channels and entered the open ocean. Spray from the waves now soaked us and I hurried to get all of my camera gear into plastic bags.

Finally we landed at the outermost cay called, officially, "Grapetree Cay." As I sloshed ashore, huge gray thunderheads began to approach from the west and we could now hear the crack of thunder and see the jagged flashes of lightning. The cay itself was a wondrous place, almost entirely composed of sand so white that it appeared to be covered by snow. There was a small stand of *Casuarina* trees on the south side of the tiny island in which a large osprey nest, weighing hundreds of pounds, had been constructed. The plump white-crowned pigeons were everywhere on the cay and they shot clumsily out of each bush as I walked by. Only the occasional clap of thunder drowned out the loud, boisterous cries of the black-headed gulls which circled overhead exclaiming their displeasure at our presence. I searched the entire cay but saw no signs of Rock Iguanas. There were lots of lizard tracks, alright, but they belonged to much smaller saurians--probably the "lined lizards" (*Ameiva spp.*) which approach 38 cm (15 inches) in length and are present on almost every cay. Nor were there any iguana scats or signs of browsing on any of the low shrubs. We eventually worked our way back to the boat and headed toward the next cay east, "Sandy Cay." These two cays are nearly connected to each other by a mile long strip of sand dunes topped with occasional mangrove trees, but there is one narrow and very shallow channel separating them. In fact, locals talk of both cays as one, calling them collectively "Sandy Spit." We stopped and searched Dollars Cay and Conch Cay in turn, but the story was the same--no sign of iguanas. Obviously my search of Long Island's cays was by no means exhaustive, for there are dozens of cays we did not visit. From the number of local fisherman and spongers that I interviewed, however, I am now of the opinion that there are no iguanas off of Long Island. The confusion probably exists because of the proximity of iguanas on Sandy Cay in the nearby Exumas and the fact that one of the Long Island cays is also called Sandy Cay. Rumors certainly were further fueled by the passage about iguana tracks in the book, Bahama Islands, which over the years must have been read by thousands of people.

Of course, I was somewhat disappointed in not finding any rock iguanas this trip but it was a great experience that I'm sure I will repeat many more times in my life. There are so many islands in the West Indies that no matter how many you visit, there will always be another remote, isolated cay where you may yet find that "mystery iguana."

I.I.S. Bookstore

As a service to our membership, a limited number of publications will be distributed through the I.I.S. Bookstore. We believe this will become a valuable source of information. The following publications are now available:

- No. 01 **The General Care and Maintenance of the Green Iguana**, by Philippe de Vosjoli. 1990. \$4.40 (including postage); \$5.50 (non-members).

- No. 02 **Guide to the Identification of the Amphibians and Reptiles of the West Indies (Exclusive of Hispaniola)**, by Albert Schwartz and Robert Henderson. 1985. \$19.00 (including postage); \$27.00 (non-members).