

# A CAY BY ANY OTHER NAME...

BY DAVID W. BLAIR

Updating the status of the Acklins Island rock iguana, *Cyclura rileyi nuchalis*, turned out to be a “game of names.” To begin with, the Crooked Island group, where it is found, is usually referred to as a singular destination, but is in reality two separate islands lying in very close proximity. Together, they roughly form an upside down horseshoe situated between Long Island and Mayaguana in the Southern Bahamas. Crooked Island, on the west, covers 92 square miles with a human population of about 700. It is separated by less than two miles from Acklins Island, which is the larger and more populous, with almost 1,000 residents living within its 389 square miles. These two main islands surround a broad, shallow area of water known as the Bight of Acklins. Off the southern tip of Crooked Island is a twelve-mile-long narrow island called Long Cay. Only about thirty people reside on the Cay today, but at one time, several thousand lived there. Most came in the 1920’s and 30’s to sign aboard oceangoing freighters and “seek their fortunes” as laborers in Central America. Because of this, the Cay became known as “Fortune Island.” The population has been dwindling since World War II and it is now almost a ghost town. Of great historical significance is the huge cathedral-like church where they still hold intimate Sunday services in one corner of the crumbling masonry and wood structure. There are dozens of abandoned houses and old foundations scattered throughout the bush and connected by the remnants of ancient paved roads.

Within the Bight of Acklins are about a dozen small remote Cays, some of which have been reported to harbor colonies of rock iguanas. But here is where the real confusion begins. The U.S. Department of the Interior, Publication 50 C.F.R., Part 17 (1983), lists “Fortune Island and Guana Cay” as their only habitat; Auffenburg (1976) names “Fortune Island, Guana Cay and Fish Cay”; The Red Data Book of the I.U.C.N. (1978) says, “Fortune Island and Guana Cay”; Barbour and Noble (1916) state, “Fortune Island, just to the south of Long Island, Bahamas”; Schwartz and Carey (1977) mention “Fortune Island, Fish Cay, and North Cay,” as do Schwartz and Thomas (1975); Iverson and Auffenburg (1980) show two populations, but don’t say on what Cays; Rabb and Hayden visited North Cay and Fish Cay in 1957, but saw no iguanas on either one!

In my continuing effort to assess and update the status of rock iguanas throughout the West Indies, I flew to Crooked Island in June of 1991. Of course, one of my primary objectives was to clear up the confusion surrounding which Cays actually still support populations of *C. r. nuchalis*, one of the smallest and least known form of rock iguanas.

My journey began with the 30-minute ride north from the small commercial airport on Crooked Island to Pittstown Point Landing, a “fly-in” hotel with its own private airstrip just a few steps from each room. This is the island’s largest tourist accommodation, with just twelve rooms. I was greeted by Randy and Libby, the inn’s husband and wife managers. They subsequently intro-

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The Acklins Island rock iguana, *Cyclura rileyi nuchalis*, male on Fish Cay, or Guana Cay, as it is locally referred to.  
Photography: David W. Blair

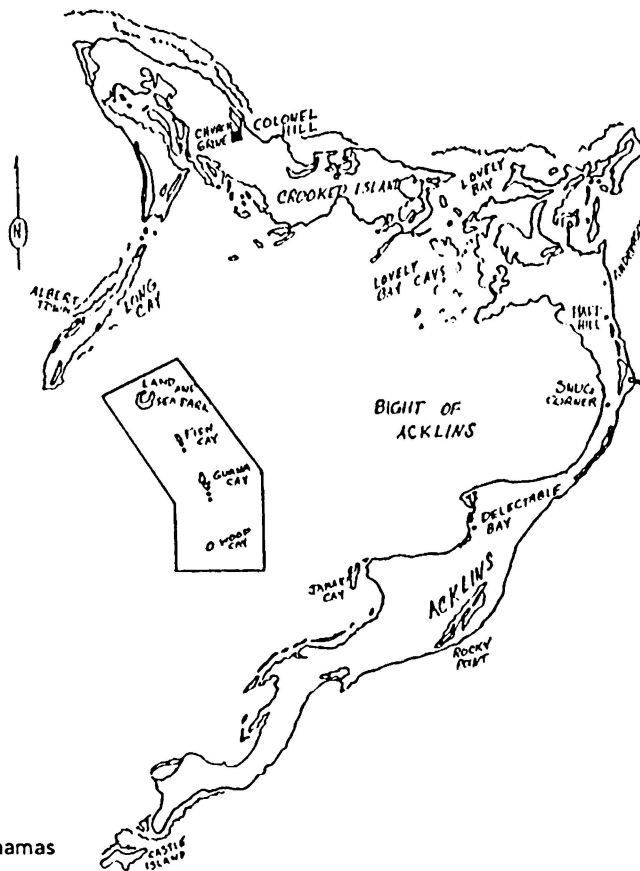
duced me to one of the owners and his family who had flown down in a private plane for a few days from their home in the U.S. The following morning his group returned to the States and I became the only guest in the entire hotel, a situation which did not change for the remainder of the week. My guide for the trips to the Cays in the Bight, 20-30 miles by boat south of the hotel, was a very personable young man named Reggie. Reggie had lived all of his life on Crooked Island and had the dubious distinction of having survived being struck by lightning. The bolt killed his companion that day and literally knocked Reggie out of his pants. This close call may have accounted, in part, for his easygoing style and apparent love of life.

We left early the next day in a small aluminum hull boat with a full tank of gas and a large ice chest filled to the top with sandwiches, watermelon, and cold drinks. About 90 minutes south, we made our first stop at the small settlement of Albert Town on Long Cay. Columbus passed between the northern tip of this island and the southern portion of Crooked Island which he named "Cape de la Laguna" on October 19, 1492. He attempted to cross the Bight of Acklins, but found it too shallow and was forced to turn back.

After a brief tour of Albert Town, we went to the home of Mr. Sidney Frazier. There was not nearly sufficient time for us to search the entire nine square mile island for iguanas and I was told Mr. Frazier, having lived on the Cay since 1934, had explored nearly every square foot of it. He told us that in all those years he had never seen any iguanas on Long Cay. If they ever existed on the island at all, he said, it was probably on the sandy southern portion and must have been many, many years ago. He was aware, however, of the existence of iguanas on two small nearby Cays in the Bight. He remembers as a young child landing on one of the Cays with his father and catching a large iguana. His father skinned and gutted the lizard, then roasted it on a stick over an open fire. Fortunately, he also added that very few, if any, residents still eat iguanas today.



The Acklins Island rock iguana, *Cyclura rileyi nuchalis*, female in a tree. Photography: David W. Blair



Acklins Island - Crooked Island, Bahamas

After talking with Mr. Frazier and others on the island, it became clear that much of the confusion as to the distribution of *C. r. nuchalis* stems from the fact that the local residents name the Cays differently than the official government maps. The first Cay south is officially listed as North Cay, but Fortune Islanders know it as Fish Cay. Mr. Frazier states that iguanas only appeared on this Cay in recent years—there were none present when his family had first arrived in the 1930's and for many years thereafter.

Thanking Sidney for all his helpful information, we returned to our boat and headed into the Bight of Acklins toward North Cay. As we approached the small U-shaped Cay, the water became very shallow and the numerous sandbars quite difficult to maneuver around. A few hundred yards off shore we noticed a small flock of 40 or 50 Caribbean Flamingos, the first I had ever seen in the wild throughout all of my previous trips to the Bahamas. We pulled the boat close to shore and I walked the long rope and anchor up the beach and firmly planted it in the sand. Reggie was already wading back out to investigate the half-dozen, six-foot sharks we had seen swimming lazily in the shallow warm water offshore. He had a large chunk of coral rock in each hand—apparently, he was going to attempt to knock out a shark and capture it by hand. I readied my cameras and began to walk the perimeter of the Cay, immediately sighting several iguanas. Acklins' rock iguanas are perhaps the smallest members of the genus; females average about two feet in length, with males about 30 inches overall. Adult coloration is greyish-brown with brown to orange-brown vermiculation and males are somewhat more colorful than females.

Reggie soon joined up with me, apparently unsuccessful with his shark hunting technique. We spent the next several hours on the Cay, counting more than 60 iguanas. Most animals sighted were adults and sub-adults; there were very few young iguanas present.

While exploring North Cay, the tide had dropped and we were surprised to discover, upon our return, that our boat was now high and dry. It took about 30 minutes of pushing, pulling, and digging a channel by hand in the sand beneath it to float the 500-pound craft again. Skirting the sand bars, the boat was headed southeast toward the next Cay in this mini-archipelago. It was just a speck of land completely surrounded by shoals and very difficult to approach. I spent a short time on the Cay and found no iguanas; the stunted vegetation and lack of adequate retreats probably indicate that it has never been able to support lizards of that size. Since it has no name on any map, I would like to hereby officially name it, "Reggie and Dave's Cay."

The engine was started again and we resumed our course toward Fish Cay, called locally, "Guana Cay." About halfway there, the outboard motor began to make a grinding noise and Reggie quickly shut it down. He removed the engine cover and we could see that the pull-start mechanism had become loose. Having no wrenches or tools with us at all, he tightened the bolts as best he could by hand and started it up again. The unit became loose almost immediately and began to grind quite loudly. After shutting down the motor once again and a few minutes of experimentation, we found that we could secure the bolts by hand, pull-start the engine and then carefully remove the entire mechanism and bolts. The engine functioned fine this way and we were able to continue the voyage, but it proved to be very time consuming and inconvenient each time we had to stop and then restart the engine at each Cay.

**Table 1**

*Cays of the Acklins listed from Northwest to Southeast*

<u>Official Name</u>	<u>Local Name</u>	<u>Iguanas Present</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Long Cay	Long Cay	No?	Information provided by local residents, but not confirmed this study
North Cay	Fish Cay	Yes	Est. 200-300 iguanas; Few juveniles present
None	None	No	Too small to support iguanas
Fish Cay	Guana Cay	Yes	Est. 200-300 iguanas; all sizes & classes present
Guana Cay 1st Cay	Wood Cay	No	None present this study
2nd Cay	None	No	None present this study
3rd Cay	None	No?	Information provided by local residents, but not confirmed this study; Cays likely too small to support iguanas
4th Cay	None	No?	Information provided by local residents, but not confirmed this study; Cays likely too small to support iguanas
Wood Cay	None	No?	Information provided by local residents, but not confirmed this study; Cays likely too small or with insufficient dry land to support iguanas

Soon we were exploring Fish Cay and sighting iguanas of all ages from juveniles to adults. In one area, two large males were engaged in a bloody battle over territory or mating rights and provided quite a show. This Cay appears to support the most viable, reproducing population of *Cyclura rileyi nuchalis*, and in the relatively short time there, we observed over 65 iguanas.

It was now late afternoon and Reggie indicated his desire to turn back, but we had come such a long way and there were still several more Cays to survey, so I convinced him to continue further. The next Cay in line is shown on government maps as Guana Cay, but again, local fishermen name it differently as "Wood Cay." Indeed, the vegetation there is higher and much "woodier" than on the two previous Cays with many dead branches scattered on the ground. In reality, this is not one but a series of four Cays lying in very close proximity and separated by shallow channels. I briefly explored the first two and saw no signs whatsoever of iguanas.

At this point, it was quite late in the afternoon and I knew that, at best, we were more than three hours from the hotel. My map still showed four more very small Cays to the southeast that I wanted to visit, but the late hour, coupled with the engine problems we were experiencing, dictated that we reluctantly return. I subsequently interviewed several of the fishermen from Long Cay (Fortune Island) who regularly visit the Cays in the Bight of Acklins and none had ever seen iguanas on any Cays other than the two where we had found them on this trip.

I felt a sense of success in finally clearing up the confusion as to which Cays actually support colonies of the Acklins rock iguana. Populations on both Cays where they occur are quite dense and probably near the carrying capacity for such small land masses. We believe there are at least 200 to 300 iguanas on each Cay, but are somewhat concerned that there were very few young animals on North Cay. These populations certainly deserve further investigation and will continue to remain very vulnerable to disturbance by man and the exotic plants and animals that he is responsible for introducing to innumerable other islands throughout the Bahamas. ✎

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