

# BOOBY OR BUST!

BY DAVID W. BLAIR

I had wanted to visit Booby Cay for many years, ever since I had read an article by Walter Auffenberg in the "Bahamas Naturalist" magazine where he described it as "One of the most remote of Bahama Islands." This tiny cay is the only known habitat of *Cyclura carinata bartschi*, or Bartschi's Rock Iguana, a lizard of which virtually nothing was known and of which no photographs existed. As I tend to be irresistibly drawn to such places, I decided to visit the cay in June of 1988. I knew Booby Cay was off the northeast point of Mayaguana in the southern Bahamas, separated from the larger island by only .4 km. I found a phone number for the Bahamas Tourist Board and Hotel Reservation Service.

I wanted to call and find out what kind of accommodations were available on the island for I planned to take along my wife and six-year-old son.

The woman with the strong Bahamian accent that answered the phone spent several minutes trying to convince me there was no such island in the Bahamas! I assured her there was, at the extreme southern end of the island nation near Great Inagua. Capitulating just a little, she said, "If there is such an island, there is no place to stay there and certainly no reason for anyone to go there!"

Undaunted, I went to my local book store and thumbed through several travel guides to the Bahamas. Finally, in one, I found the mention of a small guest house and restaurant run by a Doris and Cap Brown in Abraham's Bay, the largest settlement on the island. I wrote to Cap Brown at the vague address shown in the guide. While waiting several weeks for a reply, I found out what I could about this remote island. At 110 square miles, Mayaguana is the ninth largest island in the Bahamas, but is very sparsely inhabited with a pop-

ulation of less than 600. Only the western half is settled and Abraham's Bay, where the airport is located, appeared on my map to be about 21 miles by sea from tiny Booby Cay.

Finally one morning I received a call from Cap Brown, assisted by the Marine Operator, from the one phone on Mayaguana. We made arrangements for a room and meals for a week, as well as boat rides to Booby Cay. Cap said the boat ride would take 2½ to 3 hours each way, if the trip could be made at all, for the seas were often too rough for his small boat.

The only thing left was to make airline reservations; there was only one flight a week to Mayaguana from Nassau, the capital of the Bahamas. But eventually everything was set and on a warm June day we completed the last leg of the trip.

As the Bahamasair prop plane touched down on the paved air strip, I tried to peer out of the smudged window next to my seat. A group of 25 or so people and about 10 vehicles, were waiting when we arrived. This turned out to be more people than we would see in any one spot the entire remainder of the trip. There was an air of excitement over the plane's arrival as it brings needed supplies and most of the few visitors to the island. We found Cap Brown, were introduced to the local constable, and had our gear loaded into Cap's worn out American-made car, which had most of its windows missing. We drove several miles down a paved but very potholed road toward Abraham's Bay. Alongside the road was a very dense growth of typical West Indian thorn forest. After 20 minutes, we passed a few houses, half of them deserted, then turned up a small dirt road. A hundred yards in, we pulled up alongside a simple concrete block house painted pastel blue. A small sign with peeling paint above

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Mayaguana Iguana, male *Cyclura carinata bartschi*, on Booby Cay. Photography: David W. Blair

the door proclaimed the building the "Mayaguana Sheraton." I looked over at Cap, who was trying very hard not to laugh about his little joke on the tourists.

Later that evening I spoke to Cap about getting to Booby Cay. He explained that although several visitors before us had wanted to make the voyage, the seas were rarely calm enough to make the trip and that no one other than local fishermen had been to the cay in almost four years. I tried to remain optimistic as we sat down to one of Doris Brown's delicious meals of cracked conch and homemade bread.

Two days later, sometime before dawn, there was a rap on the window of our small room. I sat up in bed and saw Cap outside. "The seas look good, let's go!" he said. After getting dressed, loading cameras and gear, we were down at the boat. Cap's twin teenage boys, Carl and Freeman, were with us. The small ancient wooden boat that we were to use had only splintered 2x6's for seats but the engine looked fairly new and in good condition. Cap hooked up the gas tank, pumped the line three or four times to prime it, and pulled sharply on the starter rope. An hour and a half later we were still sitting there, for the motor just would not start. I looked up and saw the sun was already getting high, knowing that by the time we got to Booby Cay it would be straight overhead. At midday on a hot day like this, any iguanas would be heated up and very wary making them extremely difficult to approach and photograph.

Cap, somewhat embarrassed, explained that his own engine was not usable and that he had borrowed this one, which he was not familiar with, from another man. He sent Carl to get the engine's owner and they both returned a half hour later. The man made a small adjustment on the choke, gave one good pull and the motor started right up! Soon we were all in the boat and headed out of the bay. The crystal clear water over white sand changed to turquoise as we slipped through the small channel in the reef. Suddenly the bottom dropped sharply off and we were in the deep blue of the open sea. The three-foot chop was all the boat could handle. The impact of each wave pounded us up and down on the wooden seats for almost three hours, and I

began to wonder if I would still be able to walk when we did finally reach the cay.

Eventually Booby was in sight and the sea again became calmer as we re-entered the reef about a half mile off shore. The rusted hulk of a huge stranded freighter could be seen further out on the reef and the rough seas and winds sent constant spray and foam over it. As we got closer to the cay, it became very shallow and we slowed to watch for rocks and coral heads. The area around Booby Cay is excellent for "conching" and normally Cap and his boys would collect as many as they could, but it was Sunday and the deeply religious inhabitants of Mayaguana do no fishing on the Sabbath. Instead they walked the perimeter of the cay looking for net floats, drift lumber, ropes, and anything of value that the seas had washed up on the shore.

It took me a few minutes to ready my camera gear before I began to make my way down the coast looking for iguanas. There were many sea birds in the air overhead and their cries drew me to a sandy area near the beach where they had numerous nests, each containing a single down-covered chick. I took a few pictures and moved quickly on so the parent birds would return to the nests and again provide the necessary shade for the chicks from the intense sun. Soon I began to see a few iguanas scurrying through the brush. Bartschi's Rock Iguana is a close relative of the Turks and Caicos Rock Iguana found on islands fifty miles or so further south. Large specimens are about two and one half feet long and are gray dorsally, mottled with paler gray to cream on the head and neck; the iris is golden. The iguanas were fairly numerous with all sizes present, from juveniles to adults, indicating a healthy reproducing population. However, the iguana is vulnerable due to the small size of the cay and the fact that it is found nowhere else in the world. Booby Cay is less than two kilometers long and only .5 kilometers wide. There are two small land-locked lakes and only about two thirds of the island provides suitable habitat. Originally iguanas probably ranged island-wide but today are concentrated on the western half of the cay where the vegetation is more dense. A current threat to the iguanas are the herds of goats which are living on



Mayaguana Iguana, female *Cyclura carinata bartschi*, on Booby Cay. Photography: David W. Blair

the cay. I saw one group of about ten goats on the eastern portion of the island. Here the vegetation was heavily grazed and stunted. This area was littered with goat droppings.

After spending about four hours on Booby Cay, we all met back at the boat. Cap and his sons had a good haul of booty from their beach combing. We loaded everything into the boat and started the long trip back to Abraham's Bay. The wind and waves were up somewhat and the small boat was nearly swamped twice by large breakers as we made our way through the reef and into the open sea again. Several hours later we were back at the "Mayaguana Sheraton" enjoying spicy conch stew and fresh baked bread.

The weather remained favorable so I made arrangements with Cap for one more trip to Booby Cay. The following morning, one day before we were scheduled to leave Mayaguana, we were up before dawn and down at the boat for an early departure. Again the engine was difficult to start, but he had it running after thirty minutes. This time, however, it wouldn't accelerate! Cap cut a piece of heavy monofilament fishing line and tied it directly to the accelerator arm on the carburetor, then threaded it through a hole in the engine cover which he snapped back into place. It seemed to work okay this way but I privately questioned the wisdom of undertaking a trip of this kind with a jerry-rigged engine.

More than one tank of gas is required for the six hour round trip to Booby Cay. This time, instead of a second tank, Lewis put a plastic jug on board filled with several gallons of fuel. It had no cover and he propped it up carefully in the rear of the boat. We left the harbor once again, turning east toward the Cay. This trip down was slower than the first for every few minutes the fishing line would slip out of Cap's hand and the boat would come to a stop. The water was a little rougher, also, and after dropping down hard off the crest of one particularly large wave, the two by six wooden plank seat snapped underneath us.

Hours later we again entered the reef near Booby Cay and the breaking waves rocked the boat badly. As the boat slowed, we all began to smell gasoline. The extra jug of gas required for the return

leg of the trip had tipped over and was now almost empty. We could see another fishing boat a mile or so away and after dropping me off on the cay, they took off in that direction to try to borrow some gas and then begin to dive for "konks."

I had another successful visit, counting more than forty iguanas that day and obtaining additional still photos and video recordings. I saw the boat returning after several hours and made my way back to the beach to meet them. They were clad only in their undershorts and had the boat piled so high with conchs that the water was only a few inches below the rails. I was afraid we would surely swamp as we attempted to exit the reef but the sea had grown quite calm and we had no problems. I asked if he was able to borrow any gas and was told he could only get one gallon. I didn't even ask if that was enough, for the concerned look on his face and the fact that the main gas tank now read only one quarter full told the whole story.

The boys went right to work cleaning the conchs and discarding the shells and entrails overboard. About half way back the boat ran out of gas. We were a mile off shore from the eastern uninhabited portion of Mayaguana where there are no roads. Cap picked up the one oar he had on board and began to paddle us slowly toward the coast. Fortunately, the wind had strangely become dead calm and the water was like glass. An hour later we had made some progress and were within half a mile from land. Suddenly the wind came up again and began to blow us away from the island. Within a short time we had lost all the progress we had made by paddling.

After drifting for hours, it was now getting late in the day. It would be dark in two more hours. I remembered from my maps that there was nothing between us and Cuba, two hundred miles away. In frustration, I went to the back of the boat and removed the cap to the empty gas tank. I tipped it up and balanced it on one corner; about an ounce of gas collected in the low point of the can. I pushed the rubber intake hose into the small puddle of gas and called Carl over to try the engine one more time. Surprisingly, after two or three pulls, the engine started. "Head to shore quick!" I shouted. We were heading straight toward shore at a fast clip

and all began to cheer. After a few minutes, the engine sputtered twice, then died. We were now less than a quarter mile offshore, but the wind immediately began to blow us back out again. I looked into the tank once more. There was now only about a teaspoon of gas left in the corner. Positioning the hose one final time, I nodded at Carl. He jerked on the pull cord and it fired again. It ran for only one minute but took us to within one hundred meters of the beach where the water was shallow enough to stand. We all hopped out and walked the boat in the remaining distance. Although we were still quite a way from Abraham's Bay, everyone was obviously very relieved to be back on shore. I expected Cap to pull the boat up on the sand and wait for help to arrive since we were now long overdue. Instead, he began to walk the boat in waist deep water toward home, more than five miles away. "This way we'll be that much closer when they find us," he said.

As the sun was setting, we heard the sound of another boat and soon saw it was heading directly toward us. Had we still been drifting out to sea, I doubt they ever would have seen our small craft. When the boat drew nearer, we could see it was Cap's oldest son. After learning that we had run out of gas, he poured some in our tank and we began to follow him back to town. I expected my wife to

be worried but was surprised to hear that Mrs. Brown was more anxious than anyone and had been waiting at the dock for hours. At the first sight of our boats returning, however, she had run home so Cap wouldn't know how worried she had been. She immediately began brewing a pot of coffee, for she knew that was the first thing he would want.

We did learn a couple of important things from this successful visit to Booby Cay. First, that *Cyclura carinata bartschi* still survives and, in fact, is successfully reproducing on the cay, although the number of juveniles is low. Secondly, that the feral goats now present must be removed before the entire island is denuded by over-grazing. This should not be too difficult a task to accomplish on such a small cay. I can only hope it is not initiated too late to preserve the viability of the world's only surviving population of Bartschi's Rock Iguana.



#### References

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