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Cayman's eco-heroes

by Carol Gray

Many people have dedicated themselves to the conservation of Cayman's native plants and animals. Here, we focus on some of them, as a tribute to all those who treasure nature's gifts to these islands

Lois Blumenthal

Big things often have small beginnings. So it was for a project that Lois Blumenthal started while she was helping her teenage children with a high-school assignment and learnt, by chance, that bats were the only native mammal in the Cayman Islands. Soon afterwards during a Pirates' Week parade in 1993, Lois saw an exterminator's float that represented bats as akin to invasive pests such as rats and roaches. "It didn't seem right," she says, even then aware that people's perceptions were false and overlooked the fact that bats sought shelter in buildings only because they had lost so much of their own natural habitat. The seed of an idea to offer bats an alternative "home" began to take root.

Lois wrote to Bat Conservation International (BCI) in Austin, Texas. Their reply left her in no doubt that bats were a keystone species in ecosystems and that, having only one pup per year (not litters), they could be quickly wiped out. "I thought my kids should learn how to do something with this type of information, so we decided to develop a small awareness program."

From those modest beginnings has grown a number of projects with worldwide influence. Lois initiated the National Trust Bat Conservation Program which involves the provision of bat houses, now the most successful program of its type in the tropics worldwide. "We have erected 80 bat houses throughout Cayman and have new orders coming in all the time." The program is internationally acclaimed and used as a model from the Bahamas to Madagascar. Lois has also founded a listserv that links bat conservationists and researchers throughout the region; as a National Trust volunteer, she wears four hats (Bat Conservation Program Director, Secretary to the Council, Wildlife Rescue Co-ordinator and Visiting Scientist Co-ordinator); she takes every opportunity to lobby for the preservation of bats' natural habitat; she runs two conservation websites (www.caymanwildlife.org, and, with the help of another dedicated volunteer Alison Corbett, www.caymanwildliferescue.org); she holds "fly-outs" for the public and every year she makes hundreds of site visits to help to solve roof bat problems. Bat woman? It's an epithet that Lois wears with pride.

For more info or to buy tickets for an interpreted "Bat Fly-Out" suitable for adults and children, call the National Trust on 949-0121.

Ann Stafford

If the tide is turning towards greater awareness of the need to preserve Cayman's natural treasures, it will be thanks in some measure to the dedication of Ann Stafford. Believing that native plants and creatures, big and small, are what define a place and its people, Ann has spent the past decade studying and writing about the need to preserve the species which occur naturally in the Cayman Islands without direct or indirect human actions. "Plant by plant and person by person" is how she approaches her task. Using her own garden and personal contact through an extensive network, she spreads the word that native animals need native plants.

So intense is her interest in native plants that she discovered a species of shrub new to science. A very slow-growing, critically-endangered Grand Cayman endemic shrub, it has been officially named *Casearia staffordiae* in Ann's honor. But it is butterflies, which Ann describes as nature's jewelry, that are her particular focus. With other like-minded volunteers, Ann established Cayman Wildlife Connection and in 2005, in collaboration with Lois Blumenthal, published a booklet, entitled *Landscaping with Cayman Islands Native Plants for Butterflies and Wildlife*. A slight volume, it's nevertheless packed with information to encourage butterfly gardening (planting and protecting plants needed by butterflies to survive) in private gardens, schools, public parks and other open spaces. CayMANNature is the entity that Ann now uses to further these aims.

Despite being self-taught, Ann is considered to be an authority on Cayman butterflies and has recently co-authored "Butterflies of the Cayman Islands" with Dr Richard Askew. "Knowledge is fundamental to conservation," Ann says, "and I hope that the information we've presented will help others to make a contribution to the continuing survival of these beautiful insects."

Landscaping with Cayman Islands Native Plants for Butterflies and Wildlife is available from The National Trust of the Cayman Islands. *Butterflies of the Cayman Islands* is available online from www.appollobooks.com and from The National Trust. Cayman Wildlife Connection is an online information resource: www.caymanwildlife.org

Willie Ebanks

"My little darlings" is how Willie Ebanks, who farms beside Malportas Pond in Hutlands, Grand Cayman, refers to the West Indian Whistling-Ducks which he and his son Jamie played a part in rescuing from the brink of extinction nearly 20 years ago. Listed as vulnerable by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, West Indian Whistling-Ducks had been fair game for hunters until 1989 when they were protected by law in Cayman. Mr Willie (as he's known locally) says their population in Cayman at that time was estimated at less than 200.

"Early in December 1990, our youngest son Jamie saw a pair of ducks with five chicks in the rushes on the edge of the pond at the back of the pig pens. He took great interest in

caring for them, helping to protect them against rats and cats, snakes and dogs. Jamie noticed that each night, one of the parents returned to the wild and the other stayed with the chicks. By May, the whole family was flying off together at night and would return at daylight, with friends at times.”

That’s when Mr Willie began feeding his little darlings. Today, “from one pair of ducks and an 11-year-old boy who chose to care for the ducks instead of harming them, I can walk among hundreds of ducks at one time ... They are usually nocturnal creatures but at feeding time, when I call them, they come, in their hundreds. Sometimes they whistle as they fly by, sometimes they deliberately block my path if they want more food.”

In 1992, Mr Willie was awarded the National Trust Award for his conservation efforts. In 1995, he was awarded the Queen’s Badge and Certificate. West Indian Whistling-Ducks are endemic to the West Indies. Their total population is about 10 000; it is estimated that more than 10 per cent of that population is now found on Grand Cayman..

Otto Watler

Otto Watler is no stranger to controversy. In the 20 years he’s been trying to boost the dwindling population of Cayman parrots, he’s been in the midst of heated debate more times than he cares to remember. His commitment, however, is unwavering. “I am a conservationist,” Otto says. “Both types of parrots found here, the Grand Cayman Parrot and the Cayman Brac Parrot, are endemic to Cayman which means they are found nowhere else in the world. These parrots are more a part of these islands than we are. I’m trying to stave off the possibility that the only way my great great grandchildren will see the national bird of the Cayman Islands is to see a stuffed one in a museum.”

Not everyone in Cayman would agree with Otto. Many farmers whose crops have been fodder for parrots might think – if not always say - that the only good parrot is a stuffed parrot. Indeed, until relatively recently when parrots were declared a protected species, hunters would be paid to shoot them. Otto’s comment is characteristically pithy: “The dollar is in between the bird and the mango.”

The first person to breed Cayman parrots in captivity, Otto has a honey farm on a smallholding in Savannah where he has several purpose-built cages for his breeding program, offering a safe, long-term home for previously captive parrots in as natural a habitat as possible. (It is illegal to catch and keep a Cayman parrot.) Over the years, his breeding program has had both success and failure, often mirroring the fate of parrots in the wild. In the early years of the new millennium, for example, both his parrots and those in the wild were flourishing but the impact of Hurricane Ivan in 2004 on both populations was devastating. Now, patiently, doggedly, with the help of Alison Corbett and other volunteers who share his vision, he’s working to rebuild his breeding program. “The future of Cayman parrots is in the balance,” he says, “but I am not giving up yet.”