

THE CONSERVATION STATUS OF BIRDS IN BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL PARKS

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THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS National Parks Trust currently manages 18 National Parks and Protected Areas, five of which are bird sanctuaries: Deadmans Chest, Fallen Jerusalem, Great Tobago, Little Tobago, and Prickly Pear. One of the main objectives of the Trust is to manage selected natural areas that are vital to the protection of endangered species and the life patterns of other critical species, such as seabirds. The Trust is able to carry out this objective through legislation that supports effective management. The Wild Birds Protection Ordinance (1980) fully protects approximately 21 species of rare or endangered wild birds within the British Virgin Islands (BVI), as well as their nests, eggs, and young. The Bird Sanctuaries Order (1977) provides complete protection of all species of wild birds in 20 designated bird sanctuaries, some of which are existing National Parks and others are proposed protected areas.

Seabirds in the BVI are particularly threatened by mangrove destruction, coastal development, and land reclamation. Additional pressure is increasing from intrusion by tourists and developers in search of isolated beaches and cays for recreation or developmental pursuits. Feral animals pose still another threat for increased nesting and colonization on many of the outlying islands. Unfortunately, some of these visitation and feral animals problems occur within the Parks, but the major habitat destruction is beyond the control of the National Parks Trust because it occurs on private land. In response to these pressures, the Trust is updating its System Plan, which outlines its objectives and plans for management. This will refocus attention to the areas that were originally recommended for inclusion into the Parks system, many of which are bird sanctuaries. Ideally, these proposed areas will be reviewed in terms of their environmental importance and then be declared National Parks by the BVI Government. The urgency of the situation is evident in the increasing number of small offshore islands within the BVI that are for sale within exclusive markets that focus on private island resorts. Whereas this is preferable to large-scale development, these small island resorts still affect previously undisturbed bird colonies, which will inevi-

tably reduce the number of seabirds colonizing these islands.

The finest example of protection is the Tobagos National Park, which includes Great Tobago, Little Tobago, and Watsons Rock. These islands are reputed to be the most important seabird nesting sites in the BVI, and the entire Eastern Caribbean for the endangered Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*) and Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*), whose nests are found in the hundreds. Access to the islands is geographically restricted by the harsh north swell and rocky shorelines, in addition to the steep cliffs and cactus scrub. Consequently, the islands are undisturbed by humans, although historical intrusion has resulted in the presence of approximately 20 feral goats. The vegetation is predominantly cactus scrub, as foraging feral goats restrict tree growth to the extent that the bird colonies may be limited in their ability to expand. Several attempts have been made by the National Parks Trust to remove these animals, but a small number were not captured and they have been able to reproduce. The complete removal of these animals is being planned in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture. This is considered to be an important project that should be completed by the year 2000. Fortunately, no goats occur on Little Tobago and the difference in vegetative cover is immediately noticeable. Visiting scientist Dr. Betty Anne Schreiber, Executive Director of the Ornithological Council, began research on Great Tobago in 1997 and it is her intention to study the taxonomic status of certain peleciform birds, in relation to their conservation status (Schreiber 1997). With further research such as this, the National Parks Trust will be able to make more informed management decisions to protect these species within the BVI.

One important site for inclusion in the National Parks system is the group of islands called The Dogs. At present only West Dog is a National Park, but the original proposal included George Dog, Great Dog, East Seal Dog, West Seal Dog, and Cockroach Island; all of these islands are bird sanctuaries, but they are predominantly privately owned. In addition, their landscape is less severe, thereby allowing easy

shore access to the many sailors who visit the islands. As a bird sanctuary, West Dog is an important nesting site for seabirds such as the Bridled Tern (*Sterna anaethetus*), Sooty Tern (*Sterna fuscata*), Roseate Tern (*Sterna dougallii*), and Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon aethereus*).

Another proposed protected area includes the archipelago of Sandy Cay, Green Cay, Sandy Spit, and the eastern point of Little Jost Van Dyke. These islands are home to the endangered Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), White-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon lepturus*), and Roseate Tern. However, because all three cays are privately owned, the extent to which the National Parks Trust is able to manage these areas is restricted. These islands are another example of how the impact of tourism and development can affect the future of nesting seabirds in the BVI.

On Anegada, the proposed protected area includes all of the western ponds, all coastal mangroves, and the eastern ponds. The island is currently home to 51 Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*), 20 of which were reintroduced in 1992 and 4 are wild flamingos that joined the flock in 1994. Terrestrial wardens of the National Parks Trust are monitoring the flamingos by conducting weekly bird counts, stating location, activity, and age. These records show that the population has increased by successful undisturbed nesting, mainly in Red Pond. Presently no encroachment threats exist, since all of the western ponds, Red Pond, and Flamingo Pond (an existing bird sanctuary) have been declared Ramsar sites and are now protected under the International Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

Within the inland terrestrial parks, the protection of forests along the peaks and ridges of Tortola and Virgin Gorda has resulted in a safe habitat for local avifauna, such as the rare Bridled Quail-Dove (*Geotrygon mystacea*) at Gorda Peak National Park. The importance of buffer zones around the Parks to ensure that these habitats are not eventually isolated refugia, however, is an urgent matter on small islands where available land is scarce. The National Parks Trust is developing management plans for each of its parks, as part of the training received through the Darwin Initiative Project, Integrating National Parks, Education and Community Development. Within these plans are recommendations for effective management within and surrounding the

Parks, since boundaries cannot be placed on flora and fauna.

The newest National Park is Shark Bay on the northern coast of Tortola, declared in April 1999. This Park includes 18.4 acres of forest and extends along the cliffs to the bay below, which is a popular feeding zone for Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Pelicans, and Brown Boobies. The bay is mainly inaccessible because of the north shore swells and is not a likely visitor location because of its rocky beach, but from the cliffs there is the most amazing view of these seabirds in their natural environment. This Park will provide the best educational tool for visitors, so that they will understand why it is imperative to protect nesting areas such as Great Tobago and The Dogs.

In addition to the resident avifauna, the diverse habitats within the British Virgin Islands also support many migratory and pelagic species. These seasonal visitors include the summer pelagic seabirds that nest on the outlying cays and islets, such as those in the family Procellariidae, notably Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*) on the Tobago islands. The winter months are dominated by migratory species, predominantly from North America, and include the Double-crested (*Phalacrocorax auritus*) and Neotropic (*P. brasilianus*) cormorants, and Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) and American Golden-Plover (*P. dominica*). Therefore, the conservation of these habitats has repercussions beyond the resident avifauna, to the extent that these habitats provide important corridors for migratory species. Hence, these islands are one link in a much greater chain that determines their survival.

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