

AGAINST ALL ODDS The Cahow



by Carol Mitchell

You are beyond tired, you are bone weary and cold to the very core: your hands are raw and bloody with broken blisters, you are soaked to the skin and terrified that Davy Jones' locker will open up before your eyes and that is even before the nightmare of the bosun's wrath and the whim of the officers' beatings. But you know, absolutely know, that tomorrow will be worse, probably the worst day of your life, as it is your turn on the rota to man the crow's nest. The prospect of the riches and the travel to exotic climes offered back in Cadiz had turned your head from the seeming boredom of the farm in the sun. If you had the strength now, you would scream if you saw another weevil in the hard tack of the ship's biscuits and the stench of the hogs kept in their crates by the cook was far from the natural earthiness of the little piglets in the home farm fields. There at least you ate well and as often as you wanted with the good food in its seasonal cycles, thoughts drifting to the aromatic pigeon stew in the pot hanging over the kitchen fire.....

A sudden shout from above your head brings officers and men running up on deck. 'LAND AHOY'. It is the most welcome two words you have heard in weeks and, as the driving rain and gloom lifts, a watery sun reveals an island in the distance looking like the nearest thing to Paradise as you are likely to get. The Captain orders every man to his station and heads for the first solid terrain since the ship set sail two months ago. Safe harbour at last as you and your shipmates stumble onto dry land and fall to your knees to thank someone, anyone, for safe deliverance. Now the main task is to search for fresh water and food. Just behind the treeline, a few yards from the beach is a small gurgling stream whose water tastes sweet and clear; fruit is in reach from the trees and meat, in feathered form, waddles from burrows towards the sailors.

The island is Bermuda and this is January in the year 1517. One hundred years later all this 'meat' had gone.

In the 16th century the Spanish sailors used Bermuda as a stopover during their marauding against and murder of the native South American civilisations. The abundant colonies of Cahows were an easy target and, in 1603, it was recorded that sailors would take up to 400 birds a night. The hogs they brought with them decimated

the ground-nesting Bermuda Petrels (*Pteradroma cahow*) by rooting up their burrows, disrupting their breeding cycle and actually eating eggs, chicks and adults.



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The English were no better behaved when, in 1609, the ship *Sea Venture* was wrecked on the island. Its crew harvested the eggs then culled the birds and it was this shipwreck which led directly to the takeover of Bermuda by the English in 1612. What followed was sheer destruction. The rats, cats and dogs reinforced the mass slaughter by the humans for food together with the widespread burning of the vegetation and deforestation to turn the island into a settlement during the first 20 years of colonisation. The Governor strove to issue conservation instructions 'against the spoyle and havocke of the Cohowes' but was totally ignored to the point that, by the 1620s, the birds were believed to be extinct.

Although there appeared to be later sightings of the Cahow, these were believed to be those of the very similar Audubon's Shearwater. However, in 1935 a bird struck the St. David's Lighthouse on the island and it was sent, firstly, to the New York Zoological Society which forwarded it to the American Museum of Natural History in New York. There the eminent ornithologist, Robert Murphy, identified it as a Bermuda Petrel. Six years later, and to his delight, the Bermudian naturalist, Louis Mowbray, received a live specimen which had collided with a radio antenna tower and, after due TLC, was able to be released two days later. The birds seem to have a blind spot for high structures because another one died flying into a lighthouse in January 1951. This then prompted Murphy and Mowbray then set out to search all of the islands which comprise

Bermuda and found 18 surviving pairs on rocky islets in Castle Harbour, off St David's Island which is one of the main islands in the Bermudan archipelago. Their companion on the expedition was a 15 year-old boy. This teenager would become acknowledged worldwide as the primary conservationist in the fight to save the Bermuda Petrel. His name is David B. Wingate.

The discovery spurred Wingate on to study Zoology at Cornell University and he returned to Bermuda in 1958 to take up the challenge of saving the Cahow. He went on to become the Conservation Officer for the Bermuda Government Parks Department from 1966 until his retirement in 2000. He is also credited with rediscovering the Black-capped Petrel in Haiti in 1963.

His methods have been very effective in addressing the threats to the Cahow. Firstly, there was a programme to eradicate rats on the nesting islands and then he tackled the problem of nest site competition with the aggressive White-tailed Tropic Bird. The latter would invade Petrel burrows and kill up to 75% of the Cahow chicks. Following the design and installation of specifically sized 'baffler' burrow entrance covers which allowed the Petrels to enter but excluded the larger Tropic birds, there has been virtually no chick loss from this problem.

David Wingate also initiated the ecological restoration of Nonesuch Island close to where his original journey first fired his enthusiasm. This mammoth task was not to conserve but to restore the original environment from the desert caused by centuries of abuse, habitat destruction for agriculture and ship building and then total neglect. Literally, thousands of native and endemic plants including the Bermuda Cedar, the Bermuda Palmetto Palm and the Bermuda Olivewood were propagated and planted on Nonsuch to re-establish the original forest ecosystem. Beginning in 1962, in excess of 10,000 of those plants of over 100 species were planted and have since developed into a well-established closed-canopy forest similar to descriptions of the terrain by early settlers. This has realised Wingate's goal as it now serves as a viable nesting site for the Petrel.

Even after his 'retirement', Wingate was still designing artificial nest boxes for the original nesting islets which have little in the way of suitable nest sites due to

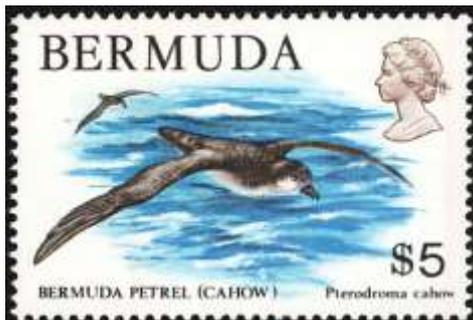
Against All Odds—The Cahow

hurricane damage and sea level with few rock crevices or deep soil for the birds to scoop out their burrows. In 2002 a banding programme for both adults and fledglings was initiated and by 2015 had resulted in over 85% of all Cahows being fitted with identification bands to enable them to be monitored throughout their very long lifespan.

That life is that of an oceanic wanderer. The conformation of the Cahow enables its superb flight – it is only 15 inches long but with a wingspan of nearly three and a half feet. So it spends most of its life across the open seas where it feeds typically on small fish such as krill and anchovies, squid and shrimp-like crustacea mainly in the colder waters of the North Atlantic – one was even sighted in May 2014 off the west coast of Ireland, the furthest the Petrel has been seen from Bermuda. Special glands in their tube-like nostrils allow them to ingest seawater and these glands filter out the salt which the birds expel by sneezing.

After 3-4 years the males return to the breeding islands to create nests and only the ones which are in complete darkness are chosen. The females reappear after 4-6 years and then lay just a single egg per season and this precious egg is incubated by both parents, hatching after 53-55 days. The adults mate for life and return to the same nest each year. The underparts are mainly white which contrast sharply with the greyish-brown upperparts, the brownish-black cowl, black bill and pink legs and feet.

Its endangered status as the second rarest seabird in the world prevented it



becoming the Bermudan national bird until 2003. It first appeared on a Bermuda stamp in 1978 (S.G. 403), below, and was

followed in 1993 by Antigua (S.G. 1760), below.



Barbuda also features in 1993 No 1760 of Antigua overprinted with 'BARBUDA MAIL' (S.G. 1472), as shown below.



It was not until 1997 that Bermuda issued two more Cahow stamps (S.G. 776/7)



These were re-issued in 2001 with different face values and the WWF emblem added (S.G. 853 & 855), shown below.



Its rarity and restriction to one small nation probably accounts for the paucity of stamps. Whilst there are still only 400 birds recorded in the wild and regarded by the IUCN as very

endangered, the efforts to re-establish the Bermudan Petrel have proved successful and worthwhile so, unlike the Dodo and Passenger Pigeon, the Cahow is accurately of 'Lazarus' status as it has survived truly 'against all odds'.

My thanks again to Carol for submitting yet another fascinating contribution to Flight.

Chiffchaff Chat

Jersey New Issue - Links with China

This is the fifth and final instalment of the series that looks at Jersey's natural links with China. This fifth series features some of the species of woodland wildlife that have been recorded in both locations, each representing two ends of the same eco-zone, the Palearctic. There are 3 birds in the 6 value set - all at 52p, Western Barn Owl, Long-eared Owl and Hawfinch, and they are very grand indeed! The date of issue was 2nd September and the design of these stamps is fabulous.



These beautiful stamps will be on my purchasing list for sure. There is a mini sheet too, as well as the souvenir sheets featuring 10x each of the stamps.

