



BLUE IGUANA TALES

Volume 2, Number 1 – 2005 Spring Edition – Quarterly update on the Blue Iguana Recovery Program

STORM TROOPERS !

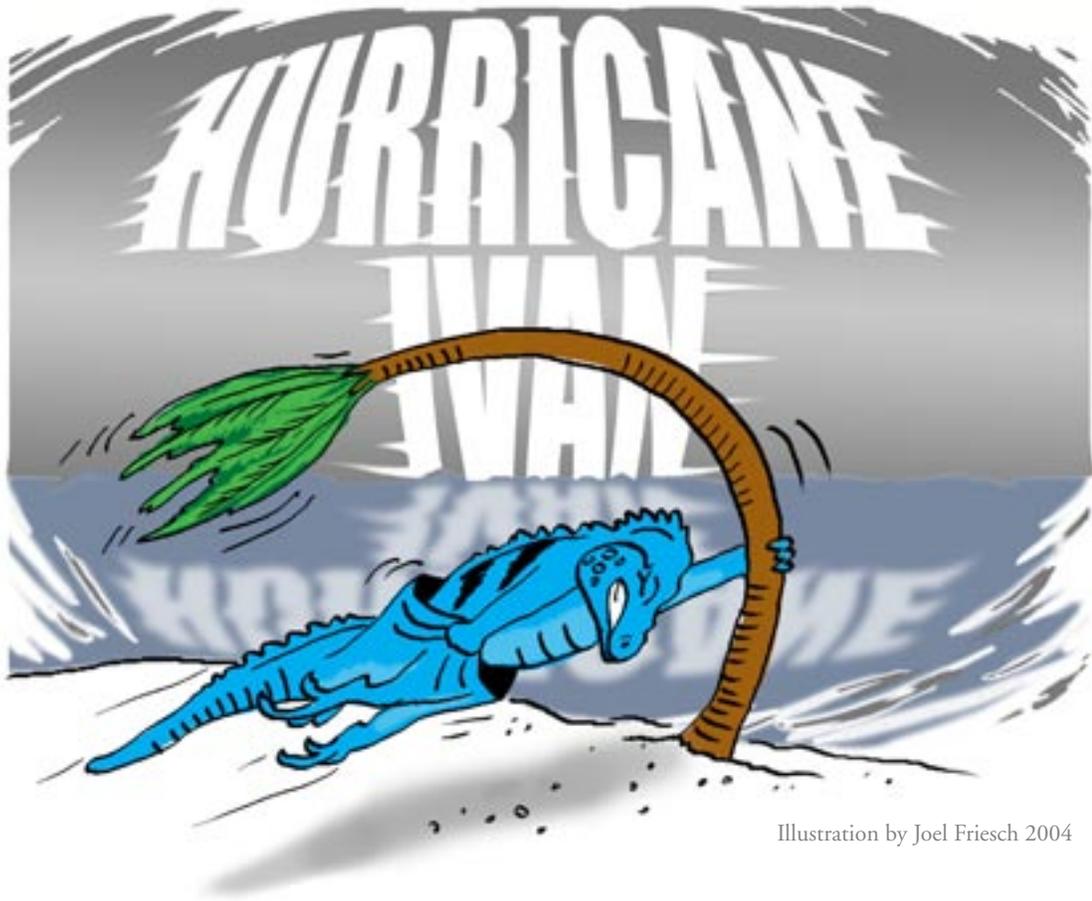


Illustration by Joel Friesch 2004

Blue Iguana Tales is normally circulated four times a year, but the summer issue never made it past a Table of Contents, and the autumn issue was never even contemplated. For those of you who have been following events in Cayman, this can be no surprise.

The captive breeding facility was undergoing a major expansion (see “Team Blue” in this issue). Major fieldwork was scheduled shortly thereafter, with Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust’s Matt Goetz, and US student Nick Louis, arriving in Grand Cayman to help with the release and radio tracking of 24 two-year-old Blue Iguanas in the Salina Reserve. In September, those plans, along with the properties and livelihoods of a great many people, were blown away by the most extreme hurricane Grand Cayman has experienced in living memory.

Photo by John Binns



Miraculously, the Blues survived “Ivan” with no mortalities. The devastation along the south coast of Grand Cayman transformed the 15-minute drive to the QE II Botanic Park into a two-day slog. Clambering over the endless tangle of fallen trees, staff and volunteers were not sure what to expect as they made their way down once-familiar Park trails.

The captive facility was awash with subsiding floodwater. The iguanas, however, were holding on, literally hanging on to trees and clinging to cage wire. After the immediate temporary repairs to the most severely damaged cages, the Program was faced with the urgent question of how to maintain over 200 captive Blue Iguanas in the middle of a disaster zone: damaged infrastructure, no electricity or running water, and the wild plant food supply for the iguanas converted overnight into rotting pulp by the floodwater.

The international outpouring of practical and financial support since then has been extraordinary. Not only has it kept the program and the Blue Iguanas alive through severely difficult times, it has supported us as we struggled with the practical and emotional challenges faced by everyone in Cayman in Ivan’s aftermath.

The planned iguana release obviously had to be postponed, but as the first communications were restored with the outside world, the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust readily agreed to allow Matt Goetz to remain in Cayman to help put the program back on its feet. At the same time, two existing program volunteers, Chris Carr and Samantha Addinall, offered their full time services to the program - their normal jobs had been deferred indefinitely because of storm damage and the temporary cessation of tourism. Chris and Sam have since been employed fulltime as our new Blue Iguana Wardens.

Photo by John Binns



Program Director Fred Burton’s home became the team’s operational base, as Fred and Matt Goetz were soon joined by John Binns, who flew in (under remarkably challenging circumstances) from California, bringing with him critical supplies, including emergency food rations and a generator. Next was film-maker Dorothea Schwab, whose plans to film the scheduled iguana release had to be radically revised (see page 11, *Too Blue to Lose*) – Dorothea also brought life support essentials including a drinking water filtration system (which continues to serve the program today), purchased with funds from the German television channel VOX, John remained in contact with what has become the Blue Iguana Recovery Program’s nerve centre in the USA, the International

Reptile Conservation Foundation (IRCF) in California. Maintaining communication with his wife Sandy by satellite phone, John supplied a stream of information for the program website (www.BlueIguana.ky) and we were able to stay in touch with our key international partners despite the limited availability of cell phone services and the complete absence of fixed line and internet access.

The hurricane temporarily erased all local income potential for the program. Local charitable funds were naturally directed to urgent humanitarian needs, while tourism and retail sales became completely dormant. Funds for program staffing and supplies were modest before the storm, and the loss of local income forced us to appeal for emergency assistance to tide the program through the crisis.

The Texas-based International Iguana Foundation IIF spread news of the need to its partners and supporters, resulting in a substantial series of grants. The Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust also directed a significant emergency grant to the program. Meanwhile the IIF and IRCF networks shipped in critical equipment, including chainsaws and a large generator capable of powering tools for repairs to the captive facility.

Now at the very end of 2004, Grand Cayman has made solid progress towards recovery. Electrical power and piped water has been restored island wide, though the Program's headquarters in Grand Cayman has not yet regained internet or email access.

Much of the island is back in business, though many challenges remain. As we count our many blessings, all of us at the Blue Iguana Recovery Program wish to deeply thank the people and organizations that have helped us through this time:

IRCF -John and Sandy Binns, Joel Friesch, AJ Gutman, and staff, emergency funds, emergency supplies, web site operation, communications and more

The International Iguana Foundation, and Rick Hudson - networking with potential contributors, emergency funds

Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust - staffing and emergency funds

Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund, rapid response fund – emergency funds

Woodland Park Zoo – emergency funds

Sedgwick County Zoo – emergency funds

Zoo Conservation Outreach (at Audubon) – emergency funds

Indianapolis Zoo, - generator

Dorothea Schwab – another generator, emergency supplies

Mark and Wendy Townsend - chainsaws

Wharton-Smith Inc. – another chainsaw

Nick Louis, Matt Goetz, Samantha Addinall, Chris Carr, and John Binns – the team that joined **Fred Burton** to handle the aftermath of the storm

The Next Generation

In the last issue of Blue Iguana Tales, we reported on the early stages of the release of 12 two-year-old Blue Iguanas to the wild, in the QE II Botanic Park. Now almost a year on, the release can be declared a success. Up until the arrival of Hurricane Ivan, all the released iguanas were still alive and remaining in the Park. At least four of the released females bred for the first time, traveling within the Park to find suitable nesting places. We located two of the nests, and successfully hatched young from both clutches of eggs.

The customized retreats have proved very effective in anchoring iguanas to their release sites. All survived the storm and are still occupied. Volunteers Rick Burton, Mark Danziger and Joel Jefferson played a major part in setting up retreats and trails for the release - news of the survival of these iguanas is a tribute to their effort.

Over 80 fertile eggs were gathered and successfully incubated in 2004, matching 2003's unprecedented breeding success.

The last egg to hatch did so unobserved, in a dark, powerless incubator, as hurricane winds roared and roofs were ripped from buildings. At the height of Hurricane Ivan's passage not one hatchling, but two emerged – the first *lewisi* twins to be hatched in the history of the Program! At a third of the normal hatch weight, the twins were dangerously low on yolk reserves, and sadly one died soon after hatch. The other twin is alive and well, sporting brilliant markings and a feisty personality.

The 2004 hatch took the Program's captive stock well over the 200 mark. Fortunately, plans were already afoot to make sure the facility was prepared for the newcomers...



Photo by John Binns



Photo by John Binns

Big Blue Truck



Photo by John Binns

Wharton Smith Inc., a Florida based international General Contractor continued their substantial support to the Blue Iguana Recovery Program, donating an appropriately blue Ford F150 pickup truck. The keys were handed over just weeks before the arrival of Hurricane Ivan. It is hard to imagine how the post-storm recovery could have been undertaken without this vital piece of equipment. Unlike so many vehicles which bit the dust (more often saltwater) during the storm, the Big Blue Truck remains in fine working order and active service. Thank you once again, Wharton-Smith!

Team Blue

(this article by AJ Gutman was originally published on BlueIguana.ky)



Photo by John Binns

Grand Cayman Facility Upgrade July 30th – August 13th 2004

As the containers in the incubator started filling up with Blue Iguana eggs, it became evident that some timely assistance was needed to upgrade the captive breeding facility in QEII Botanic Park to accommodate the “newcomers”. Help arrived just in time thanks to John Binns and the International Reptile Conservation Foundation. With little notice, John assembled a team of volunteers from around the world and Team Blue descended on Grand Cayman. An advance guard arrived on July 27th to undertake some quick planning and prioritizing for the rest of the Team members, most of who arrived on July 30th. Baby iguanas hatching daily added an element of urgency to the activities.



Photo by John Binns

Team Blue: F. Burton, AJ Gutman, J. Binns, M. Ogle, C. Carr, J. Ehrenberger, D. Bell, D. Belster, C. Belster, N. Russell, and B. Anderson



Photo by John Binns

All the hammers, tape measures, power tools and scrub brushes, which must surely have intrigued airport security staff checking Team luggage, were immediately put to use. From an initial prototype of four attached 4 ft. x 4 ft. cages, volunteers quickly got to work on an assembly line sawing lumber, notching and screwing pre-cut pieces together and covering each completed unit with screen mesh. Others were charged with the seemingly endless

task of cutting cage doors and attaching hinges and bolts to the 102 units that were produced within a new compound. Cement was being mixed and poured for new pens even as the saws and power drills hummed.

Meanwhile, in the established iguana housing area, other Team members were busy cleaning, repairing and redecorating the existing cages. Rocks, branches, palm leaves and epiphytes collected from the forest floor in the surrounding Botanic Park were all used creatively to provide sleeping retreats, shaded areas and climbing opportunities within each cage. Volunteers also had a chance to learn about the natural plant components of the Blue Iguana diet, which have led to much-improved breeding success.

Enthusiastic local Caymanians also showed up to lend a hand. The entire football team showed up with shovels and wheelbarrows to help move rock, soil and vegetation within the new breeding



Photo by John Binns

enclosures in preparation for their future inhabitants. Others brought their rakes and gloves to help clean cages and tools to assist with construction.

Team Blue enjoyed a well-deserved day off visiting the neighboring island of Little Cayman, the home of yet another iguana species, the Sister Isle's Rock Iguana (*Cyclura nubila caymanensis*), shown on the right. The iguanas, well acclimated to tourists, came flocking out to greet their delighted visitors. Small lizard enthusiasts eagerly photographed the native anole (*Anolis maynardi*) and the birders in the group happily sighted Red-footed Boobies and Frigate Birds.



Photo by John Binns

Once all the lavish new cages were complete, some were quickly furnished for their new inhabitants, mostly two year-olds due for release in September into the neighboring Salina Reserve. Some Team members “enjoyed” a rather grueling hike into this rocky and forbidding territory for a chance to see what natural Blue Iguana habitat looks like.

Team Blue members also gave their power tools a thorough workout clearing an area for a new work and storage shed. Trees that were cut down were sawed into perfect lengths for use as perches in the new cages. And about half the concrete floor was poured for the shed, just as the rains accompanying Hurricane Charley started pouring ...

Hurricane Charley – as if Team Blue members weren't sufficiently well occupied with all the tasks they'd set for themselves, they were suddenly faced with battering down the Captive Breeding Facility for what, for most members at least, was their very first hurricane! The newly decorated cages had to be quickly emptied of any objects which could potentially get tossed about in the wind and hurt the iguanas.



All the new cages were packed together as closely as possible to protect them from the wind. And the smaller, older cages were all packed together around and in between the larger wire enclosures.

Everyone was enormously relieved the following afternoon when Charley deflected off course, and unlike Ivan a month later, spared the island from significant harm. The most obvious consequence of the hurricane was cancelled flights for several team members, who were able to use their extra time to help put the facility back in order.

Not Just a Walk in the Park...

Last Spring's successful release of 12 young Blues in the QE II Botanic Park brings this free-roaming population to a total of 28 individuals. At best, we estimate the Park can support about ten more Blue Iguanas, but by late 2004 we had 24 two-year-olds ready to release into the wild. (By late 2005, about 70 more will be ready to go!)



Photo by John Binns

The National Trust's 625-acre Salina Reserve, in the northeastern interior of Grand Cayman, includes some small areas of dry rocky shrubland with soil patches that are suitable habitat for Blue Iguanas. Back in 1993, a test release of three radio-tagged youngsters demonstrated that Blue Iguanas can survive and grow there, and following a habitat survey in 2004, we decided the Salina should be the next location for restoration of the Blues to the wild.

A substantial grant from the Dennis Curry Charitable Trust, through the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust (DWCT), provided the human resource financing for the work, with an additional grant from the International Iguana Foundation providing the equipment and supplies. DWCT also sent one of their staff, Matt Goetz, to work with program staff radio tracking the released iguanas. The team was completed by Nick Louis, a student and reptile enthusiast from the USA seeking work experience.

The release was originally scheduled for September – October 2004. The preparations and procedures were finalized for the imminent release, when Hurricane Ivan struck. Inevitably, the release had to be postponed, and after helping with the immediate crisis the overseas members of the team had to return home.

On 6 December 2004 the release finally went ahead. Six two-year-old, radio tagged females were placed in their retreats in the northern zone, and seven more in the central zone of the Salina. All were free to emerge into the wild the following morning.



Photo by Fred Burtron

Female GYP (bead colors green-yellow-pale blue) spends her first day in the wild.

The released females were tracked from dawn to dusk every day through 24 December by a new team led by BIRP Director Fred Burton, and including (cumulatively through the tracking period) BIRP staff Chris Carr and Samantha Addinall, overseas participants Sarah Doty (IRCF), Judith Bryja (Houston Zoo), Desiree Wong (IRCF), John Kunna, and Craig Pelke (Milwaukee County Zoo) and John Bothwell and Janice Blumenthal of the Cayman Islands Department of the Environment. The work is funded by grants from the Dennis Curry Charitable Trust through the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, and the International Iguana Foundation. The overseas participants were coordinated by the International Reptile Conservation Foundation, with most participants paying their own way or being funded by their respective institutions.



Photo by Fred Burtron

Above: Moment of release.

Below: RBO (red-dark blue-orange) wakes up free.

On 25 December, radio tags were fitted to ten males (also two years old), and these were released in the same two areas on 28 December. Daily dawn-to-dusk radio tracking resumed with all 23 iguanas being located at least once per hour. The staggered release was intended to allow the females opportunity to establish stable territories, which would then serve to anchor the potentially more mobile males in the release areas. So far, the strategy seems to be working, with the females remaining extraordinarily faithful to their release sites, and the newly released males already forming associations with neighbouring females.



Photo by Fred Burtron

Photo Journal - Salina Reserve Release and Radio-Tracking

Photo by Fred Butron



Wired, tagged and ready for release.

Photo by Dorothea Schwab



Janice Blumenthal, Grand Cayman, and Sara Doty, IRCF, on the right, shown radio tracking the first morning after release of the female Blue Iguanas.



Photo by Fred Butron

Samantha Addinall, BIRP, who is involved in many aspects of the program and works as facilities keeper, takes her turn at releasing a Blue Iguana

Photo by Fred Butron



Desiree Wong, IRCF, assisted with release logistics, facilities efforts, and radio tracking, is shown above releasing a Blue Iguana in the Salina



Photo by Dorothea Schwab

Joey Welcome, Grand Cayman, participating in the release efforts, shown releasing a Blue Iguana.

Photo by Fred Butron



Judith Bryja, Houston Zoo, made a significant contribution assisting at the facilities, radio tracking and participating in the release.



Photo by Dorothea Schwab

Darvin Ebanks, Grand Cayman, taking his turn at release of a Blue Iguana.

The Big Picture

Work continues on *Too Blue to Lose*: an educational DVD about the Grand Cayman Blue Iguana, under development by Wild Wings Vision in collaboration with the Blue Iguana Recovery Program. Funded by Deutsche Bank (Cayman) Ltd., the DVD was originally slated to be a 20-minute mini-documentary, but since then opportunity has knocked again and again, and now a much more ambitious product with international appeal is in the making.



Photo by Dorothea Schwab

Initial filming, by producer Dorothea Schwab, went so well that it was decided to extend the project. This became possible when the German television channel VOX commissioned Wild Wings Vision to produce a half-hour, German language documentary on the Blues. Filming the two productions in parallel, Dorothea worked intensively with Fred and additional cameramen Stefan Hisge and Michael von Loeper. Long hours, careful planning, and exceptional good luck came together to capture

unique, stunning footage of the Blue Iguanas mating, fighting and nesting. After a marathon editing session, the VOX documentary aired in November 2004. It hit top ratings in its class, reaching 1.11 million viewers.

Clearly, *Too Blue to Lose* has the potential to reach out far beyond the schools of the Cayman Islands. Discussions with the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust led to the next exciting development: a comic voice that will be recognized by millions has agreed to be recorded speaking the inner mind of the principal lead in the film, “King Blue”. With comedy, celebrity, and stunning wildlife images secured, the team came back to the project sponsors, Deutsche Bank (Cayman) Ltd. The bank’s board quickly saw the new potential, and agreed to an unprecedented grant to develop the film and educational DVD to reach an international audience.

Already, the filming and production has seen support from all directions. Not least, Dorothea continues to work on the project without taking fees, a truly exceptional commitment. Her cameras have been aloft thanks to Island Air and Urs Billeter. Travel has been supported by Cayman Airways with accommodation courtesy of Pirates Point and the Bumgarner, Blumenthal and Clifford families, set building by the Machine Shop, transport assistance from Des and Fran McConvey, and support with filming from Joel Jefferson, Janice Blumenthal, Joni Solomon, James Squire, Mat Cottam, Timmy Rivers, Darvin Ebanks, Joey Welcome, Trevor Baxter, John Binns, Jaqueline & Hannah Ebanks, Logan Seymour, Maja Heisterhagen, Rod Chestnut, the QE II Botanic Park, Ocean Frontiers, Caribbean Utilities Co., First Baptist Christian School, Home & Office Supplies, and the Department of Environment.

Too Blue to Lose should become available for distribution to local schools in the Cayman Islands, and for sale to the public in late 2005.

King Blue Bobble-Head



Limited Quantities Available

The King Blue Bobble-Head is available **Now** on www.BlueIguana.ky for U.S. sales and will go on sale in Grand Cayman late February!

King Blue is designed by Joel Friesch (Sculpture) and manufactured by the IRCF. Made of hand-cast plaster and hand painted, it is truly a work of art - **with a twist of fun added mimicking the famous head bob** of a “True Blue”. The base displays Grand Cayman’s endemic butterfly.



Support the Blue!
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Donations

Direct financial assistance to the Blue Iguana Recovery Program can be made to the “**Blue Iguana Conservation Fund**” at PO Box 10308 APO, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands. This is an audited National Trust account restricted to the Blue Iguana Recovery Program. www.BLUEIGUANA.KY

In the US, tax-deductible contributions can be made through either of two 501(c)(3) foundations:



International Iguana Foundation
Rick Hudson, Program Officer
1989 Colonial Parkway
Fort Worth, Texas 76110

International Reptile Conservation Foundation
John Binns, President, JFB@IRCF.org
3010 Magnum Drive
San Jose, California 95135



In either case, be sure to indicate clearly that you wish your contribution to assist the Blue Iguana Recovery Program.



A programme of the National Trust for the Cayman Islands, in association with local and international partners.

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