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Eye to Eye with the Jamaican Iguana

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The Hellshire Hills - Iguana Land

Photo: Peter Vogel

Monday, September 3, 1990 was very special for a small team of naturalists, Rose Smith (veterinary student), Edwin Duffus (hunter), Willie (camp chef) and myself. Taking part in a six week survey, we went to the Hellshire Hills in search of the endemic Jamaican

Iguana. We were all very excited since we had the opportunity to see one of the rarest species of animals as well one of the world's largest lizards. Interest in the Jamaican Iguana was renewed after Edwin captured a live specimen saving it from his attacking dogs and brought it back to the Hope

Zoo. This was but the second confirmed individual from the Hellshire Hills in this century.

We arrived at our base camp (code named Alpha) after approximately 2 hours of hiking from the foot of the Hellshire Hills. After

settling in and examining maps of the area, Rose, Duffus the hunter and I proceeded to the first depression south of Alpha which is approximately an hour and a quarter hiking. There we indentified a "hot spot" by the fresh tail impressions in the red soil. We erased the markings and set out food on fallen logs for the lizards. This consisted of pieces of oranges, string beans, carrots and cucumbers. These were not chosen because they were known to be tasty to iguanas but because they were available from the camp. I named the "hot spot" HS1 and positioned myself approximately 60 metres on a slope to the west. Shrubs provided a natural hiding place although this was improved with a few palm leaves. By this time it was 3:00 pm and I sat and observed HS1 while Rose watched at HS2, about 100 metres south of my position and Duffus roamed through the bushes. There were no sightings in either "hot spot". Duffus was lucky that day since he saw a lizard on his excursion. We departed for camp at 5:30 p.m. feeling a bit disappointed.

On day 2 we arrived at the depression at approximately 8:45 a.m., added sardines and watermelon to the "hot spots" and resumed our task of watching or roaming as we had done on the previous day. At 9:45 a.m. as I sat reading a novel, I was alerted by a loud moving sound on the leaf litter to the east of HS1. Movement was intermittent and for long periods I would resume reading, uninterrupted. Duffus had told us that the sound of iguanas walking on leaf was "like a man" but at first I was unconvinced, and thought the sounds I heard were too loud and must have been made by the wind moving the litter. After a while I was able to differentiate between the moving noise and the wind rustling the leaf litter and foliage. At exactly 10:30 a.m. my reward for waiting, and for study-

ing Zoology for over ten years was received. Into HS1 sauntered a very large iguana lizard. I was at first tempted to stand and shout "Iguana" at the top of my voice while doing a dance of joy, however, I remained calm, stopped breathing, and tried to believe what I had seen. The lizard (called "Iggy") was at least a metre and a half long and had a very large body with a prominent head crest. It was grey green in colour with dark blue down the centre of its back. "Iggy" ate most of the sardines on sight, however, it ignored all else despite making close physical contact. The lizard stayed in HS1 about 10 minutes before exiting to the east. Its exit was unhurried, therefore it was apparently unaware of my presence.

I recovered from my experience after half an hour to resume my reading. The "hot spot" was visited by a mongoose at about noon but it was chased away with a stone. All was quiet again until about 1:50 pm when I heard what I thought were two iguanas walking on the leaf litter. The sound was moving westward from just south of HS1. 45 minutes later, a lizard ("Lizzy") came into the clearing, walking past HS1 and the food. It was about 1.2 metres in length and was brown in colour with the blue streak down its back and did not have as prominent a head crest as "Iggy". Apparently the iguana was headed to a destination on the western slope of the depression on which I was resident. "Lizzy" was observed to walk slowly, then stop and look around while moving its head backwards and forwards and "sniffing" the air. It was also seen to run for short distances of just over a metre or less and repeat its observations. Since it came into the clearing "Lizzy" looked unsettled and on one of its stops I was spotted, causing it to run quite quickly in the opposite direction. It was obvious that a lot of the noise made by the iguana is caused from the tail being pulled over the leaf litter. Although no sightings were made at HS2, Duffus was lucky again. On our way back to camp we made

short trips on either side of the path to look for iguana droppings as Duffus gave a demonstration of the different kinds we would encounter.

On day 3, Rose and I left camp without the hunter and changed "hot spots" after replenishing the sardines. Nothing happened at HS2 until 11:00 o'clock when about 6 mongooses staged a commando raid on the sardines. Despite throwing stones at them, they returned with increasing frequency. HS1 suffered the same fate. The day was saved at about 3:00 o'clock when an iguana was heard approaching from the western slope. I thought it would appear almost immediately behind me, therefore I shifted my position accordingly. At one point we were about 10 metres apart separated by palms leaves. The lizard then turned and headed south before I was able to examine it. No lizards came into or near to HS1 that day; we departed at 5:30 in the evening.

The fourth and final day was most disappointing. We improved the food by adding ripe mangoes and watermelon and fresh sardines and retained our positions from the previous day while Duffus went walking. At 5 o'clock when we left, no lizards were spotted by any of us nor did the mongoose visit the station. Maybe the iguanas were not sufficiently attracted by the food to return or were aware of our presence and moved on; however, this does not explain the absence of the almost omnipresent mongooses. On our way back to camp we consoled ourselves by taking what we hope would not be our final look at the unique plant and animal life of Hellshire.