

NATURES JOTTINGS JUNE 2000

Newsletter of the Natural History Society of Jamaica

ACTIVITIES REPORT

DEVELOPMENT OF THE BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

Prof. Brian Freeman from the Life Sciences Department, UWI was the second speaker in the NHSJ's distinguished lecturer series marking the Society's 60th. Anniversary.

The lecture, which was held on April 19, 2000, also marked Earth Day 2000. The NHSJ thanks CIDA and Guardian Life for their assistance in the presentation of this event, which was held at the Mutual Life Auditorium, Oxford Road.

Prof. Freeman entertained his audience with fascinating anecdotes, which traced the history of the Biological Sciences from the time of the Pharaohs to the present day.

The NHSJ now has a tape recorder, so we were able to record Prof. Freeman's presentation, along with Prof. Goodbody's amusing introduction, so that those who missed the lecture may have the opportunity of hearing it at a later date.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF A 19TH. CENTURY NATURALIST As part of the 60th. Anniversary Celebrations the NHSJ acknowledged one of Jamaica's early naturalists, Philip Henry Gosse, by visiting Bluefields, an area of Jamaica, where he stayed with Moravian missionaries, between 1844 and 1845, enjoying and studying local natural history; birds in particular. He published *The Birds of Jamaica* in 1847, *Illustrations of the Birds of Jamaica* in 1849 and *A Naturalist's Sojourn in Jamaica* in 1851

On the week end of May 5-7, 2000 NHSJ members set out for Bluefields, to follow the trail up into the hills so much enjoyed by Gosse. Members from Kingston were joined by members from Mandeville and Montego Bay along with Dr. and Mrs. Hugh Vaughan, from Bird Life Jamaica, whom we thank for the bird list included in this letter.

The trail is probably better defined now than when Gosse walked it but still forested on either side. In fact, it is likely that there is now more natural forest, since the surrounding land is no longer a working Pimento plantation. In the area there are many small cultivations, much as Gosse describes and near the top of the trail there are quaint board houses with attractive gardens and tiny pimento barbecues much like he must have seen, though most of the varieties of garden flowers mentioned by Gosse, seem to be out of fashion. Gosse writes of many varieties of ferns lining the trail and the two miles of trail below Shafston Great House, where our walk started, still shows evidence of this, but the recent drought has taken its toll. We saw no Tree Ferns, though Gosse was enthralled by them on the trail.

The walk up to the village of Content with its Moravian Church should have taken less than an hour but with our fascination for things along the route, took much longer. Birds, trees, orchids, bromeliads, flowers, mushrooms, snails, butterflies and Geological formations, all caught our attention.

A fairly large variety of snail was seen in numbers adhering to tree trunks and branches. Very prevalent along the trail and in the forest around Shafston Great House were the white flowering, sweet scented trees, locally called Sweet Wood, but not listed in "Adams" under that name. A detailed account of the flora by Trevor Yee follows.

From Content, which according to the map is not the Content where Gosse stayed with the Moravian missionaries, some of the more intrepid of us, guided by two gentlemanly small boys, adopted by one of our party and the fit and enthusiastic Dread, Owen, continued on another trail, which took us to the highest point at about 1,500 feet. From there we had a view of the Cockpit Country, the Pedro Plains and miles of coast line beyond, Spur Tree and Montego Bay. There, too, some of us collected grass lice specimens.

Our guides, keen for us to miss nothing of interest, led a group down by another route. It was only when the rest of our party was pointed out as tiny figures on the road below that we realized that we had been, "taken for a walk".

However, the rest of the party waited for us, with the result that everyone was completely soaked by the down pour that lasted four hours, dashing our hopes of a boat ride to the mangroves to see the birds come to roost at sunset.

c/o Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston 7,
Jamaica

Tel: (876) 977-6938. Fax.: (876) 977-1075. Email: naturalhistory@hotmail.com

One member was disgruntled by the disappearance of his newspaper with which he had hoped to while away the rainy afternoon. There were whisperings the following morning of it having been used as stuffing to dry sodden shoes.

Although we did not venture into the forest around Shafston, our host told us that he frequently sees the Yellow Boa and the rarer Black Racer. Also, whilst swimming at Bluefields next morning six of us saw a sea snake, about 2 feet long with a cream and dull tan zig zag pattern. We learnt that they are fairly common there.

Grande Vale ,where we had hoped to see Quassia trees growing the next day, was a sugar plantation when Gosse visited it.

Jill Byles

COMING IN JUNE

WORLD ENVIRONMENT WEEK & GREEN EXPO

Green Expo to celebrate World Environment Week will be open to the public, at the National Arena, on the week end of June 9,10, 11, 2000. To mark the 60th. Milestone the NHSJ will occupy a large booth this year and highlight 60 years of personalities and activities.

Call Grace Smith at 9272803 or Jill Byles at 9778007 and give a day and time, convenient for you, for duty at the booth . Leave a contact number and we shall get back to you. Please offer, you can really help, just by being there.

VISITING LECTURER

Through the kind co-operation of the U. S. Embassy in Jamaica the NHSJ has been given the opportunity to plan two days of events for Dr. Bruce McPherson Beehler, Vice President, Environment and Natural Resources Counterpart International, based in Washington.

Thursday June 15 at 5.30 p.m. :

Public Address by Dr. Beehler at the Mutual Life Building, 2 Oxford Road

Look forward to seeing you!

Friday June 16, starting at 9.00 a.m.:

Workshop at the Mutual Life Building

Topic: CONSERVATION OF JAMAICA'S BIO-DIVERSITY THROUGH SUSTAINABLE USE OF WILDLANDS

Speakers will address the following:

Managing Our forests, collection of data and the development of an inventory on bio-diversity, management of information on bio-diversity, bio-prospecting, community and ENGO involvement.

Group discussion will follow after the lunch break and conclusions may determine a role for the NHSJ.

If you wish to participate in the Workshop call 9778007 by June 10 and leave a name and contact number.

Several organizations are being invited to send representatives.

NEWS OF MEMBERS

Condolences to the family and friends of the late Jimmy Kirlew, who seldom missed an NHSJ seminar.

Congratulations and best wishes to Wayne Chin, who was recently married.

THANKS

Dr. Andrea Geoghagan has been kindly doing some of the secretarial work but volunteers are still nee

Your Jottings

c/o Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston 7,
Jamaica

Tel: (876) 977-6938. Fax.: (876) 977-1075. Email: naturalhistory@hotmail.com

FIELD TRIP TO THE VINEGAR HILL TRAIL^{8TH} JANUARY 2000 by Cecily Tobisch
On the morning of January 8, 23 people, members of the NHSJ and their friends, met in the parking lot of the Botany Department U.W.I., where they were given a brief introduction to the tour from Cinchona to the Vinegar Hill Trail by Miss Thera Edwards.

Thera was our leader for the day. She is a postgraduate Botany student.

We arrived at Cinchona at approximately 10:30 a.m. then we set out towards St. Helens Gap after we had reconnoitred the vicinity in different directions around Cinchona. The road is wide and overgrown with grass just before going on the trail to St. Helen's. On our right there was a hillside which was covered with mature specimens of the orchid *Epidendrum verrucosum* which were 'crowned' with large panicles of white flowers radiant in the sun shine. On our return some of our members collected a few of these plants but these will not thrive on the plains of St.

Andrew.

Soon we travelled along a winding path and arrived at a forking in the road. The trail to Sir John's Peak was on the right and on the left there was a winding trail which led us to the Morse's Gap. Thera gave us the names of the plants as we walked along single file and the information was relayed to those bringing up the rear. There were trees of *Pittesporum maculatum*, a dominant species that could be seen on most of the hillsides as we walked along. This species bears clusters of orange berry-like fruits, which are much loved by the birds, and has been introduced from Australia.

A few trees of *Podocarpus* sp. could also be seen. We saw many shrubs of the "red bush" *Polygonum chinensis* with its inflorescences of small waxy, white flowers, blooming in abundance along the trail. Among the many species of mosses growing in this area were *Usina* sp. (Spanish moss), *Trichomanes* sp., *Sphagnum* sp. and *Hymenophyllum* sp.. There was an abundance of the liverwort *Marchantia* sp. There were several plants of St. John Wort, a medicinal plant that has a distribution throughout Europe, Western Asia, North Africa and the Canary Islands and have been naturalised in Eastern Asia and North and South America. Its botanical name is *Hypericum perforatum* and it is known to have anti-inflammatory and healing properties.

There was *Alcornia latifolia* also known as "woman wood" because the wood is soft; this was one of the more common trees. Also we were introduced to *Cletra occidentalis* (soap wood). There were low shrubs of bilberry, *Vaccinium meridionale*, a member of the Ericaceae. We came to an area where Thera had marked trees in transects on an upper slope to our right and treacherous lower slopes to our left.

She informed us that other scientists were also doing studies in the area. She explained that the trails, which we were using, had once been wide roads graded from numbers 1 to 4 and had been used by carts with wheels before the advent of the motor car for transporting coffee from the plantations. Farther on near to Thompson's Gap is the old Trafalgar Plantation. Thera had several soil samples in small plastic bags, which were being used to determine what species of plants would sprout from seeds lying dormant in them, which would also indicate whether there were species different from the mature plant population. This is a study on the effects that roads, trails and traffic have on the plant populations in the area and how many species are introduced by traffic.

We saw groups of the fern *Gleichenia bancroftiae*, *Gleichenia jamaicensis* forming dense thickets, *Dicranopteris pectinata* and the rattle snake fern, *Brotrychium virginianum* with a triangular frond and a separate stalk bearing sporangia. Among the tree ferns Dr. Proctor assures me that the species *Cyathea pubescens*, *Cyathea skerringii*, *Cyathea tussacii* and *Lophosoria quadripinnata* would have been present there.

Just before making a hairpin curve before arriving at Morse's Gap, Thera told us that we were standing on the Grand Ridge of the Blue Mountains and we could see the John Crow Peak to our left and Sir John's Peak would be to our right. At Morse's Gap we turned to our right and went on the Vinegar Hill Trail. Very soon Thera was calling us excitedly to climb up an embankment on the left which is almost like a Fairy Glade.

There we saw several plants of *Lepanthes*, *L. rodundata* with its miniature round, thick, flat leaves and yellow flowers and other unidentified species. There were orchids *Diachea graminoides*,

c/o Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston 7,
Jamaica

Tel: (876) 977-6938. Fax.: (876) 977-1075. Email: naturalhistory@hotmail.com

Diachea glauca, *Stelis ephiglossoides* and *Epidendrum rivulare*. Along the trail there was a patch of the ground orchid, *Spiranthes tortilis*. There were species of Bromeliads there too.

Many flowering plants of *Stelis* could be seen on their host trees at high elevations as we walked along the trails and one was tempted to think that these were plants of the *Pleurothallis racemiflora*, but a closer examination proved otherwise.

We walked along the Vinegar Hill Trail for perhaps one-mile. We could observe low clouds coming across the gap to our left and we would experience slight drizzle from time to time. This is typical of the weather pattern in Lower Montane forests. We returned via Morce's Gap again and then when we found a wide clearing on the trail we paused for lunch. Some members of our party went on ahead, back to Cinchona.

Thera informed us, that had we gone farther along the Vinegar Hill Trail for 1 mile or longer, then we would have arrived at Thompson's Gap where we would have once more seen a Fairy Glade type of vegetation. After our lunch we started to trek back to Cinchona with Dr. Proctor leading the way and pausing every now and again, to warn us of a very treacherous path or to inform us about the vegetation.

At approximately 5:15 p.m. we arrived in Cinchona, relaxed for a while and then returned to Kingston.

REPORT ON FIELD TRIP TO THE BLUEFIELDS AREA

May 5-7 2000 by Trevor Yee

As a result of the pre-trip publicity, we were looking forward to seeing one of Captain Bligh's original Breadfruit trees, *Artocarpus altilis*, syn. *A. communis*, (Moraceae), which was reported to be still alive on the grounds of the Bluefields Great House.

We located the tree but were expecting to see an even larger one, since it would be just about 200 years old. Several of its older branches were cut and painted with what appeared to be metal primer.

We also looked forward to seeing the Bitterwood plantation, *Quassia picrammia* (Simaroubaceae), at Grandvale, which are exported to Martini Rossi as the bitter principle in their liqueurs. Because of the state of the roads and time constraints, however, most of us did not see the plantation. We were advised that the entire tree is cut, the bark stripped off and the tree broken up into chips, which are then dried and exported.

We did see samples of the chips, courtesy of Dr. A. Geoghagen. The chips were very bitter to the taste and someone remarked that they remembered the wood being used as matchsticks in days of old.

The Shafston Great House, where we all stayed, is half way up Gosse's trail and surrounded by limestone mountains. Because of the recent rains, the vegetation was lush and we noticed many birds along the trail.

Among the most conspicuous plants was the card gum tree, in fruit, *Clusia flava*, (Guttiferae/Clusiaceae), * and which fruits resembled those of a most delicious member of the same family, the Mangosteen, *Garcinia mangostana*, from the Far East.

Other trees which caught our attention were: the Jamaican Dogwood, *Piscidia piscipula*, (Papilionaceae), a white/pale pink Poui, *Tabebuia* sp., (Bignoniaceae), the Red Birch, *Bursera simarouba*, (Burseraceae), which is a source of the essential oil, linalool and the bark of which is also used to make a local herbal supplement, the Trumpet Tree, *Cecropia peltata*, (Moraceae), and several Bromeliads and epiphytic Cacti.

Species of the following plant families also caught our interest: several yellow and orange Verbenaceae, several Labiateae/Lamiaceae, several Malvaceae, and a number of Compositae/Asteraceae. There was also the very attractive climbing Crow, *Stigmaphyllon emarginatum*, (Malpighiaceae) and the endemic *Blakea trinerva*, (Melastomaceae)

Several orchids were also seen on the trail: the terrestrial mottled leaf *Oeceoclades maculata*, syn. *Eulophidium maculatum*, which is reported to have arrived in the Western Hemisphere, in the early 1950s in the Sahara Dust Haze, which occurred at the time. Since then, it has been observed throughout the Caribbean, Southern U.S.A. and Central America. The writer has seen

c/o Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston 7,
Jamaica

Tel: (876) 977-6938. Fax.: (876) 977-1075. Email: naturalhistory@hotmail.com

the orchid across the island, the Cockpit Country, Long Mountain, Point Hill in St. Catherine, Bermuda Mount and Stony Hill.

Other orchids seen on the trail, were: *Encyclia fragrand*, *Oncidium luridum* and seen commonly in the trees at Paradise Park, on Sunday, *Brassavola chordata*, the fragrant Lady of the Night.

Among the mushrooms found were a tree stump covered with harvestable quantities of the edible white Oyster Mushroom, *Pleurotus djmor* syn., *P. flabellatus*, which had also been seen in harvestable quantities at Naco Caribbean in Temple Hall, St. Andrew and on Campus beside the Students' Union, the same week.

A large quantity of the Oyster Mushroom was given to Frank, the owner and head cook and bottle washer at Shafston, to cook for us. He was extremely wary of this and despite there being three doctors in the group, who were most were most eager to taste the mushrooms, he wanted us to sign a disclaimer, that, if we died from food poisoning, it would not have been as a result of his cooking.

After much fussing, he finally cooked the mushrooms, apparently with a bit of the dripping from the crab backs he was preparing, a hint of garlic and sauteed in butter. By the time the mushrooms were ready for serving, Frank had already tasted them.

The group then enjoyed some deliciously prepared Oyster Mushrooms, with the only problem being that a few the mushrooms were a bit past their prime and fibrous. Frank had by then joined the group for dinner and continued to enjoy the mushrooms asking about the name etc. Someone suggested that we should have got a rebate, since we provided the materials for one of his dishes.

Other mushrooms observed were: several Inky Caps, *Coprinus* sp., several unidentified species of bracket fungi, and possibly a species of *Clitocybe*.

* *Sometimes called Autograph Tree*

The following is a list of birds seen by Elaine and Hugh Vaughan during the Field trip to Bluefields, May 5-7, 2000.

Ja. Tody, Olive throated Parakeet, Yellow Billed Parrot, Ja. Euphonia, Sad Flycatcher, Striped Headed Tanager, Ja. Woodpecker, Yellow Faced and Black Faced Grass Quits, American Kestrel, Grey Kingbird, Ja. Oriole, White Crowned Dove, White Winged Dove, Zenaida Dove (Pea Dove), Ja. Bullfinch, John Crow, Red tailed Hawk, Black Whiskered Vireo (John Chewit)

c/o Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston 7,
Jamaica

Tel: (876) 977-6938. Fax.: (876) 977-1075. Email: naturalhistory@hotmail.com

c/o Department of Life Sciences, University of the West Indies, Mona, Kingston 7,
Jamaica
Tel: (876) 977-6938. Fax.: (876) 977-1075. Email: naturalhistory@hotmail.com

Andrea Geoghagan observed a Tody fly into its nest in the bank side and out again. Other members noticed that Todies seemed to be attracted by the sound of stones being knocked together, which someone had suggested trying.

Prepared by Jill Byles 21/5/00