



Nature's jottings

UPCOMING ACTIVITIES FOR

Newsletter of the Natural History Society of Jamaica May 07

JUNE

Field Trip

There will be a visit to the Port Royal Marine Lab. and boat trip to Refuge Cay and some of the mangrove islands of the inner harbour.

Leader: Mr. Camilo Trench, Scientific officer in charge of the PRML

Date: Saturday, June 9 2007

Depart from the SRC, Hope Road at 8.15am

The Lab. will provide 2 boats holding 10 persons each. You will need to reserve your place by

Friday June 1 by calling Trevor Yee at 942 2233, 970 2574 or Jill Byles at 9778007.

Cost: \$300.00 per person *

Seminar

During the recent wet spell Dr. Trevor Yee has received many inquiries about the edibility of the mushrooms that have been popping up. As a result he will give a talk entitled "Some Mushrooms of Jamaica" on Thursday, June 21 2007 at the Life Sciences Conference Room

Time: 6.00pm with refreshments at 5.30

RECENT ACTIVITIES

The NHSJ AGM was held at the Tropical Learning Centre, Hope Zoo on Saturday, March 24, 07 at 10.00am. There was a comparatively low turn out. Dr. Byron Wilson's update on progress to reintroduce and protect the iguana population at Hellshire was well worth hearing. Sincere thanks to him for that concise and pithy presentation.

We were also treated to a photographic presentation by Clyve Bowen. Very special thanks to Clyve for attending the meeting to do this after the death of his father the day before. On behalf of the NHSJ we sympathise with him and his family in their bereavement.

Many thanks to Annette Chin for her usual tasty selection of well needed refreshments.

The NHSJ Executive Committee for the year 2007-2008 is:

President: Trevor Yee

Vice president: Vashti Chatoor

Secretary: Lisa Gordon

Treasurer: Hermann Tobisch

Ordinary members: Clyve Bowen, Jill Byles, Stephen Hodges, Andreas Oberli, Cecily Tobisch,

Corn Puss Gap Field Trip

The field trip to Corn Puss Gap in search of Piper discolor (Piperaceae) was led by Helen Jacobs on Saturday, April 21st. We thank Helen for the invitation to join her.

A full account of it follows in **Your Jottings**.

Seminar

Thanks to Natalie Blake, who gave us the latest update in her research on Jamaica's Land Snails on Wednesday, April 25th. at the Dept. of Life Sciences Conference Room, a follow up to Gary Rosenberg's last talk and field trip. The seminar stimulated some lively discussion afterwards despite the low attendance, which was probably due to a last minute change in the date.

Your Jottings

Report on the Society's Field Trip to Corn Puss Gap, Sat. 21st April, 2007

by Trevor Yee

On the morning of Sat. 21st April, 13 members set out on a rather long, arduous trek from Beacon Hill to Corn Puss Gap in the John Crow Mountains, accompanied by 3 knowledgeable guides. We were accompanying Helen Jacobs of the UWI Chemistry Dept., who was collecting *Piper discolor* (Piperaceae), one of the plants which she has extracted for her research. We had met at the historic Bath Botanical Gardens earlier that morning and drove northwards for about a half an hour along a road where the asphalt surface had deteriorated and was in poor condition in several places.

One the early section of the trail were several lumber trees, which we wondered if they may have been planted by the Forestry Dept., especially West Indian Cedar, *Cedrela odorata* (Meliaceae), Spanish Elm, *Cordia gerascanthus* (Boraginaceae), and Blue Mahoe, *Hibiscus elatus* (Malvaceae). Further on there was extensive droppings of the cottony seeds of the Balsa tree, *Ochroma pyramidale* (Bombacaceae) almost all along the length of the trail. These cottony seeds were reminiscent of another member of the family, the Kapok or Silk Cotton Tree, *Ceiba pentandra*. There were several members of Piperaceae observed along the trail, early on there was an abundance of the endemic and fairly common *Piper fadyenii*, a fewer number of *P. hispidum*, *Peperomia* sp., *Pothomorphe peltata*, and then as we approached Corn Puss Gap, an abundance of the endemic and rare *P. discolor*, that we had gone to collect, with its leaves resembling that of *P. amalago*, with a similar pattern of veins, but larger and with a more fleshy appearance.

There were a number of palms seen and these were more common at the higher elevations, the Mountain Cabbage, *Roystonea altissima*, and many of the quite attractive and endemic Long Thatch, *Calyptronoma occidentalis*, with trunks resembling Coconuts. In abundance along the trail were also the Trumpet Tree, *Cecropia peltata* (Cecropiaceae) in fruit, and one of the species of Fig, *Ficus* sp. (Moraceae) with buttress roots, and at Corn Puss Gap, a tree with a very aromatic bark which the guides called, Wild Cinnamon. There were, especially near the streams, huge specimens of the giant exotic fern *Angiopteris evecta*, a native of Hawaii that had originally been planted in the Gardens but has now escaped and found in several locations in the island. The fronds are truly large and those observed were about 2 metres long and approximately 1 metre or more wide.

Corn Puss Gap resembled a small cross road, with a clearing and trails leading off in several directions, one over the hills to Portland northwards, and several trails to adjacent hills such as Crown Hill, surrounding the gap. All these were in need of some clearing to traverse. We were fortunate that although we later found out that it was raining heavily in Kingston, we experienced only an occasional light drizzle and heavy rains would have made some parts of the trail treacherous. Interestingly, near to the gap, were a number of what appeared to be abandoned housings for meteorological instruments, and what also appeared to be an overgrown clearing beside them, that Andreas Oberli, thought might have been a landing site for helicopters.

We crossed many streams on the trail and one of slower moving of these had an abundance of Water Cress, *Nasturtium officinale* (Cruciferae), which was collected by several members. Among the more beautiful wild flowers observed were large clumps of *Pitcairnia* sp. (Bromeliaceae) with red inflorescences, growing on the banks of the trail, and a strikingly beautiful wild Passion Flower, *Passiflora* sp. (Passifloraceae), with relatively large pinkish orange petals and green fruits.

Several mushrooms were also seen, among them the Artist Fungus, *Ganoderma applanatum* (Ganodermataceae), the Little Helmets, *Coprinus disseminatus* (Coprinaceae), apparently a species of *Lentinus* sp. (Tricholomataceae), *Polyporus tenuiculus* (Polyporaceae) and several other unidentified Polypores.

This was the habitat for the endangered endemic and beautiful Giant Swallowtail Butterfly, *Papilio homerus*. The most experienced of the guides who used to collect them for visiting North Americans and be paid for each specimen caught, spotted one approaching up a valley and down again, and showed it to us. The host plant for the larva, the endemic Water Mahoe, *Hernandia catalpifolia* (Hernandiaceae) was fairly common, especially near the streams, and although we could observe some evidence of the leaves being eaten, we could not find any larvae on them.

Fairly common along the trail were wallowing holes dug by the wild hogs that were introduced into the island by the Spaniards and which have now become feral and relatively common in this part of the island, *Sus scofra*. All our guides were experienced wild hog hunters, but the most experienced, Mr. Bum Bum Thomas, had captured one which he kept at home, fattening it and was eager to show to us. The hunting of the hogs is done with trained dogs, which have a difficult time keeping up with and cornering them. The guides advised that if the hogs were in their territory, it would be quite impossible for the dogs to corner them, since they knew every turn, nook and cranny of their territory and were able to leap down very steep terrain, without damaging themselves. When they are caught outside their territory and are uncertain of the terrain, then the dogs have a chance of cornering them, since the hogs get confused and become unsure where to run.

Mr. Bum Bum Thomas also advised that these hills were also home to the Jamaican Coney or Hutia, *Geocapromys brownii*, and promised to show us one of their burrows, if we came upon one. We did and he showed us a large, fairly deep burrow into the earth, in which they would evade hunting dogs, but in which the less conservation minded hunters would use smoke and other similar means of fumigation to drive out them out. Bum Bum disagreed with this method of capture, since he felt it was destructive to the animals, and especially those that were young.

We saw many birds, but there being no active birdwatchers in the group, and most were unidentified. We were however able to identify, a female Streamer Tailed Hummingbird or Doctor Bird, *Trochilus polytmus*, and a Jamaican Woodpecker, *Melanerpes radiolatus*, both of which are endemic to the island.

Several of the members experienced a few leg cramps and similar leg pains, the Society not having gone on a long hike for some time, but all appeared to have enjoyed the hike into a primary forest area and to assist with the plant collection. The hike to Corn Puss Gap from Beacon Hill had taken us nearly 3 ½ hours to reach Corn Puss Gap from Beacon Hill where we had set out, and a little less for the way down.

Condolences

The NHSJ sympathizes with the family of the late Cuthbert Gordon Rowe, who was for many years one of the Society's most ardent members. His garden contained many unusual plants and fruit trees and was a haven for birds. He was a keen birder and rarely missed a birding or NHSJ field trip before his illness.

Prepared by Jill Byles 10/5/07

* This is the time of year when a number of species of birds nest on Refuge Cay and several of the other mangrove islands of the inner Kingston Harbour. We will be observing this occurrence, as we also did recently in Portland Bight.