

NHSJ's Trip to the Black River and Surroundings, 26/27th March, 2011.

On the morning of Sat. 26th March, approx. 15 NHSJ members set out on a two day visit to the Black River and its surroundings. We were to be joined by a few other members who would meet up with us later on the weekend, and it turned out, by an equal number of another group, who joined the group in Black River. The total group was therefore close to 40 persons.

After arriving in Black River and having a quick lunch, the large group met at the well known Sister Lou's River Stop, set off at approx. 2:00 pm in 3 fisherman's boats, and were led by Dr. Kurt McLaren and his doctoral graduate student or Kurt No. 2, Kurt Prosperd, from St. Lucia. Sister Lou, we later found out was the maker of extremely delicious crab cakes, which she made from seasoned crab meat only and without breadcrumbs or any other kind of fillers.

There was another pleasant surprise at Sister Lou's River Stop, Baboo, our host at the Society's field trip to Accompong and Baboo's Garden in 2010, called out to the group, he having recognized us before we did him. What are you doing at Sister Lou's River Stop, we asked? He was there on one of his many trips to the area to purchase Bull Thatch, *Sabal jamaicensis*, fronds from the owners of the countless trees there. He needed up to 2,000 fronds to repair the roofs of his cottages but his pickup could only hold 50 fronds per trip. The cost of each frond he advised was \$10.

After the group reassembled at Broad Water on the river, Dr. McLaren took us upstream to see some of his research plots and to show us some of the sights of the Black River ecosystem. One of the fastest invasive species of plants was *Alpinia allughas* (Zingiberaceae) apparently an escaped ornamental Wild Ginger, that was first seen on the banks of the river upstream in the mid 1970 but which was now spreading miles downstream on both sides of the river. In fact, a visit to the herbarium at UWI, showed that it has been spreading to many other wetland areas of the island, such as Braes River also in St. Elizabeth, St. Catherine and several locations in Portland. Dr. McLaren was trying to see how the species may be controlled and was thinking of possible methods of biological control. The problem is however a very formidable one.

Less challenging in terms of control could be the other invasive species of *Melaleuca quinquenervia* (Myrtaceae) which is also spreading in Florida. *Melaleuca quinquenervia* is itself another formidable invader. It is an Australian species that was introduced to Florida to dry out some of the swampy areas, possibly for development purposes, and has since become a major problem, displacing many of the native species. However it has not spread very far in the Black River environs as yet, being still early in its invasion history, and Dr. McLaren has concluded that he can kill the specimens he has found by making a ring around the bark and applying herbicides to the incision. As usual, speed is of the essence in methods of control.

Alpinia allughas is attractive with its bright green foliage and small pink flowers. One of the activities assisting its spread is the planting of ganja fields in the areas of the Black River morass and their subsequent burning by the security forces. There were innumerable burnt out patches to be seen right up to the river banks. With these burnings and death of the natural vegetation, *Alpinia allughas* is an invader that quickly spreads through these areas and even to areas far away from the banks. It is believed that the species is spreading as far as the native woodland forest and many of the once stately trees surrounding the morass, were seen dying.

The presence of alien invasive species is unfortunately not restricted to the flora. Seen along the banks of the river were innumerable holes some as large as 6 (15 cm.) or more inches in diameter. Dr. McLaren

pointed out that these were the many burrows of the armour plated catfish, the Cascadura or Hassar, or Cascadoo, *Hoplosternum littorale* (Callichthyinae), which is found in the rivers of Trinidad, Guyana, Venezuela and other countries of South America. It is a much sought after delicacy in Trinidad and Guyana. Speaking to the fisherman who captained our boats for the weekend, Jacob Miller, he advised that the catfish was caught in traps and nets by the local fishermen but they usually threw it back since they didn't know that it could be eaten or how to prepare it. Vashti Chatoor one of our members on the trip, advised that the armour plated scales are so firmly embedded that the fish is first rigorously scoured to get rid of the muddy taste, and then either cooked with the scrubbed scales on or parboiled, after which the scales are removed more easily. Attempts to remove the scales before cooking result in a tearing of its flesh. Dr. McLaren also advised that the presence of the Australian Red Clawed Crawfish, *Chernax quadricarinatus*, which is now found in several of our river systems, has also been confirmed in the Black River. How these are interacting with the native Crayfish, *Macrobrachium* sp. is not known. The invasive species in the Black River also include the amphibians found there.

Readers will have seen in the Society's Blue and John Crow Mountains Guide that there are 19 species of the small tree frogs belonging to the genus, *Eleutherodactylus* spp, which means : "free digits, fingers or toes" in the island. 17 of these are endemic to the island, and 2 were introduced, one deliberately and the other by accident, and that one of the local endemics was introduced into Bermuda by accident. In a current study being done, *inter alia*, on the amphibians in the Black River by Ms. Iris Holmes a Fulbright scholar working out of Kurt McLaren's office, she advised in a chat with her that she has found five species there, two of our endemics and three introduced ones. The two endemics are *Eleutherodactylus gossei* (Leptodactylidae) and *Osteopilus brunneus* (Hylidae), and the introduced invasive species she found being, one of the introduced species of *Eleutherodactylus* from the Lesser Antilles, *E. johnstonei*, the American bullfrog *Lithobates catesbianes*, (syn. *Rana catesbiana*), whose presence here was described by Karl Aiken in the 1970's, and the omnipresent Cane toad, *Rhinella marina* (syn. *Bufo marinus*).

E.gossei is the endemic that was introduced into Bermuda by accident. It is one of our whistling tree frogs that has the intriguing common name of Spaldings Robber Frog, the origin of which I have not been able to find, at least so far. It is on the IUCN's Red List of Threatened Species and is believed to have been accidentally introduced into Bermuda on plants shipped there from Jamaica in 1895. It has however not been seen in Bermuda since 1995, and it is believed it may have now become extinct there. The other Jamaican endemic *Osteopilus brunneus*, found by Ms. Holmes has the common name, Jamaican Laughing Frog.

Among the trees observed in the surrounding forests was the stately Swamp Cabbage, *Roystonea princeps* (Palmae), probably so named because the growing apex can be eaten as a "Heart of Palm". Also seen were several specimens of the Bull Thatch, *Sabal jamaicensis* (Palmae), both of these palms being endemic. Commonly seen also, were many specimens of the probably endemic Anchovy Pear, *Grias cauliflora* (Lecythidaceae) belonging to the same relatively rare family in Jamaica, as the introduced Bishop's Mitre or Driftfruit, *Barringtonia asiatica*, and the Cannonball Tree, *Couroupita guianensis*.

Among the many other species seen in the forest near the banks were a species of *Peltophorum* sp. (Caesalpiniaceae). The Blue Mahoe, *Hibiscus elatus* (Malvaceae), the Burn Wood, *Metopium brownii* (Anacardiaceae), the Cabbage Bark tree, *Andira inermis* (Papilionaceae), a species of the Dumb Cane, *Dieffenbachia* sp. (Araceae), another species of Zingiberaceae, the native, *Renealmia aromatica*, Guango or Rain Tree, *Samanea saman* (Mimosaceae), several Mangoes, *Mangifera indica* (Anacardiaceae) and Coconuts *Cocos nucifera* (Palmae), and common along the river banks, in areas away from the *Alpinia*

allughas, the Reedmace, *Typha domingensis* (Typhaceae), and amongst the *Alpinia*, two species of the Morning Glory, *Ipomoea* spp. (Convolvulaceae), and Guaco, *Mikania micrantha* (Compositae). The main Mangrove in the river system was the Red Mangrove, *Rhizophora mangle* (Rhizophoraceae), and floating in the river, the invasive Water Hyacinth, *Eichhornia crassipes* (Pontderiaceae), and the Water Lettuce, *Pistia stratiotes* (Araceae).

Before we headed back, it was time to leave the graduate student on the banks of the Black River to continue his monitoring of the research forest plots. He was scheduled to remain alone in the morass until the following Wednesday when Dr. McLaren would return to collect him. He was left with what was considered sufficient supplies for any emergency, five 5 gals. pails of fresh water, food, a tent, a canoe with both an engine and oars, a machete, a coal pot and coal for cooking, sponges to use as a mattress, a piece of tarpaulin, and a cell phone with which he was instructed to keep in touch. Apparently, he has stayed alone doing his research for a period of up to two weeks in the morass, and is well known by even the ganja planters so that no one has bothered him staying there. There were crops of bananas, pumpkins, okras, etc. if it was safe to use any, all around him, and of course, if he was equipped and able to, and could find the time away from his research, he could fish in the river.

Heading back, the Figuerero Mountains in Manchester, where we had visited Richard Khouri and his hydroponics farm, were clearly visible from our boats and especially the Wigton Wind Farm. That evening we had another pleasant surprise, Jacob Miller, the fisherman and captain of our boats was celebrating his seventh wedding anniversary, and as is his custom at this time of the year, he invited all his friends and included us among his invitees, for a complimentary dinner of octopus, curried goat, chicken and rice and peas, and lots of drinks.

On Sunday 27th the contingent of Guyanese and other visitors had left and we were joined by our Secretary and some members of her family. Two boats once again set out from Sister Lou's River Stop, the first boat leaving at approx. 8:00 am going upstream along the river from Sister Lou, which is the less visited part of the river.

There we saw on the banks, specimens of the fragrant Spider Lily, *Hymenocallis littoralis* (Amaryllidaceae), and what appeared from the distance of the boat to have been the orchid, *Bletia purpurea* (Orchidaceae), but which could not be confirmed from the distance of our boat from the bank. There were no specimens of *Alpinia allughans* in this upper part of the river. The boat then stopped at a large, deeper part of the River, Blue Hole, and only a few took up the invitation for a swim, including Kai Meng Lui, in a scene very reminiscent of Chairman Mao swimming in the Yangtze River. He was joined by Sonia Chin and Andrew Pearson, these three being the only ones brave enough to dive off from the safety of the boat into this deep part of the river. On the way back the boat then stopped at the recreation area of Cheese Rock. The clarity of the water in the upper parts of the river was crystal clear especially when compared to that of the lower parts of the Black River and of Broadwater itself.

In especially the lower parts of the river, several crocodiles, *Crocodilus acutus* were seen and along the river several birds such as, the Northern jacana, *Jacana spinosa*, Snowy egrets, *Egretta thula*, Blue herons, locally called Blue gaulins, *Egretta caerulea*, and an Osprey, or Fish hawk, *Pandion haliaetus*.

Back at Sister Lou's those on the first boat disembarked, said goodbye to Jacob, and each other, stocked up on Sister Lou's delicious crab cakes and made their way back to Kingston. So was concluded an enjoyable, educational, two days on the Black River.



www.tasteslikehome.org/.../hassar-cascadura-not-ordinary-fish.html. accessed 30th Mar. 2011

Written by Trevor Yee, 30th Mar., 2011.