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VIRGIN GORDA FIELD TRIP REPORT
February 3 to February 6, 2012

Prepared for the BVI Environmental Profile Programme

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Friday, February 3, 2012

The IRF field team arrived at the Bitter End Yacht Club, Virgin Gorda at noon. After unpacking and getting field gear ready, the team members revisited the eastern peninsula (Bitter End, and Biras Creek to Deep Bay area). Of particular interest were the grassy slopes adjacent to the road leading to Oil Nut Bay. During our last visit, Kevel Lindsay had observed about a dozen small skink-like lizards *Mabuya* sp. at this site, darting through the grass field. These specimens were noted as having unique bluish tail perhaps the marking of a distinct population or juveniles. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in obtaining any species at that time. We decided to return to the site for another attempt at observing, photographing and possibly catching a specimen.

On the way there, the team observed many flowering plants, despite the fact that this is the start of the dry season when most species are usually shedding their leaves and everything seems to be slowing down awaiting the coming rainy season.

Upon our return to the grassy slope, Kevel managed to briefly glimpse one specimen of the illusive lizard in the grassy area, but was unsuccessful in catching it. It was then that we decided to employ the use of sticky traps to monitor future activity. This is not the preferred method, but an adequate alternative. It was suggested by a colleague, herpetologist Dr. Gad Perry, because it is quick and often successful.

We then decided to hike up from the grassy area to the ridge, which looks out across Berchers Bay to the south. From here are views of the eastern end of Virgin Gorda and of the remainder of the peninsula to the west. This is a spectacular and scenic landscape with steep cliffs and drop offs, dry environments, beautiful flora and seascapes (**Photo 1**).



Photo 1.

A spectacular view towards Berchers Bay.

The team found populations of the Virgin Islands endemic Euphorbe *Croton fishlocki* growing as a low, wind-sculpted shrub amongst the rocks and cliffs. It shows beautiful bright red leaves, and small shrubs are scattered along the headland, hugging the land for protection (**Photo 2**).



Photo 2.

A Virgin Islands endemic plant, *C. fishlocki* at Berchers Bay.

Also observed were spectacular examples of the shrub *Nashia cf. inaguensis*, a species that the team discovered during the previous trip to the area. **Photo 3** shows one of the shrubs, which give off a powerful rich spicy scent when standing close to it. It is a species that seems favoured by wild bees, wasps and other insects. It is endemic to the Greater Antilles and is somewhat rare in the Virgin Islands.

The team also observed a number of other native plants and examples of unique ecosystems, including native grasses and other shrubs. On the northern-facing slopes of the ridge, above Deep Bay, a woodland of low trees, shrubs and vines grows over large boulders and rocks. It was here that Kevel had a much longer observation of one of the skinks, though it also was too brief a moment for capture. It was seen darting amongst the gaps between the boulders. The specimen was sunbathing in the hot afternoon temperatures when it was disturbed and sought protection between the rocks.

Later that afternoon we hiked the Orchid and Alicia's Trails along the south side of Biras Hill. There, we observed many species of orchids, specifically *Epidendrum* and *Phychillis* spp. The trail was in excellent condition.

Later in the evening we went back to check the sticky traps for skinks, but they were empty.



Photo 3.

The highly aromatic shrub, *N. inaguensis* at Berchers Bay.

Saturday, February 4, 2012

We took the 8 am ferry to Gun Creek and rented a vehicle in Spanish Town. Our first excursion was in the Trunk Bay area a few miles south of the town. The hike took us across a pasture landscape densely covered with acacia trees and croton shrub. Access was only possible with the help of pruners. Eventually we proceeded to the boulder fields near the shoreline to examine the flora. This area is worth more detailed exploring in the future.

At around 10 am we met Freeman Rogers and Chrystall Kanyuck from the *BVI Beacon*. They were to join us to gather information for an article about the environmental profile project. We guided the reporters to a unique beach and dune system at Savannah Bay. Following this, we made a short stop near Pond Bay to check the waterfowl. Pied Billed Grebes and White-cheeked Pintails were observed. Afterwards we proceeded to drive the circuit road around Gorda Peak with multiple stops along the way to examine the unique flora and impact issues associated with the road design. The last stop was between Fanny Hill and Gorda Peak to re-visit a rare Evergreen Forest community along the old Rockefeller Road. However, due to cattle activity along the pathway, we decided to forgo this stop and visit other nearby sites.

After a lunch break and departure of the *BVI Beacon* team, the IRF team examined the Baths National Park Area. We took note that the trail corridor showed signs of overuse. Later that afternoon we explored the road corridor leading to Copper Mine.

Upon our return to Bitter End, we re-examined the grassy knoll where the sticky traps were laid. One of the traps captured a *Mabuya* specimen. The specimen is about a third smaller than the *Mabuya* cf. *sloanii* from nearby Mosquito Island. The specimen was kept and preserved and will be sent to herpetologist Blair Hedges, who is currently working on a revision of the *Mabuya* skinks of the Caribbean. His analysis so far suggests that many of the Virgin Islands may possess unique populations. He is putting together a monograph of the skinks, which may be available by the summer of 2012.

Sunday, February 5, 2012

After taking the 7 am ferry to Gun Creek, the team spent four-to-five hours examining the new road cut along the northeast facing slopes just above and west of Leverick Bay. We noted significant sediment erosion and runoff along some segments; no preventive measures appeared to be in place. The road is also poorly cut and sited, and steep cliffs and escarpments are visible all along the path.

Many rare species of flora were discovered in the unique, native, dry woodland near and along the roadside. This forest has not previously been explored by scientists. Species of plant discoveries included:

- Small populations of *Zanthoxylum thomasianum*, a rare V.I. endemic (**Photo 4**).
- Many rare species of orchids (**photo 5**).

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- A new plant record, the Puerto Rico Bank myrtle, *Mosiera xerophytica* (**photo 6**). The species is very rare in Virgin Gorda, and only known from one specimen on St. John where it was destroyed. The species is also found on Puerto Rico where it was once believed to be endemic. The population here is seriously threatened by this road and future associated developments.
 - Possibly *Metastelma anegadensis*, previously thought to be endemic to Anegada (**photo 7**).
 - A first record for the British Virgin Islands for the cherry, *Malpighia coccigera* subsp. *Coccigera*, a West Indian endemic, previously reported from the nearby USVI but not for the BVI (**photo 8**).

It was above Leverick Bay that we first heard the strange call of a dove, similar in some aspects to the Common Ground Dove (*C. passerina*). Kevel knew that it was somewhat different and noted the call. Later, after doing some research and listening to recordings of West Indian doves, he concluded that it was a Mourning Dove (*Z. macroura*), a first for the Virgin Island (see further note on this dove in section on February 6th field work).

The team also discovered significant populations of the very rare and newly discovered *Nashia cf inaguensis* in this forest.

Also noted was an unusual population of *Tillandsia* bromeliad, similar to the much larger *T. utriculata*. It is much smaller in every respect. Indications show that there may also be hybrids between this new species and the latter. Further research is needed to determine what exactly is occurring here. Specimens were procured and left with the National Parks Trust.

At the end of the road cut, we continued cross country for a couple of hours in the direction of Great Ghut Bay. We stopped along the Money Bay Ghut and observed many more species of flora including the Puerto Rico Bank endemic cherry, *Malpighia woodburyana* and the threatened *Machaonia woodburyana*, which is endemic to Virgin Gorda and St. John.

A number of other plants were noted, and further research is being undertaken to identify them and update the list of those observed for the area.

The whole cross country excursion was slowed by the constant occurrence of the ever-presence Christmas Bush (*Comocladia dodonaea*), also known as Poison Ash and a relative of Poison Ivy. It is a common native found in the Caribbean and South America. Contact was unavoidable so both researchers brought back an irritating skin rash that manifested itself a few days later and lingered for a week.

While waiting for our mid-day ferry at Gun Creek, we observed many foraging birds during low tide at the head of the bay. Observed were: Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Great Blue Heron, Little Blue Heron, Spotted Sandpiper, Wilson's Plover, Snowy Egret, White-cheeked Pintail, and King Fisher.

Later that afternoon and evening, we went mist netting in Gorda Peak National Park within the parking and picnic area and adjacent to a few agriculture ponds. Three nets were set up: a 12 m within the picnic area and a 6 m and a 9 m adjacent to the nearby ponds.

It was at a small pond that the team observed an all-black snake. It was coiled on the berm of the pond, sunning itself when Kevel almost stepped on it. The snake quickly launched itself into the nearby shrubs. Though Kevel tried to secure it, it managed to escape. The species was all black and was possibly a melanistic form of the Puerto Rican Racer (*Borikenophis portoricensis*). However, on contacting experts about this sighting, we were advised that no such form has yet been observed in this species, though it is quite possible since this has been observed in other related species and many reptiles. Further work is needed in the area to ascertain exactly what this species or form may be.

For bats, only the 12 m net was busy capturing one Jamaican Fruit Bat (*Artibeus jamaicensis*) and two Velvety Free-tailed Bats (*Molossus molossus*). The fruit bat was processed on site and released while the two insectivore bats were kept as voucher specimens.



Photo 4.

A Virgin Islands endemic, *Zanthoxylum thomasianum*, threatened by development.



Photo 5.

Psychilis macconnelliae along road cut west of Leverick Bay.



Photo 6.

M. xerophytica, a new plant record for the BVI, and also an endemic species.



Photo 7.

M. anegadensis, a Virgin Islands endemic and possibly new record for Virgin Gorda.



Photo 8.

Malpighia cocigera subsp. *Coccigera*.

A new plant record for the BVI, and, so far, only known from one small plant on Virgin Gorda.

Monday February 6, 2012

In early morning we processed the two *M. molossus* specimens. Afterwards we spent the morning investigating the eastern peninsula from Gun Creek to Pajaros Point, particularly the flora and fauna along the road leading to Oil Nut Bay. The high point was the identification of rare or new records of birds for the Territory. Along the open fields before heading for Oil Nut Bay, we observed what looked like a Mourning Dove. It had all of its important field marks that are distinctive from the Zenaida Dove (e.g., it lacked a white wing bar and a distinctive long pointed tail with white outer borders). Furthermore, as the bird flew away Kevel confirmed the presence of a wedged tail. The distinct high-pitched whistling of the wing feathers was also heard. A picture taken by Jean-Pierre was deemed inconclusive. Both Kevel and JP are familiar with the species, which is quite common in the northeastern US.

The call of the Puerto Rican Flycatcher was also heard in the area. This species is extremely rare in all of the Virgin Islands and is declining.

Further along the road, Kevel heard a strange bird calling. He consulted Jean-Pierre and also used his camcorder to record the incident. Kevel said that the calls were vaguely familiar, but he could not identify the bird. It was later, after returning to New York and listening to the calls of all possible candidates found in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, Hispaniola and the Northern Lesser Antilles, that Kevel concluded the calls were in fact similar to the Antillean Euphonia (*Euphonia musica*), a species with which he is familiar from his home island of Antigua. The calls in fact are similar to those of the Puerto Rican subspecies *E. musicasclateri*, previously only known from Puerto Rico. Further research is needed to ascertain the presence of this species on Virgin Gorda. It was thought that there were two to three birds heard calling in the area.

We left Bitter End for Trellis Bay on the noon ferry.

Below is a preliminary list of the bird sightings compiled during field trips in October 2011 and February 2012. A complete list will be provided in the *Virgin Gorda Environmental Profile*.

American Kestrel	Common Ground Dove	Pearly-eyed Thrasher
Antillean Crested Hummingbird	Common Moorhens	Pied-billed Grebe
Bananaquit	Frigate Bird	Puerto Rican Flycatcher
Belted Kingfisher	Great Blue Heron	Red-tailed Hawk
Black-faced Grassquit	Green-throated Carib	Scaly-naped Pigeon
Blue-winged Teal	Grey Kingbird	Smooth-Billed Ani
Brown Booby	Lesser yellow legs	Spotted Sandpiper
Brown Pelican	Mangrove Cuckoo	White-cheeked Pintail
Caribbean Coot	Merlin	Wilson's plover
Caribbean Elaenia	Mourning Dove	Yellow Warbler
Cattle Egret	(possible sighting)	Yellow-crowned Night Heron
Cattle Egret	Northern Mockingbird	Zenaida Dove
Collared Dove	Osprey	

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