

SANDY CAY FIELD TRIPS: Annual Report for 2005

Prepared by

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FOUNDATION

INTRODUCTION

During 2005, the Island Resources Foundation, with local institutional and individual support from its associates, undertook six field trips to Sandy Cay, primarily focused on the Rat Monitoring Program. As customary, while visiting the island participants obtained bird counts and made observations on the overall status of the island's flora and fauna, trail condition and recreational usage. Two of the field trips were carried out jointly with staff from Resortscapes, Inc. and members of the Jost van Dykes Preservation Society, which is responsible for trail maintenance.

This following report provides a summary of 2005 field trip activities, observations and related issues.

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THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS NATIONAL PARKS TRUST

2005 FIELD TRIP SCHEDULE

Date	Participants	Activity
1/3/05	Z. Pascoe (IRF) N. Woodfield (NPT) R. Power (HLSCC)	rat monitoring and general observations
1/13/05	Z. Pascoe (IRF)	rat monitoring and general observations
2/22/05	NPT staff Jost Van Dykes Society members B. Moody (RBF) J.P. Bacle, L. Gardner, N. Georges (IRF)	Sandy Cay annual visit with NPT and Bill Moody, review of environmental issues, and monitoring activities
2/23/05	C. Thomas (Resortscapes) J.P. Bacle and Z. Pascoe (IRF)	trail maintenance, rat monitoring, and general observations
9/17/05	Z. Pascoe (IRF) C. Petrovic (HLSCC) J.P. Bacle (IRF)	rat monitoring and general observations
12/5/05	C. Thomas (Resortscapes) D. Blyden and Foxy Callwood (JVDPS) J.P. Bacle (IRF)	trail maintenance, rat monitoring, and general observations

HLSCC H. Lavity Stoutt Community College
 IRF Island Resources Foundation
 NPT National Parks Trust
 RBF Rockefeller Brothers Fund
 JVDPS Jost Van Dykes Preservation Society

POST-RAT-ERADICATION MONITORING

Throughout the year bait stations were examined, and we observed no sign of rat activity. Other indicators related to rodent behavior were absent such as rat trails in the salt pond and tooth marks (gnawing) on fruits and branches. Noticeable also in the last three years was a slight increase in nesting activity among certain species of perching birds. This increase may be attributable to the elimination of the predator.

The ongoing problem of hermit crabs accessing the bait stations has continued despite several design modifications since the start of the monitoring program. During the year we have tested a different bait station designed by the managers of Seagrape Cottages located on neighboring Little Thatch Island. This new design has proven to be very effective in limiting hermit crab access (photo #1).

In IRF's 2006 visits to the island, we plan on gradually replacing all the old stations by this new one. This change is also timely since most of the old stations have deteriorated under tropical weather conditions and need to be overhauled.

TRAIL CONDITION

In early 2005, Mr. Bacle (IRF) assisted Chris Thomas (Resortscapes) in cutting a new 30 meter trail section to bypass a section of the southeast trail that was damaged by coastal erosion and beach "foot" traffic. This new trail section was previously marked out by Roy and Chris Thomas during their December 2004 visit to the island. It is located 5 to 10 meters inland from the currently closed-off trail section. The new trail section follows the landside of the beach berm and is adjacent to the inland wetland. The location of the new trail section was carefully selected in order to minimize tree removal and to preserve the overall integrity of the site (photo #2). The old trail section was effectively blocked at both ends and from beach access with branch cuttings from the new trail section.

In our last visit to the island (12/5/05) we noted that vegetation growth has significantly covered the old trail section and that old foot paths to/from the beach were no longer as evident as in the past. The beach grass community is slowly stabilizing the berm system. We also concluded that "snow fences" will not be required to block access or stabilize the beach berm.

BIRD OBSERVATIONS

Bird counts were made during all visits to the island (see table below). As in previous visits to Sandy Cay, bird observations were made along the trail and the shoreline. A total of 20 different species were recorded during the year, which is somewhat consistent with previous years. Although the diversity of species tends to remain the same from year to year, we noticed a slight increase in the perching bird count in the last three years, most notably the Scaly-naped pigeon (*Columba squamosa*), Zenaida dove (*Zenaida aurita*), Grey kingbird (*Tyrannus dominicensis*), Bananaquits (*Coereba flaveola*), and Yellow warbler (*Dendroica petechia*).

During a field trip on 09/17/05, Clive Petrovic recorded over 30 pigeon and dove nests along the trail corridor although, due to the season, most of them were not active. He also recorded 29 Bananaquit nests (one nest containing two eggs).

Table 1. Recent bird observations at Sandy Cay.

Species	1/3/05	1/13/05	2/22/05	2/23/05	9/17/05	12/5/05
Magnificent Frigatebird		5	3	1	1	2
Brown Pelican	7	3	5	6	7	5
Brown Booby		4	1	2	2	2
Green Heron					1	
Ruddy Turnstone					1	
Laughing Gull					2	
Royal Tern	1				2	
Sandwich Tern					1	
Wilson's Plover						1
Semipalmated Plover	1	2		4		
Sanderling					4	2
White-cheeked Pintail						1
Scaly-napped Pigeon	17	15	11	13	4	6
Common Ground Dove			2	1	1	2
Zenaida Dove	4		6	7		10
Green-throated Carib	2		3	1	7	1
Gray Kingbird	3	1	5	4	3	1
Yellow Warbler	2	1	7	5	12	8
Bananaquit	30	15	17	21	49	20
Black-faced Grassquit		1	2	1	3	
* <i>nesting activity</i>						

SEA TURTLE ACTIVITY

No sea turtles were sighted during visits to Sandy Cay in 2005; however, numerous signs of activity were recorded. Zach Pascoe (1/13/05) observed what appeared to be a series of turtle nest pits along the western north shore beach area, but no sea turtles were observed. He noted that a recently active nest site was found and that it contained more than 25 eggs already hatched. The turtle nest was located on a berm that was uncovered by what appeared to be heavy surf-induced erosion.

Most recent signs of activity were observed during our 12/05/05 trip to Sandy Cay, where we noted at least 6 inactive nest pits. Of concern is the fact that one of these pits showed signs that it recently had been dug by humans (photo #3). It is difficult to conclude if this is evidence of poaching activity or related to curious day users.

Sea turtle findings and observations were communicated to Shannon Gore, who is involved in the ongoing turtle monitoring program at the BVI Conservation and Fisheries Department.

VISITATION

The overall number of visitors to the island was consistent with previous years. Busiest visitation times were between 11 am and 2 pm. Whenever possible, we recorded the maximum number of boats anchored and people utilizing the beach at a given time during the 11 am to 2 pm peak hours. For persons walking the trail, we kept track of the numbers we encountered while engaged in our field work.

Table 2. Visitation at Sandy Cay on selected days, 2005.

	1/3/05	1/13/05	2/22/05	2/23/05	9/17/05	12/5/05
Anchored boats	8	2	5	6	4	4
Persons on the beach	20	0	17	13	22	8
Persons on the trail	4	0	7	5	3	6

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Vegetation. With more than sufficient rain this year, Sandy Cay's vegetation showed signs of healthy growth. During most of our trips we observed many species with blooming flowers, for example: ground plants (*Hymenocallis caribaea* and *Sesuvium portulacastrum*); trees (*Plumeria alba*, *Coccoloba uvifera*, and *Pisonia subcordata*); cactus (*Pilosocereus royenii* and *Opuntia dillenii*), shrubs (*Lantana involucrata* and *Jacquinia aborea*).

A small cluster of Fan Palms seedlings (*Coccoloba uvifera*) was located in the northwest area of the upland ridge by Z. Pascoe early in the year. The only other specimen recorded on Sandy Cay is located in the lower slope of the upland ridge to the east of the salt pond. This species is native to the Caribbean and in decline.

Many Coconut palms have fallen victim to seasonal storms particularly along the western side of the island (photo #4). On the other hand, we also noticed a number of coconut seedlings further inland in the back shores. A coconut tree count is

recommended during the early part of 2006. Coconut seedlings should also be included in the inventory.

Overnight camping. On a number of occasions throughout the year, as well as in the past, we observed evidence of camping or squatting on the island. Most recently, on November 19, 2005, members of the Jost van Dykes Preservation Society observed some camping activity (including a tent) at the northwestern end of the island, just inside the tree line.

In the “Sandy Cay Visitation Guidelines” prepared as an informal guide for the Sandy Cay caretaker under SANDY CAY II, “no camping” is one of the designated rules. Members of the IRF Sandy Cay project team and of the JVD Society will maintain a record of such activity and will advise campers, when encountered, that the owner of the island does not permit camping activities of any kind.



Photo#1: Proposed new bait station constructed of PVC pipes.



Photo #2: New trail section looking westward. The beach is 8 m. to the left.



Photo #3: Sea turtle nest pit recently dug out by humans.



Photo #4: Erosion along western shoreline has downed a few palms trees.