

A TRIP TO MONA ISLAND

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We arrived on Mona Island, "Isla de la Mona," around 8:00 on a Sunday morning in June, 1994. The whole island is only eight miles long and five miles wide. We were with a group of 25, which included students from as far away as Germany and France, as well as adults from the United States and Puerto Rico. We unloaded the boat and proceeded to set up camp on the beach called "Sardinera," which was on the west side of the island, with Hispaniola only 50 miles away. This beach had showers and bathrooms. The water was pumped from a well down below. All around we could hear beautiful bird calls and sounds like we'd never heard before. On the beach, the island was very lush with palm trees (and coconuts suddenly falling everywhere!), Australian pines, thick bushes, mahogany trees, poison wood trees, and tons of other trees I didn't recognize. The palm trees and Australian pines are not indigenous to the island. They were planted shortly after the island was discovered.

There is a reef which protects Sardinera beach. The water is clear, warm, calm and beautiful. It rains 32 inches a year on the island, but because of the heat, evaporation rate, and porous character of the rock, the whole top "shelf" of the island is very dry and desert-like without standing water. Huge cactus plants and plumeria trees grow, as well as other "desert" type shrubs.

I decided to videotape the dock and the beach around our camp site, so I grabbed my camcorder and started walking down the path. As I was near-

ing the dock area, I heard a rustle and caught sight of something moving out of the corner of my eye. It was a young rhinoceros iguana, about 15 inches from snout to tip of tail. I was about 10 feet away from him. He bobbed his head at me but never ran away or seemed really frightened. After taping him for a few minutes, I decided to run back and get Dan since this was the first iguana sighting; nevertheless, I was afraid the iguana would leave. I ran back to the camp site anyway and looked for Dan, who had wandered off in search of iguanas. I flagged him down and we



Mona Island. Photograph: Sylvia Byrd

went back to the dock area. The iguana was still there, sitting on the side of the path, just sunning himself. Dan and I sat there for a good half hour, watching him. We fed him some pear, and he got within three or four feet of us. He seemed to know we weren't there to hurt him (or he didn't care). We were surprised he was so tame.

As we were walking back to our camp site (about 25 yards away), Dan looked to our left, and in another camp site was a pretty big iguana. We did not see hemipenes and she looked to be gravid



Mona iguana. Photograph: Sylvia Byrd

because of her huge belly hanging on the ground. We estimated she was about two-and-a-half to three feet from snout to tip of tail, and maybe 12 pounds. She was eating food that the campers occupying the spot had thrown on the ground. We were standing about 15 feet away from her while we videotaped for several minutes as she just stood there. Dan approached her. When he got within eight feet, she started to walk up the hill. Then she stopped, but as Dan approached closer she walked away further. It was as if she were deliberately keeping a minimum distance, without running away. She appeared to lose interest in us, and climbed to the top of a large, round boulder. We could see the head of another iguana up there, but couldn't make out if it was another female or a male.

Around our camp site there were two more huge iguanas. One looked to be female (gravid), and the other was most definitely a male. The male had a much larger head, and his crest was bigger. He bobbed his head at us and seemed upset that we were near him. He would chase the female a few feet away as if to keep her a distance from us. The male was about three-and-a-half feet long, and close to 20 pounds. The female was about three feet and maybe 15 pounds.

We took some trails and walked a few miles through trees and bushes. We then climbed up the

side of the cliffs to some caves that had petroglyphs drawn by the Taino Indians, who inhabited the island when it was discovered. We didn't see any iguanas. We walked to the entrance of a beach where a sign was posted that read, "Area de Anidaje de Iguanas, No Entre 1 Julio al 15 de Nov." The sign translates to: Iguana breeding area, do not enter July 1 to Nov. 15. Sea turtles also lay their

eggs on this beach. We walked another mile, came to a fork in the road, went right and came upon the small airplane landing strip. We didn't see any iguanas there so we went to the beach on the other side of the trees. We found what we believed to be another nesting area of the iguanas. We figured they weren't sea turtle nesting sites because the burrow area was further away from the beach, among the trees. As we were walking back to our camp site, nearing the beach with the sign posted, Dan spotted a huge iguana. Appearing to be gravid and with no hemipenes, she was very statuesque—just resting there among the bushes. She was about three feet, 15 pounds, like the other iguanas. She walked away quickly when we approached her, hiding behind a huge concrete slab that had fallen over. We didn't see any other iguanas in that area.

Our group was there for a whole week, but because Dan and I had to get back sooner, the captain of the boat was going to pick us up on the eastern side of the island on Tuesday morning. A group of eight geologists and biologists, employed by the Department of Natural Resources, regularly visits the island for 10 days at a time to test for fresh water in the caves and underground. They were heading to the other side of the island on Monday morning, and since they own the only vehicle on the island (an old four-

door truck), we hitched a ride with them. It was a seven mile drive to the other side. We felt very fortunate to have traveled to the top and to the other side of the island. The terrain was completely different on the top, being very flat with extensive cacti and brush. We could see the light house on the far northeast side of the island.

As we descended to the eastern side of the island, we could see a huge Dominican Republic ship which had crashed into the reef some time ago and subsequently was abandoned. It just sits there today. The beach here, "Playa de Pajaros," was absolutely beautiful. There were caves all along the cliffs, as far as we could see. As we were driving down to the beach, we spotted an iguana in the middle of the road. On this side, there were no facilities at all, just a shack that is used as a kitchen when people come to stay. Dan and I set up our camp site on the beach under the cover of several trees. It was much windier on this side and the water seemed rougher. As I was setting up our tent, I noticed two large iguanas watching me. Both of them looked like females (gravid with swollen bellies), about three-and-a-half feet long, and weighing 15 pounds or more. These two looked bigger than the ones on the other side. They seemed to be waiting for me to feed them. The most impressive iguana we saw was an enormous male. He must have been four-and-a-half feet long, and weighed perhaps 30 pounds! He was massive. Indeed, he was by far the biggest iguana I'd ever seen. He had an enormous head, thick, strong arms and legs, and the base of his tail was big. He looked pretty old, but I think I must refrain from guessing how old.

We walked several miles along the beach and found a nesting site. We dug one nest

up and discovered the remains of last year's eggs. We saw only one iguana on our way back, which we surprised—and he hissed at us. He looked as if he was blind in one eye. We hiked up the hill to the top of the island and walked another three miles to the light house. We saw lots of land crabs but no iguanas. The light house was very impressive. There was a big house nearby, a two car garage, and a well with fresh water. However, the structures were completely abandoned; no one lives there any longer. It's a real shame they allowed it get so run down.

During our time on the island, we saw about 15 adult and only two juvenile iguanas. We did not go around the entire island, but we feel we should have spotted more juveniles than just two. Goats and small pigs were on the island, we were told, but we didn't see any. We did see one cat running around our camp site. We spoke with a man that comes to the island frequently, and he said that even ten years ago there were more iguanas than there are now. He believed that the cats and birds eat some of the hatchlings.

All in all, we thought the island was a true paradise. But we feel that the iguanas need more protection from the animals that prey on them. People should appreciate the iguanas as a rare and beautiful gift, and do all they can to protect them.



Mona iguana. Photograph: Sylvia Byrd

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Male Cuban iguana, *Cyclura nubila*,
at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.
Photograph: A.C. Alberts