PROFILE

Rick van Veen: A Feral Mammal's Worst Nightmare

Byron Wilson

Department of Life Sciences
University of the West Indies, Mona
Kingston 7, Jamaica

Rick van Veen was born the son of a Dutch father and an Australian mother in upstate New York on 27 June 1967. Rick's stint in the U.S. was short-lived, as the family moved to Australia when he was five months old. There, in the herp-rich outback, an extraordinary herper was born. At age four, Rick brought home his first snake, a venomous Copperhead (*Austrelaps superbus*) that he had usurped from a Kookaburra. That snake didn't bite Rick, but others did — included was a Sea Snake (*Enhydrina schistosa*), a Spotted Black Snake (*Pseudechis guttata*), a Tiger Snake (*Notechis scutatus*), a Brown Snake (*Pseudonaja textilis*), and half a dozen "lesser" elapids. The Brown Snake incident resulted in Rick being in a coma for 48 hours — an ordeal that left him with some lingering liver and kidney problems, as well as some apparent neurological anomalies (see below). Fittingly, Rick would later serve as an instructor on snake handling techniques for the Queensland Department of Environment; perhaps more appropriately, he also served as an instructor on snakebite first aid.

Rick van Veen on Heard Island, contemplating work closer to the equator. *Photograph by Tony Dorr.*

Rick's educational and work history reflect a man who has followed his dreams, and they have been varied. Says Rick: "If it ain't fun, I ain't doing it." Of course, Rick's idea of fun is somewhat different from what most people would regard as even bearable. Remarks one of Rick's former Australian employers: "Rick's exploits in the field are legendary… He actually seems to enjoy the sorts of conditions that most people would find downright unbearable." One could not get a better recommendation for prospective work in the harsh Hellshire Hills of Jamaica. Indeed, Rick quickly attained legendary status in Jamaica. Also, those of us who work with him soon came to realize that, when Rick suggests some seemingly insane and undoable course of action, he is usually serious — and, then, invariably produces. For example, Rick has been parlaying his masonry skills into converting our humble stick research station into a veritable rock fortress, an exercise that requires him to carry 90-lb bags of cement into the interior forest, not to mention other bulky or heavy construction materials.

After early stints as a brick layer and horticulturist, Rick focused full-time on pursuing a career in field biology and conservation — a career that has extended, literally, from the equator to the Antarctic. During this time, Rick also completed a BSc degree in Botany/Zoology at James Cook University in Queensland. Rick's employment history has included seven years working for the Queensland National Parks research branch on crocodiles, sea turtles, and endangered macropods (kangaroos, etc.); more to the south, he worked on pack-ice seal surveys with the Tasmania/Australia Antarctic Division, and studied the feeding ecology of Macaroni Penguins on Heard Island. Rick gained additional animal handling skills working for a variety of Australian wildlife parks, including the Curumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, the Healesville Wildlife Sanctuary, and the Ballarat Wildlife & Reptile Park.

More recently, Rick worked as resident naturalist at the Pajinka Wilderness Lodge on the Cape York Peninsula, and, from 2002–2003, served as coordinator for the Pompuraaw

Up close and personal with an Elephant Seal: Rick pondering the wisdom of working on subjects that outweigh him by an order of magnitude. *Photograph by Tony Dorr.*

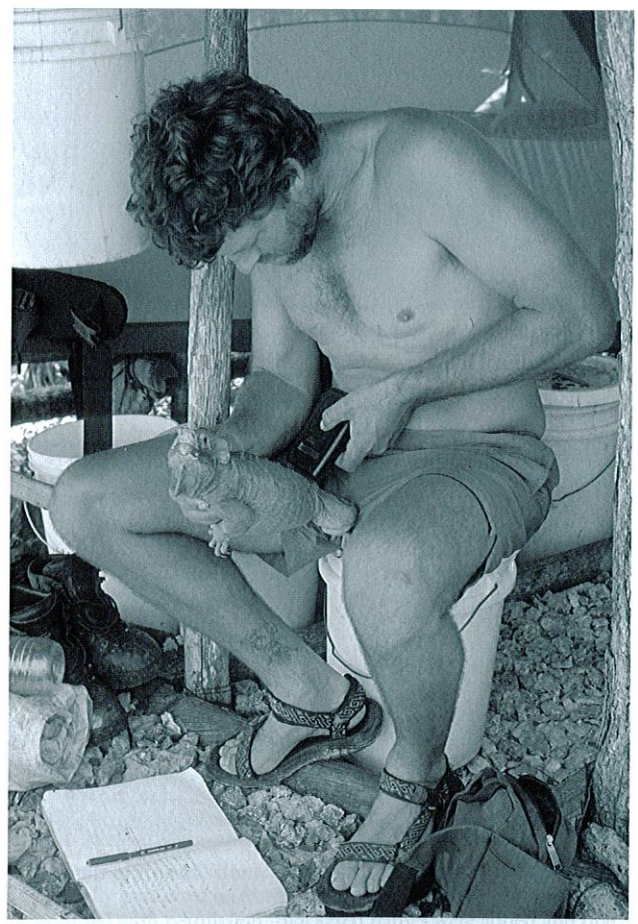
Aboriginal Land & Sea Management Centre. These latter positions involved significant feral animal control work — experiences that uniquely prepared Rick for front line duties in the Hellshire Hills. For example, Rick participated in the "control" (i.e., with extreme prejudice) of thousands of wild pigs — providing the training that has made him the uncontested wild boar king on the Jamaican Iguana project. The rest of us remain humble pretenders.

Oddly, Rick has long had a love for iguanas; odd because he grew up in a country devoid of iguanas despite harboring one of the world's richest and most dramatic lizard faunas. Whatever the explanation for his fascination with iguanas, in 2000, Rick was able to whet his appetite by assisting with vegetation surveys and dietary analyses of the Fijian Crested Iguana at the Yandua-tabu Island Iguana Conservation Reserve. Determined to become fully immersed in iguana work, Rick traveled to the U.S. in 2003, passing by the Fort Worth Zoo en route to attending the annual IUCN Iguana Specialist Group meeting in the Turks and Caicos Islands. Fortunately, Rick Hudson, a conservation biologist at Fort Worth, saw Hellshire written all over van Veen and cleverly pointed him south, toward the Jamaican Iguana project.

Funds to hire Rick came initially from grants from the Miami Metrozoo and the Audubon Zoo. These were designated for a 3-month pitfall trap survey and associated mammal control experiment in the core iguana area. This project involved spending periods of over a month in the remote interior of the Hellshire Hills, and a trap-checking regimen that entailed walking the equivalent distance of the entire peninsula every day for the 48-day census period. Rick began capturing and observing iguanas during this time, and quickly established that he was just the sort of biologist who could work happily and productively in Hellshire's interior forest. A grant from Conservation International and the efforts of the International Iguana Foundation have secured funding to retain Rick's talents through 2004, and a major effort is now being directed at obtaining funds to keep him in Jamaica for the remainder of his natural life (see www.IguanaFoundation.org).

Next on the agenda for Rick is a radio-telemetry study that will involve attaching transmitters to 20 hatchling iguanas during the September (2004) hatching period. This endeavor will yield critical ecological data on the most vulnerable, but poorly known life history stage of the species. Indeed, aside from obviously high mortality rates resulting from predation by exotic mammals, virtually nothing is known about the habitat preferences, activity patterns, and movement ecology of young iguanas. Rick's skill and demonstrated dedication will no doubt ensure that this project will come to fruition. Radio-tracking wild adults, especially post-partum females, is planned for the 2005 nesting season. That effort will help delineate the extent and characteristics of the habitat used by wild iguanas during the non-nesting portions of the year.

Aside from the continued monitoring of both wild and headstarted iguanas in the core conservation zone, Rick's participation will also enable us to embark on other high priority projects that have long awaited implementation. For example, survey work in the early 1990s identified a population of iguanas in the western Hellshire Hills that we have not been able to revisit. We plan to assess the status of this forgotten population, and will focus on the location and subsequent monitoring of nesting sites. That activity will permit harvesting a new source of wild hatchlings to provide fresh genetic material for the captive population. At present, all captives are derived from a handful of females that nest at two known communal nesting areas in central Hellshire. Additional nesting areas obviously exist. An infusion of new genetic variation will be a boon to the existing zoo population that now serves as a hedge against extinction —

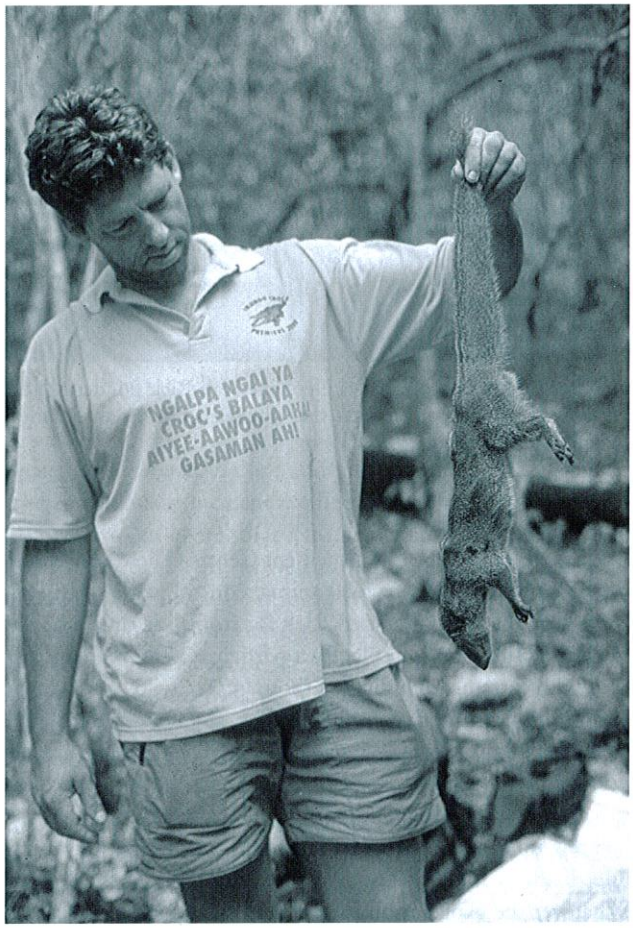


Rick processing a Jamaican Iguana in the Hellshire Hills.

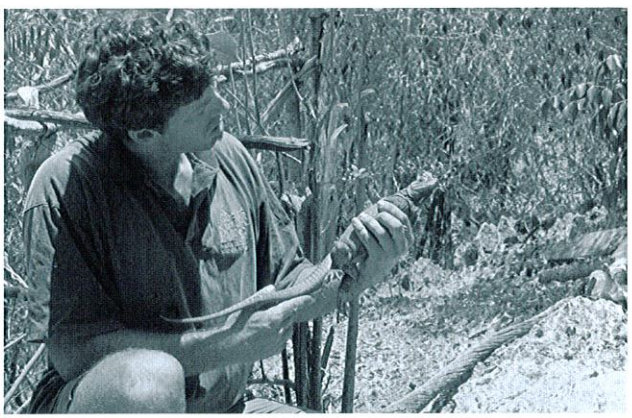
and as a source of headstarters for use in on-going and future repatriation exercises.

Unfortunately, the future outlook for the iguana in the Hellshire Hills does not look bright. The plethora of invasive species (e.g., dogs, cats, rats, mongooses, pigs) will never be eradicated — only controlled through labor-intensive trapping efforts that will be difficult to maintain in both the short and long term. In addition, illegal logging activities continue to erode the remaining natural forest and pose a security risk to iguana project personnel. Thus, while the preservation of the Hellshire Hills ecosystem is an objective that must be pursued, the only realistic strategy for ensuring the iguana's survival in the wild is the creation of an off-shore population on the Goat Islands. Lying just off the western edge of the Hellshire Peninsula, Great Goat Island in particular has long been recognized as an ideal site for the re-establishment of an iguana population. The island could easily be rendered pest free and iguana friendly, and the prospects for effective, long-term management would be enhanced by economic and logistic feasibility.

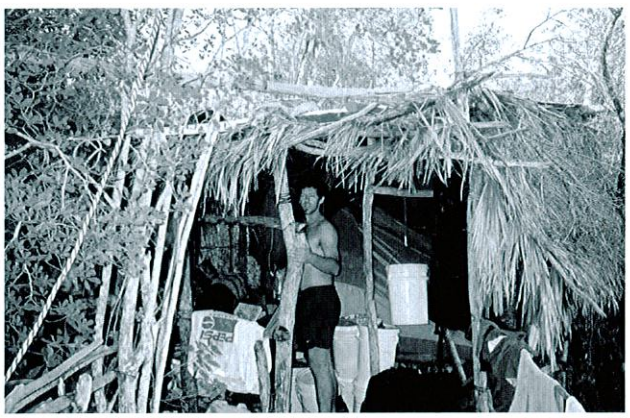
Encouragingly, the bureaucratic issues that have historically prevented the initiation of a Goat Island restoration and iguana re-introduction program appear to be approaching resolution. Both the Hellshire Hills and the Goat Islands have been accorded protected area status since 1999, as part of the Portland Bight Protected Area. The government of Jamaica is now taking steps to ensure that appropriate management instruments will be instituted to conserve these national treasures. If all goes well, such a rehabilitation program will become a reality in the near future — and Rick van Veen is the obvious candidate to lead such a crucial field campaign. Rick is not only the right person to launch an assault on the Goat Islands, but has already indicated his enthusiasm for remaining in Jamaica and dedicating himself to the effort.



Rick surveying a job well done: a dead mongoose that was trapped and removed from the core Jamaican iguana conservation zone.



A reflective Rick van Veen, holding a freshly caught Jamaican Iguana in the Hellshire Hills.



Rick van Veen at the research station "South Camp," in the central Hellshire Hills. *Photograph by Dawn Fleuchaus.*

In summary, Rick's participation in the Jamaican Iguana project has been of incalculable value. Aside from running the field program in Hellshire, he has infused new life into both the local project and the international donor community. In short, Rick has provided the impetus for a renewed thrust to study and conserve the Jamaican Iguana and its unique but critically imperiled ecosystem. He also has made the project a more entertaining enterprise for the rest of us participants. Although clearly comfortable with a hermit's solitude, Rick is a gregarious sort whose consistent good humor and contagious enthusiasm have been an invigorating influence at all levels of the project. In particular, for those of us who love wild pig meat, Rick has improved the quality of our lives in such a dramatic fashion, we often find ourselves embarrassingly grateful.

VOLUME 11, NUMBER 3 SEPTEMBER 2004 US$6.00

IGUANA

JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL IGUANA SOCIETY WWW.IGUANASOCIETY.ORG

Grand Cayman Blue Iguana, *Cyclura lewisi*, Grand Cayman, Cayman Islands (see story p. 148). *Photograph by Fred Burton.*