Hellshire Blues

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Whenever I take someone to the Hellshire Hills in Jamaica to see the iguana field project, I describe the habitat as someplace where they definitely don't want to fall down. The brutally sharp limestone rock, known as karst, can inflict grievous bodily harm to someone unfortunate enough to take a tumble. However, after seven years of trekking around Hellshire without serious injury, I took that tumble in June 2000, when we had gathered a field team to search for new nesting areas. I was wearing a new pair of boots and not at all confident of my stride. Without my "field legs," I predictably stumbled and hit the uncompromising karst with both hands and knees. Deep puncture wounds in the heels of each hand plus some nasty knee injuries kept me laid up in the hammock for a day recuperating and ingesting pain pills and anti-inflammatory drugs. Although it could have been a lot worse, to this day I wear thick leather gloves when traversing the karst of Hellshire. That way, if I feel myself going down, I can at least break my fall with my hands without risking serious injury.

As painful as that day in 2000 was, it absolutely does not compare to the indignity suffered on my recent February 2005 trip. A record (my personal) three iguana bites over three days, combined with walking out of Hellshire in the dark (which can be dicey even in broad daylight), topped off by getting mired past my knees in swamp mud, all resulting in what I consider my roughest trip yet. Maybe not the roughest physically, but certainly the most damaging to my psyche.

The misadventure began at the Hope Zoo in Kingston, home of the Jamaican Iguana headstarting program. We were preparing another cohort of 16 iguanas for repatriation into their native habitat, and I was joined by a veterinary team from the Fort Worth Zoo plus two Ministry of Agriculture veterinarians. During the next three days, we would be conducting pre-release medical screening exams on 22 mid- to adult-sized iguanas to certify them healthy for release. This includes weighing and measuring, collecting blood and cloacal cultures, physical exams, and attaching bead tags for visual identification in the field. My job was to restrain the iguana during much of this process, which is something that I have done so routinely that it has become *second nature* — or so I thought. The first bite on my right thumb from a small female was minor; I covered the wound with a band-aid and we were underway again in no time.

The next day, with our performance under the glare of a graduate biology class from the local University of the West Indies, I sustained my second bite. With a hood over the iguana's head and eyes to relax it, and using a rather cavalier one-handed restraint, I somehow managed to pass my left hand in front of the iguana. With a quick lunge and shake of the head, I had a perfect, U-shaped bite on top of my hand that was bleeding profusely. I took this latest injury in stride and began trying to staunch the flow of blood. The class was amused, except for one student who couldn't handle the sight of blood and had to leave the building. Fortunately, the veterinary team was amply prepared with a range of first-aid supplies, and Veterinary Technician Kim Evans dutifully (again) bandaged my wound. No band-aid was adequate, and, for the rest of that trip, my hand was bound in green veterinary wrap.

However, the clincher came on Friday, 25 February, our first day in Hellshire. With eight pairs of iguanas in hand, we hit the beach at Manatee Bay around noon and set up camp. Around 4 PM, three of us (field biologist Rick Van Veen, Kim, and me) decided to make the trek to South Camp to release a few males. We tend to release males in a somewhat random manner in order to disperse them in hopes of reducing conflicts. In contrast, females are always released at one of two primary nesting sites so that they have an opportunity to imprint on the

KIM EVANS

This iguana bite would later seem insignificant, but only two hours later we were mired deep in the mud and muck of a "dried-up" salina. The word "salina" means swamp, but is designed to avoid a sense of dread. Don't be fooled; if you hear this word, and it involves your walking through it, be very afraid.

KIM EVANS

Nothing is capable of consoling a person who has just emerged, iguana-bitten, beaten down, and exhausted from a night of wandering in a swamp — but an ice-cold Red Stripe was about as welcome a sight as any I could have imagined. Now that's proper planning!

area in case this becomes important later. So, with the sun low in the sky, and with the full realization that it would begin setting in two hours, we began our ascent into Hellshire. To lighten my load, I had removed most non-essential field gear — including a headlamp that had to weigh all of eight ounces. What a relief that was! After reaching South Camp, we caught our breath, had a drink of water, and started unbagging the males for release. These were all large adult males, well within breeding size. Whether it was a lapse in judgment, carelessness, or just a slip of my hand, I somehow managed to allow one of these big boys to clamp on to my right thigh, way too high for comfort. To make things worse, he didn't just lunge and bite, he held on with a tenacity that I thought was reserved for wolverines and alligator snappers. Registering pain beyond anything iguana-related I had previously experienced, and with blood streaming down my leg into my boot, I issued an expletive-laced cry for help. Rick was quick to respond, but not in the way that I had expected: between bouts of wicked laughter and mumbling about not having batteries for his flash, Mr. Van Veen (formerly known as my favorite Aussie) searched for his camera. He couldn't resist the urge to catch the famous iguana man in such a compromising situation. Kim busied herself finding the first-aid kit, and extracted some cotton balls and a few band-aids. Fully expecting a gaping flesh wound in need of suturing, I thought to myself "that ain't gonna cut it, honey; you better look for some #2 cat gut." Rick had finally managed to stifle his laughter and began the task of trying to extricate the iguana that was so intimately involved with my upper thigh. Each attempt to loosen the jaws would produce another chomp and another surge of intense pain. With Kim working the back and Rick the head, he finally managed to pry the jaws loose. First aid included application of some primitive foul-smelling wound dressing that Rick had in camp (I remember something like Dr. Percival's bitterroot swamp tonic) followed by an elastic bandage. With this unexpected event taking up valuable time and the sun quickly setting, we released the four males and began heading back to camp. Only halfway there and visibility was already extremely poor; three-fourths of the way and the three of us had to hold hands to stay in contact as we maneuvered the rocky trail. I lamented not bringing my headlamp, to which Rick replied: "If I'd thought of it, mate, I could have brought one from South Camp." Although I wasn't sure what an aneurysm felt like, I was pretty sure I was about to add that to my list of the day's maladies. My only comment to Rick was that killing his primary sponsor and #1 champion for his project was not a good career advancement strategy.

JOEL FRIESCH

When we finally reached a point where continuing on the trail was becoming hazardous, and facing a final stretch to the beach that meant stepping from one large boulder to the next, we opted to walk through the "dry" salina. With no tree canopy to block the new moon, the salina was better lit but no more hospitable. Kim and Rick would leave shallower footprints than my 210-pound bulk, but they were already sinking to their ankles. Not long thereafter, I punched through and began sinking. Once the mud goes past your knees, any hope of an unassisted escape is gone, and, on at least three occasions, I had to be unceremoniously extracted from the swamp (I'll never call it a salina again) — only to take a few steps and sink again. Something about crawling helplessly in the mud is very humbling — and I can say with absolute certainty that I never want to feel that humble again.