

Chapter 1

The Formation of the Belize Audubon Society

January 28, 1969

"A group of interested persons are desirous of forming a local club or society for the purpose of studying wildlife and its conservation. On behalf of this group, we cordially invite you to meet Mr. C. Russell Mason, Executive Director of the Florida Audubon Society, at the Premier's Lodge on Thursday, February 6, 1969 at 8.00 p.m. Mr. Mason, who will be here with an Audubon tour, will talk on how to go about forming such a society. The film, 'Painted Reefs of Belize' and the newly presented film by Esso will be shown."

This invitation was sent to about 50 people and some 40 attended. The meeting was held at the Premier's Lodge, the house at the end of the Foreshore, formerly the residence of the Colonial Secretary. At that time it was called the Premier's Lodge. The Premier, George Price, never lived there, but he allowed it to be used for receptions and other functions. James Waight chaired the meeting. Here is the text of his comments:

Mr. Premier, Ladies and Gentlemen, first of all permit me to extend very warm greetings to our friends of the FLORIDA AUDUBON SOCIETY from across the gulf. I hope that they will like what they see and that we on this side will be able to make up, even in a small way, for all the difficulties and discomforts of travel which they may experience in a comparatively new country such as ours is. Greetings also to our fellow budding naturalists who live here.

In a few moments I shall ask someone, who is better able to do so, to welcome you on behalf of the whole of Belize. Before doing so, I would like to make a few very brief comments on what the Florida Audubon Society, in cooperation with the Florida State University, will be doing in Belize:

There are about 9 square miles of the Columbia Forest Reserve which has been set aside as a Wildlife Refuge. This block of land is situated in the Toledo District north of the Columbia River. It is one of the last pieces of undisturbed rain forest in our country. The Florida Audubon Society and the Florida State University will work on the conservation of this forest in its natural state and on the conservation of the birds, mammals and other animals which inhabit it. They hope to carry out research on the plants and animals, partly with the view of finding out just what we have there and partly with the view of learning enough about these species so that we can preserve them for future generations to enjoy. Eventually they will set up observation areas for the use of the schools in teaching about our wildlife.

The Florida Audubon Society will give assistance in the preservation here of bird species, such as the Roseate Spoonbill which can be found at Cayo Rosario behind San Pedro, Ambergris Caye and mammals, such as our "tiger" (jaguar), species that are in danger of extinction.

They will also bring Natural History tour groups, such as this one here tonight, to Belize so that people from other countries can enjoy our wildlife also.

Now our group here wants to organize a local chapter of the Florida Audubon Society, to be called the Belize Audubon Society, for the purpose both of learning more about our wildlife ourselves and of preserving it as part of our national heritage. In a little while I will ask Mr. Russell Mason, Executive Director of the Florida Audubon Society, to tell us how to go about doing so.

Just now I wish to tender thanks to the Premier for the use of his Lodge for this first get-together and, as I said earlier, I am going to ask him to say a few words. Ladies and Gentlemen, the Premier.

[The Premier welcomed the group and pledged his support to any such projects that would encourage the preservation of the country's natural resources.] Thank you, Mr. Premier.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are fortunate in having with us the Executive Director of the Florida Audubon Society. He started to do tropical tours in 1958. He has developed cooperative programmes for wildlife conservation in several countries. He has led the Florida Audubon Society in setting up wildlife sanctuaries in the Bahamas, in Panama, in Trinidad and now in Belize. Ladies and Gentlemen, Mr. Russell Mason.

The first *BAS Bulletin* (March 1969) carried the following account of the formation meeting:

A meeting was held at the Premier's Lodge of persons interested in forming a local Society for the purpose of studying wildlife and its conservation. The Premier welcomed the group and pledged his support to any such projects that would encourage the preservation of the country's natural resources. Mr. C. Russell Mason, Executive Director of the Florida Audubon Society, was present. He addressed the group, making suggestions as to how a Society might be formed, what its functions would be and its relation to the Florida Audubon Society. At this meeting a decision was reached to go ahead with the formation of a Belize Audubon Society as a chapter of the Florida Audubon Society and temporary officers and directors were elected. These officers and directors were instructed to nominate a slate of officers and directors to be considered during an inaugural meeting of the Society to be held on a date fixed by the temporary board.

At this meeting and subsequently, 55 persons have become members of the Society.

Inaugural Meeting

A meeting of the members and friends of the Society was held at the Bliss Institute on March 7, 1969, and the following officers and directors were elected:

Officers:

<i>President</i>	<i>James A. Waight</i>
<i>First Vice President</i>	<i>Dora Weyer</i>
<i>Second Vice President</i>	<i>Louis Lindo</i>
<i>Secretary</i>	<i>Lydia Waight</i>
<i>Treasurer</i>	<i>Albert S. Grant</i>

Directors:

<i>Fr. Leo Weber, S.J.</i>	<i>Colonel Martin C. Hastings</i>
<i>W. Ford Young</i>	<i>Albert Staine</i>
<i>Norman Staines</i>	<i>Henry Fairweather</i>
<i>Magnus Halcrow</i>	<i>Meg Craig</i>
<i>Fr. Charles Woods, S.J.</i>	<i>Ronald Clark</i>
<i>Gil Rosado</i>	<i>Winston Miller</i>

At the same time, Directors Magnus Halcrow and Albert Staine were elected to join the officers on the Executive Committee which would handle the day-to-day running of the Society. The officers and directors were instructed to appoint six Standing Committees as required by the Florida Audubon Society.

Following the business session, Dora Weyer gave a brief talk, accompanied by color slides of some of the birds which can be found in and around Belize City at the present time. ((from the BAS Bulletin March 1969))

Standing Committees

In accordance with the by-laws of the Florida Audubon Society the officers and directors have appointed six standing committees. In order to maintain liaison between the committees and the Board, each committee is headed by a member of the Board of Directors. These committees are not necessarily closed and if any member has a particular interest in any of these fields, he or she is urged to contact Mrs. Lydia Waight, telephone 2450, and advise her of the desire to join a committee. The committees as presently constituted are as follows:

- Field Trips:** *W. Ford Young (head), Esther Pendergast, Col. M.C. Hastings*
- Programme:** *M. Halcrow (head) L.C. Balderamos, Jim Parker, W. Barmon, Peter Hill*
- Conservation:** *Louis Lindo (head), Winston Miller, Fr. Charles Woods, S.J., Paul Szabo, Henry Fairweather, Ronald Clark*
- Membership:** *Albert S. Grant (head), Albert Staine, Jim Parker, Hyacinth Waight*
- Youth Education:** *Fr. Leo Weber, S.J. (head), Meg Craig, Ann Carter, Norman Staines, Gilda Wagner, Kathleen Hope, Elvia Verde*
- Sanctuary:** *Dora Weyer (head), Premier George Price, Dr. Peter Schmidt, Gil Rosado, Fr. Len Dieckman, S.J., Jorge Verde*

An Introduction to the Founders

Dora Weyer was the moving spirit behind the formation meeting. She and her husband had lived in West Africa where he worked with the Firestone Rubber Company. When he retired, they wanted to live in Belize and came here looking for property. Mr. Weyer died very suddenly before they could complete the move, but Dora and her daughter Diane settled here. Dora was an ornithologist, herpetologist and a wildlife person all around. She was very interested in the wildlife of Belize, especially in our birds.

As a member of the Florida Audubon Society Dora knew that the Executive Director, C. Russell Mason (Russ), was interested in starting foreign chapters. She had made friends with Meg Craig, Lydia and Jim Waight, and other people who were interested in wildlife and joined her on bird-watching trips. Dora decided that if she could find enough interested people, a chapter could be formed here. So, she got in touch with Russ Mason who arranged a tour for members of the Florida Audubon Society with the intention of getting a chapter started.

W. (Walker) Ford Young was born in Eugene, Oregon. He came to Belize in the 1950's with Gulf Oil Corporation after working in Nicaragua and Colombia. After retiring from Gulf Oil, he went into the real estate business, forming his own company in Belize.

James Waight was born in Belize City. In 1969 he had retired from his position as Surveyor General of Belize and was working on the 1970 Commonwealth Population Census.

Lydia Waight and **Alice M. (Meg) Craig** are sisters who were born in Belize. They grew up in a family that was greatly interested in wildlife. Their brother, George Price, was at that time Premier of Belize. Meg's son David later became Vice President of the BAS, son Walter (Mickey) became the first Executive Director of BAS, and son Peter is one of Belize's best birders.

Colonel Martin C. Hastings, D. S. O., was the officer in command of the British forces in Belize. He had been in Kenya and was interested in wildlife conservation. Col. Hastings was most helpful in providing transportation for field trips and was able to supply maps for proposed reserves. In 1971 Col. Hastings moved to Devon, England, but he has kept up his membership.

Esther Pendergast and her husband, David, who was an archeologist from the Royal Ontario Museum, worked at Altun Ha. They were credited with naming Altun Ha, which is a translation of the local name, Rock Stone Pond, into Maya. Herself a keen birder, Esther studied the birds of Altun Ha. She was in contact with ornithologists at the Museum who came here and added several new records for birds in Belize. Later she conducted tours to Belize along with D. H. Baldwin.

Magnus Halcrow was an Englishman who was the manager of the Reconstruction and Development Corporation that built Belmopan, the new capital. His wife, Molly, collected orchids and together they published the first work on the orchids of Belize. Mr. Halcrow was instrumental in the designation of Guanacaste Park as a protected area.

Russell Waters from Glasgow, Scotland, was the Chief Forest Officer. He met a tragic death on December 8, 1969, when the plane in which he was traveling crashed into the sea near the Haulover Bridge.

Louis Lindo was the Chief Game Warden at the time of the formation of the Society and succeeded Russell Waters as the Chief Forest Officer at the end of that year.

Fr. Leo Weber, Fr. Charles Woods, and Fr. Len Dieckman were Jesuit priests teaching at St. John's College in Belize City.

Dr. Peter Schmidt from Germany was the Archeological Commissioner at the time of the formation of the Society.

Jorge Verde lived in Sarteneja and had a tourist business there. He was the first to report on wood stork nesting in the Corozal District and on the slaughter of young birds in the nest. His wife Elvia was a teacher.

Ronald Clark was Secretary of the Tourist Board and later became Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Henry Fairweather, a surveyor, was Head of the Housing and Planning Department of the Government of Belize.

Winston Miller was Fisheries Biologist and later Fisheries Administrator.

Gil Rosado was Fisheries Officer in the Fisheries Laboratory of the Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Albert S. Grant was Chief Draughtsman in the Survey Department.

Albert Staine was Director of Public Prosecutions at the time of the formation of the Society. He later became Chief Justice and was knighted.

Norman Staines was Executive Officer of the Scout Association of Belize.

Jim Parker was a volunteer with the U.S. Peace Corps, teaching biology in Belize.

W. Barmon was the U. S. Vice Consul.

Peter Hill was Veterinary Officer at Central Farm

Paul Szabo was a Canadian surveyor working with the Survey Department.

Hyacinth Waight was Information Department Secretary.

Ann and Bolon Carter were Papal volunteers working in Belize.

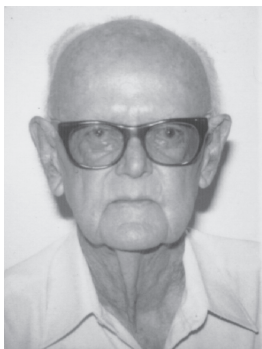
Kathleen Hope was a teacher.



Field trip on the road to Bermudian Landing

Field Trips

W. Ford Young



Soon after the establishment of the Belize Audubon Society, the directors felt that it would be in the interest of the members of the Society to organize birding field trips on a regular basis. Ford Young, a founding member, volunteered to undertake the organization and conducting of trips on one Sunday of each month.

Ford, a lover of the outdoors, having been raised on a farm in Oregon and working in the geological field in Colombia, Nicaragua, and Belize as an employee of Gulf Oil Corporation, was an experienced field trip organizer. Also, he was in the real estate business and had an open back Land Rover so he was able to provide transportation for the groups.

Other members often brought their own vehicles and sometimes a participant would donate a small amount to Ford to help cover the cost of gasoline. When the Land Rover got too old for this work, Ford got a Chevrolet pickup and installed upholstered seats and a roof with canvas curtains in the back. This was appropriately labeled the "Audubon Birder."

Ford enlisted the services of Meg Craig, another founding member, to accompany him on all trips and act as a recorder. In addition to being a project recorder, Meg is also a knowledgeable self-trained botanist and was able to contribute greatly by identifying various plants encountered on the trips.

Dora Weyer, a founding member and perhaps most responsible for the establishment of the Society, is an excellent ornithologist and was most helpful in identifying unusual species when she could participate.

Trips were taken each month and were either half or full day trips. The first trip was a half day to the Mayan ruins of Altun Ha, some 32 miles from Belize City just off the old Northern Highway. Thirty-seven species of birds were identified. The number of participants on the trips ranged from about 6 to 30. It was most gratifying to note that a number of students were regular participants.

It was not unusual for birders from abroad, who were visiting Belize, to join the trips. The number of species recorded varied widely, depending on whether it was a half or whole day trip, the time of year and the weather. Because the trips were taken during the middle of the day, many species active in early morning or late afternoon were not seen.

One rather surprising count occurred on November 11, 1973, when a half day trip in Belize City produced 57 species. Among the more popular trips were those to Big Falls Ranch, along the various roads from the Western Highway to the Sibun River, Guanacaste Park and the Hummingbird Highway. Summaries of each Sunday's trip were included in the monthly bulletin published by Mrs. Lydia Waight, secretary.

In addition to the field trips, local members were invited to join trips arranged by visiting groups such as the Canadian Audubon Society and Russ Mason's Flying Carpet Tours. Some members of the local Society also participated in bird banding programmes run by Dora Weyer in the vicinity of her residence off the Western Highway, Guanacaste Park and the Columbia Forest Reserve.



Some field trips were by boat. This Belize River trip was in 1984. (from left) James Waight, Shelly Matus, the guide, Michael Heusner (standing), Lydia Waight (center) Bill Hasse, Lou Nicolait, and Leo Balderamos. Photo by W. Ford Young

Field Trip to Guanacaste Park

Meg Craig

The long-planned working field trip to clear the trails at Guanacaste Park got off at last on Sunday, September 23, 1979, when seven adults and two students in one Land Rover, armed with machetes and files, left the Bliss Institute at 9:30 a.m., hoping the day would turn out fine.

Though no stops were made on the way to the park, a number of birds were observed. Belted Kingfishers, our only migrant of the five species recorded here (the other four – Ringed, Green, Amazon and Pygmy – are resident), had come in and a total of eleven were counted perched on wires along the road. A number of Snowy Egrets were also seen and these were also probably migrants.

On reaching the park, three of the party proceeded in the vehicle along the Hummingbird Highway to pick up some madre-de-cacao posts to be used for fencing, while the others paired off and set to work, leaving one student to guard the lunches and other belongings. As planned, all the workers met under the big Guanacaste tree just about noon, having completed the clearing of trails up to that spot. About the same time the post-collecting party returned without the posts. There had been some misunderstanding. It was then decided that a lunch break would be most appropriate.

After lunch, the clearing of the trails west of the big tree was completed and then the workers clamoured for a swim as a reward for their labour. But Roaring Creek was in flood and the supply of fuel in the vehicle was low. Rather than face a mutiny, the field trip organizer decided to try to get some gas in Belmopan. He managed to do so, though not without some difficulty, and the party then drove on to the Blue Hole, where a refreshing swim was enjoyed.

It was disturbing to find the iron pipes for the handrail of the steps leading down to the Blue Hole, which had been broken off for some time, were gone, and a part of the steps had been eroded, no doubt due to the recent flooding. This has been reported to the Ministry of Trade and Industry and it is hoped that the damage will soon be repaired, to prevent the possibility of further disintegration.



Birding on a field trip to Guanacaste - Meg Craig is second from the left looking through binoculars; next is Sheree Smiling (later Mrs. Peter Craig); Philip Balderamos is just to the right of the Land Rover; and Dora Weyer is in the front on the right.

In spite of the fact that the outing was mainly a working trip, during the course of the day, a total of 59 species was identified, a list of which is given below. A sighting of interest was a pair of Scarlet-rumped Tanagers, the dark, olive-brown female a marked contrast to the velvety black and bright red male. The distinctive call of the Ivory-billed Woodcreeper (described as a rapid whistled series running down the scale) was heard, but the mainly brown, tree-climbing bird was not seen.

The large, orange-yellow flower, with reddish brown veins, of a vine growing in the park attracted much attraction. Called locally "guaco" or "duck," and used medicinally, the vine is a species of *Aristolachia*. The *Aristolachia* (Birthwort family) is a genus of twining climbers, with woody stems and extraordinarily-shaped flowers. One species, often called "pelican flower," produces probably the largest flower of any American plant. Another species, *Aristolachia trilobata*, is called locally "contriho" and is used as a remedy for fevers.

After an unsuccessful search for wood roses, the dried calices of *Ipomoea tuberosa* prized for flower arrangements, the party decided it was high time to start on the homeward journey, after a very enjoyable day.

Personal Snakebite Experience

Dora Weyer

In February of 1981 I was bitten by a Yellow-jawed Tommygoff or Fer-de-Lance (*Bothrops asper*) at the Yaxchilan ruins in southeast Chiapas, Mexico. This was almost exactly 30 years after seeing my first wild specimen of this famous species in Costa Rica. In the meantime I had walked many miles in tennis shoes in poisonous-snake-inhabited tropical rainforest; had once accidentally stepped within a few inches of the nose of a Gabon Viper in West Africa, had unknowingly stood beside another Yellow-jawed Tommygoff in Belize, and had twice had a Coral Snake glide across my tennis, one of them twice encircling my ankles – but had never been bitten. Poisonous snakes generally do not bite unless molested. In this case I had not molested the snake, but was working my way along a small animal trail through thick riverside bamboo and brush. The tommygoff was coiled under a low spreading plant waiting for its dinner to come walking down that trail and apparently it mistook my foot for an agouti or some such small animal and struck. The fangs entered (a bit over an inch apart) about an inch behind my fourth toe, just in front of the start of the arch. The tommygoff was about five and a half feet long, and the fangs long enough to strike through the tennis and the foot almost to the sole. The snake immediately withdrew so that I did not see it when I looked down and I picked up a stick and poked into the plant to see what kind of viper it was. This was an unusually gray fer-de-lance. The one I had first seen in Costa Rica was velvety black and those in Belize were varying shades of brown. There is a considerable colour variation in most species of snakes.

Pain did not start appreciably for four or five minutes, then became more and more severe so that an hour later, as I flew back to San Cristobal de las Casas, pain was excruciating. Within a few minutes after the bite I grew dizzy and first needed a friend's arm to help me walk out and then had to sit down, unable to stand upright. Soon I was too dizzy to sit and lay down. I became thirsty – very thirsty – after about 15 minutes so that had I been alone I think would have tried to drag myself down to the riverside. The Indian in charge insisted I should not drink – I don't know the truth of this. By this time I was nauseated and beginning to get cold. All these



effects are results of the action of the venom. This information comes from a long-time doctor at Gorgas Memorial Hospital in Panama where they have dealt with many cases.

A doctor in the group of tourists I was guiding insisted on putting a tourniquet at mid-leg. I allowed it, thinking it wouldn't do any good, but it shouldn't do much harm. In this I was wrong. A tourniquet should not be used. Experiments have shown that a tourniquet does keep the venom concentrated in an extremity such as the foot or lower leg. It was first thought this was advantageous, to keep it from the heart and brain. But concentrated in one small area it does more damage to the blood vessels and muscles in that area than is necessary. Also deaths have been reported when the tourniquet is released and a large amount of venom and partially digested blood is suddenly swept into the systematic circulation. I didn't die when the tourniquet was released, but the large amount of tissue rot I suffered may have been caused by the concentration of venom in the foot and lower leg during the first two hours before we got to the hospital. The doctor with me also incised cuts across the fang marks to release blood heavily loaded with venom and a friend on the tour sucked blood and venom out – he was a brave man because had

he had a small open sore of any kind in his mouth he could have been envenomated also. This, if done soon after the bite as it was, and if done by a doctor who will know not to cut important nerves or blood vessels and tendons, is helpful in removing venom. If you are bitten, do not allow this to be done by anyone but a doctor.

Fortunately for me, the Indian in charge of the site came running with a vial of antivenin. The government of Mexico very wisely keeps antivenin at all archeological sites. I wanted this injected intravenously, which is the way it should be done. Tests have shown that nearly 85% of the antivenin is active at the site of the bite if injected intravenously, whereas only 1.5% moves to the area where it is needed if the injection is intramuscular. We were taught years ago to inject antivenin intramuscularly, but this is now known to be a mistake. Antivenin for pit vipers is made from horse serum from horses that have developed a strong immunity to viper venom. Horse serum is dangerous to give a human if the person is allergic to it as many people are. And so, although I thought I was not allergic to it, the doctor did not want to give it intravenously where the allergic shock might be severe enough to cause death. I finally wrote a note relieving the doctor of responsibility and the doctor did give the injection intravenously. I then asked the Indian if he had another vial. He did, but it was one from the previous year. I knew from long experience with dogs that had been bitten that the viper antivenins are remarkably durable even in the heat of the tropics, so I took the second vial. I believe that having those two vials of antivenin injected intravenously so soon after the bite saved my life.

The Indians then made a litter and carried me the half mile to the airfield. By this time I was in great pain and retching, although I had nothing in my stomach to come up. This lasted, although to a lesser degree, for five days, as did the dizziness. We had come to Yaxchilan in three small Cessnas (the only access then to Yaxchilan was by plane), so I sent the rest of the group and their picnic lunches on to their next stop, Bonampak, and asked the doctor and one of the group who spoke fluent Spanish to return with me to San Cristobal. The flight took nearly two hours, during which time I was nauseated, very cold and in considerable pain.

Everyone in San Cristobal was very helpful and they took me to a private clinic where I was given two more vials of antivenin intravenously. By the time I reached the hospital I was beyond questioning what the doctors did, but I found out later that that was all they had. I should have received 10 or more vials because of the severity of envenomation. And should have asked to be flown on to Tuxtla Gutierrez or Mexico City, or had more antivenin flown in to me. On the sixth day, as rotting of the flesh around the bite progressed, I flew to Miami (I would have gone to Mexico City, but the planes were full and I already had tickets and a place to Miami). There the rotten flesh, now including all the right side and middle of my foot and three-fourths of the muscle on the right and back sides of my lower leg, was cut away, including the destroyed nerves, blood vessels and small tendons. Nothing was left of the right side of my foot save the sole itself and the bare bones and major tendons. A third of my lower leg was cut away, the Achilles tendon and the main tendon up from the ankle bone were scraped bare and the tissue removed down to the bone. My surgeon did an excellent job and I was kept under heavy antibiotic treatment. Surprisingly, the tissues grew back, including the blood vessels and some nerves. I was walking within 8 weeks, albeit cautiously and with help. Today I walk normally although I do not have control over the two outer toes and so find balancing a bit difficult. The scar is now only about a third of its original size, and in the scar area itself I can feel pressure but do not feel cuts or insect bites (all to the good) or heat or cold.

I didn't die after a severe bite by a tommygoff, but my doctors are convinced I would have, without the use of antivenin. I can walk again because of excellent medical care. The important thing in case of snakebite is to get the patient to a doctor as soon as possible. Antivenin is very important, but it must be given with knowledge because of the danger of severe allergic shock or even death from the horse serum. Do NOT use a tourniquet. Do NOT cut the wound open – only a doctor can do that safely. Do NOT give alcohol which actually exaggerates the effect of the venom. See that the doctor gives enough antivenin, and gives it intravenously, after checking for allergy. The Belize City Hospital has not lost a patient from snakebite.

