BERMUDA ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY

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The Fabled Cahow

Written by Dr. David Wingate, Chief Conservation Officer

On a stormy night in 1603 a Spanish ship was sheltering from a gale in a cove on the then uninhabited island of Bermuda - a place feared by sailors for its furious tempests and treacherous reefs, a dreaded sea area and graveyard of ships.

Suddenly the vessel was surrounded, almost invaded, by hundreds upon hundreds of petrels, sea birds that are found in one variety or another over many of the oceans of the world. But theses were new to the sailors and already frightened by the storm, they took them for devils.

But the crew's fear did not last for long. They soon found that the birds were easy to catch and kill, and that they were good to eat. Later other men found the same and, within 20 years, aided probably by pigs and rats brought to the island by visiting ships, man had exterminated, it seemed, another animal.

For that was the last that was heard of the Bermuda petrel, or cahow, for three centuries. assumed to have gone that way of the great auk, also killed by sailors for food, it was forgotten; no one had much idea of what it looked like, beyond the supposition that it was probably a fairly typical member of the genus known as dadfly petrels.

Unidentified Petrel

And then, in February l906, L. L. Mowbray, father of Louis Mowbray, Former Curator of the Bermuda Aquarium, Museum and Zoo, found a small unidentified petrel on Gurnet Rock, Bermuda. This bird bore a fairly close resemblance to the capped petrel of the Caribbean Sea, (*Pterodroma hasitata*) which the French settlers on Guadalupe had christened diablotin ("little devil"), presumably for the same reasons that had caused the Spanish sailors to fear the Bermuda petrel when they first saw it. Mowbray's petrel, however,was smaller than the diablotin, and in 1916, he gave it the scientific name *Pterodroma cahow* - cahow being a rendering of the curious sound it makes during courtship. In the same year this bird was compared with a reconstruction of the original Bermuda petrel made from bones and sub-fossil remains found in caves and crevices; it was proved beyond doubt that the new discovery was, in fact, the same bird as that presumed extinct for nearly 30 years.

Seen Again

A handful of survivors had evidently been coming and going silently in the night, incubating their single eggs and raising their young unseen in the remote rock burrows of the outer islands - and keeping the species alive unknown to man.

Individual cahows were found in 1935 and again in 1941. (One flew into a lighthouse, another into a telephone wire.) But it was not until 1951 that the next real advance in knowledge was made. In that year, Louis Mowbray and the American ornithologist Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy went out on an expedition to find the cahows' breeding grounds.

In the course of their careful search, some six occupied burrows were discovered on the islands in Castle Roads, and probably there were more on Gurnet Rock, where Mowbray's father had seen his specimen. The weather prevented the expedition from visiting it, for in a southerly blow, it is impossible to land there.

Present on this expedition was David Wingate (at that time still a school boy). It is he who is principally responsible for the field work of saving the cahows and building up their numbers. Only by seeing the places concerned can one get a true picture of what is entailed; surging seas around the reefs make landing on these little islands difficult and often impossible. Once there, movement is hampered by rocks, shrub and prickly pear. On an island only two acres in extent, there may be literally thousands of little crevices where cahows may be found.

Gradually our knowledge about the life of the mysterious cahow is being increased. One of the greatest threats to its survival are the predatory yellow-billed tropic birds, which nest in large numbers on the same islands as the cahows. While the parent cahows are hunting for food in the ocean, the tropic birds sometimes find their burrows and go in and kill the unprotected young. With a population so low, the loss of every chick matters.

The answer to this, however, does not involve reprisals against the tropic birds, which are themselves one of the great charms of Bermuda and indeed, among the loveliest of all birds. What is being done is more subtle and takes advantage of the fact that tropic birds are slightly larger than cahows. False entrances to the cahow's burrows are built, which are just big enough for the cahows to get through, but too small for the predators. These are called "Baffles".

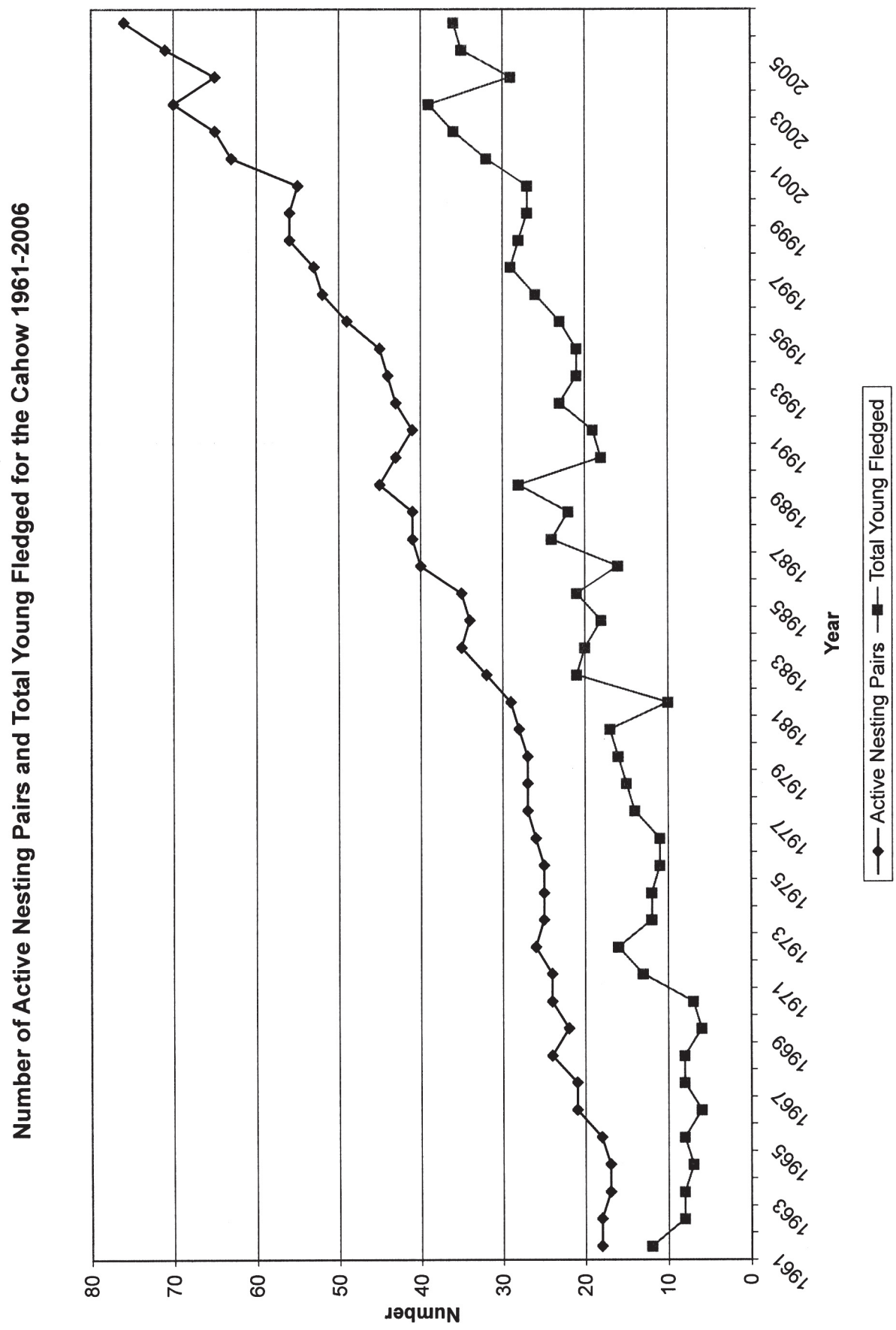
The cahows' breeding habits are as unusual as their habitat. Towards the end of October they start flying in from the ocean, arriving always at night. They then clean out their burrows and carry in sticks and leaves for their nests. By the end of November they are ready to mate. Having mated, they disappear again to sea.

They are not gone long, for around the first week of the new year, the female comes back to her nest and immediately lays her single egg. It is an enormous egg for so small a bird (the cahow is about the size of a Manx shearwater) and takes 51 - 53 days to incubate. Male and female share this duty, apparently taking turns of 10 - 12 days at a stretch with neither relief nor food.

The young finally hatch between February 20th and March 12th.

Diet of Shrimps

One parent stays to brood the chick for about four days, while the other brings food each night. Thereafter the adults go out together, returning only at night with red shrimps or small squids found in the ocean. During the day the chick is alone and the parents are never seen. When it is old enough to look after itself, the parents simply abandon it and it finds its own way out of the burrow, stands for a moment on the cliff and then just launches into its first flight and disappears out to sea.


Number of Active Nesting Pairs and Total Young Fledged for the Cahow 1961-2006
Number
0
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
80
1961
1963
1965
1967
1969
1971
1973
1975
1977
1979
1981
1983
1985
1987
1989
1991
1993
1995
1997
1999
2001
2003
2005
Year
Active Nesting Pairs
Total Young Fledged