

AN INCIDENT WITH FERAL DOGS ON VOLCAN CERRO AZUL, ISABELA

by

Uno Eliasson

In 1966-67 I spent nine months plant-collecting in the Galápagos archipelago. The existence of the Charles Darwin Research Station greatly facilitated my work and I was able to visit all islands in the archipelago except the remote islets of Wenman and Culpepper. All the five large volcanoes on Isabela were climbed. Thanks to help from, above all, Mr. Roger Perry, at that time Director of the Darwin Station, I managed to work on Fernandina and to spend two nights on the floor of the caldera in March 1967, fifteen months before the collapse of the caldera.

In December 1980 I again worked on Santa Cruz, Santa Fe, Floreana and Santiago. It was interesting to see the islands again after fourteen years and to note several changes in the distribution and frequency of some species. Although there is some positive development in the protection of native species many negative tendencies remain and some problems need urgent attention. Introduced species of plants and animals are a serious threat to the indigenous flora and fauna. The goat problem seems to be getting under control; on the other hand, feral dogs have become much more numerous. When working on Santa Cruz in areas where feral dogs had been reported I was equipped with a paralyzer, a spray-bottle with tear-gas, to be used in case of attack by dogs. This has surprised some persons who apparently look upon dogs merely as pets. I, too, like dogs, but an adventure with feral dogs on Volcán Cerro Azul on south Isabela in 1967 made me realize that these animals are sometimes very different from the dogs we normally encounter. I will relate briefly this incident; my story is translated from field-notes. Some explanatory sentences have been added, whereas detailed botanical data have been omitted. The story is aimed as a warning to others not to stay in dog-infested areas without some kind of defense weapon. My companion on the trip was Dr. Ian Thornton, later Professor of Entomology at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

We left Puerto Ayora at midnight 24-25 April on the small fishing-boat Santa Marianita. The boat went via Villamil to Caleta Iguana, the southwestern corner of Isabela, where we arrived around 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The anchorage was small with a heavy swell. We prepared ourselves for the climb by eating salt-tablets and trying to drink as much water as possible.

We started the climb at 3 o'clock. The coastal *barranco* (cliff) was steep, about 100m high, and not easily climbed. Scattered *Opuntias* were growing at low elevations. Above the barranco the vegetation was quite dense and mainly comprised *Zanthoxylum*, *Scalesia cordata*, *Croton*, and *Cordia*. Occasionally we had to use a machete to cut our way through the vegetation. The forest belt extended to an elevation of about 400m, above which was open grassland. A narrow transition belt with *Zanthoxylum* and *Pteridium* dominating was recognizable. The open grassland covered the slope of the volcano to an altitude of 1250-1300m with an abundance of grasses, sedges, and ferns. The bracken, *Pteridium*, was most common in depressions. *Zanthoxylum* trees, many of them dead, were scattered through the lower part of the grassland. Near the rim of the caldera were patches with further woody species, including *Scalesia cordata*.

The slope was steep and the climb fatiguing. We had not been able to sleep well the previous night, since the sea had been very rough. I felt rather exhausted and was perspiring freely, and carried only two litres of water — which had to last until we came back to the boat. We knew that there was to be a full moon that night and intended to walk to the rim of the crater by moonlight. Our plan was to reach the rim around midnight and then to return to the coast the next afternoon. We saw large numbers of free-ranging cattle, the bulls outnumbering the cows. We were pleased to see that the animals were much shyer than those I had previously seen on Volcán Sierra Negra, and they usually ran away when we approached closer than 100m.

We were both very tired and exhausted when at about 5.30 p.m. we experienced one of the most unpleasant adventures of my life, an incident that will always remain clear in my memory. I was walking a few metres

behind Dr. Thornton and we had reached an elevation of 500-600m. I remember I looked up and saw what I first thought might be a white calf at a distance of some 30m. I found it strange and again raised my eyes, now to see a pack of thin, long-legged dogs, 8 to 10 in number, white with dark patches, and dalmatian-like in appearance. According to Dr. Thornton the dogs were resting in a depression in the ground when they first caught sight of us. As a pack they came straight towards us and then started to spread out in order to surround us. I did in fact carry a weapon — a small revolver — but it lay unloaded and wrapped in a plastic bag at the bottom of my ruck-sack. Unfortunately, we had left the machete lower down the slope after passing through the dense forest, intending to retrieve it on our return.

I took off my helmet and rushed a few metres towards the dogs, waving my helmet and shouting. This had no effect. The dogs approached yet closer. They were silent; there was no barking, no waving tails; their eyes expressed neither anger, nor joy; we were their prey. There was discipline in the group and it was apparent which of the dogs was the leader. We realized that we had to remain close together. Trying to escape down the steep, uneven slope would have been futile. A bite in the leg would have been enough to make one of us fall, and then the dogs would have attacked to kill. Dr. Thornton had a walking stick which he waved in front of himself, thus stopping the leader at a distance of two metres. The other dogs were standing about one metre beyond, forming a sinister half-circle. Fortunately they never closed the circle. All dogs were silent, whilst we were shouting. The leader stood ready to jump but Dr. Thornton's stick was continuously waving. The others were also ready to attack but apparently awaited a sign from the leader; again, the discipline was abominably perfect. Our behaviour probably puzzled the dogs and after some 20 seconds or so — we found it much longer — the leader turned and ran away. The other dogs followed and within a few seconds all disappeared. Now we noted that the event had been watched by three big bulls some 50m away.

We were shocked and spent a few minutes discussing the event and whether we would be wise to climb to the summit. However, since the top of Cerro Azul was very poorly known botanically, as well as entomologically, we decided to continue. I took out my revolver, loaded it, and kept it easily available. We went on, much more intent than before.

As already mentioned, we had intended to complete the walk by moonlight. However, when the sun sank below the Pacific the question arose as to what might happen if the dogs returned in the dark. The moon was not to rise for a couple of hours. Would there be enough light to use my revolver, if I had to (which, of course, I hoped I would not!)? We concluded that it would be dangerous to continue in the semi-darkness and decided to put up our tent and spend the night where we were at an altitude of 970m. The top of Cerro Azul is at about 1600m; so we would still have a long climb the next day.

We went into the tent and tried to get some sleep. For a long while, we lay listening to the nocturnal sounds of Cerro Azul. A short-eared owl was heard; then the sound of a running animal approaching. Could it be dogs? No, this was a heavier animal, probably a bull. If the dogs came back, how would they behave? We did not know. We regarded it as unlikely that the dogs would blindly attack the tent. Perhaps we could get them one by one to the narrow opening in the tent and shoot them, if necessary. After a couple of hours the moon rose above the rim of the crater. Then we heard the dogs howling like wolves in the distance. We were silent, listening. Now, again, we felt as prey must feel. The dogs were heard again, closer. Then silence. After a while the dogs were heard barking. They were coming closer. Then suddenly a new sound, a cow bellowing, but in a different way than normally. Again we heard it; and again. Then silence. Just silence. Apparently a cow had been killed.

The night was cold and too disturbed to make sleep possible. Before sunrise we ate our food and then climbed to the top of the volcano collecting plants and insects. Late in the afternoon we returned to the fishing-boat at Caleta Iguana. No further dogs were seen. We arrived exhausted and dehydrated, and during the next two hours I drank five litres of water. We were happy we had been able to fulfil our plans.

Postscript. The feral dogs are a serious threat to the native fauna of the Galápagos Islands. If the dogs on southern Isabela are permitted to multiply to such an extent that they cross the Perry Isthmus, then the indigenous reptiles and other wildlife of northern Isabela will be threatened. For this reason I believe that an even greater emphasis should be given to the eradication of dogs on this island. The protection of the unique Galápagos fauna is an urgent matter. Organizations for the protection of wildlife should strongly support the dog eradication program in the Galápagos Islands.