

## ADVENTURE ON NORTH ANDROS ROBERT W. EHRIG

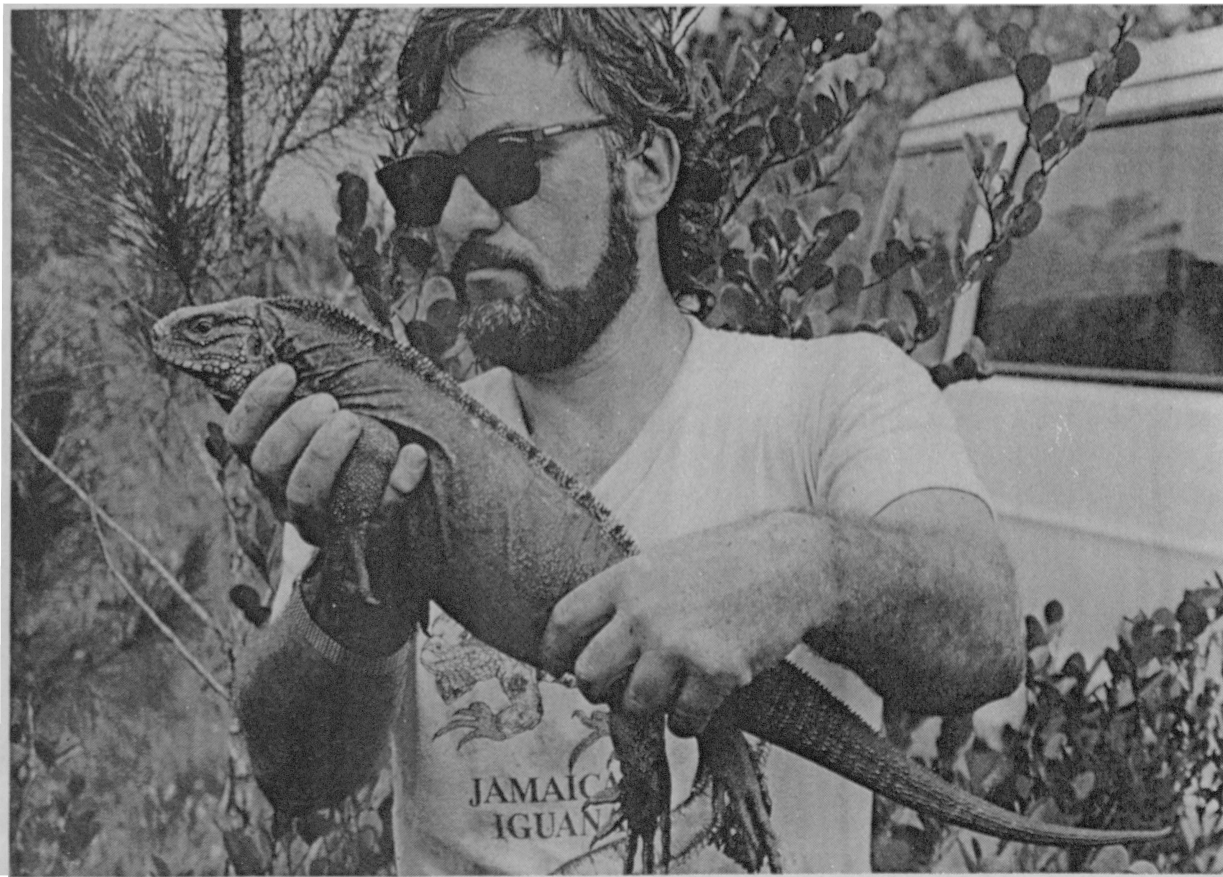
The small plane touched down on the empty Androstown runway. "Andros", the very name conjured up visions of wilderness--the largest Bahamian island and the least explored. Only 130 miles east of Key Largo, the fifth largest West Indian island is home to the largest native Bahamian island animal. The entire west coast is a maze of salt water creeks, sand bars, and mangrove swamp. The interior is a mosaic of hundreds of square miles of pine forest and fresh water wetlands interspersed with hardwood jungle, locally called coppice.

On 13 June 1991, we set out to help assess the current status of the Andros Island Rock iguana, *Cyclura cyclura cyclura*. The Andros iguana is the largest of the iguanas of the Bahamas, growing to just under five feet long and 25 pounds according to Mr. Kingston Brown, a former iguana hunter and renowned boat builder on Andros. The female iguana can lay over 22 eggs, and lays its eggs within termite mounds, the only iguana species known to utilize this method of incubation. African monitors are known to dig into termite mounds, lay their clutch, and allow the termites to reseal the mound. *Cyclura cyclura cyclura* is a blue-gray to brown-gray animal overall with strong pink-orange scalation around the head. Of the three subspecies of *Cyclura cyclura*, the nominate race is the most orange form.

Accompanied by California member Timothy Haack and my wife, Marcie, we were warmly welcomed at Forfar Field Station by director Rachel Cartwright and the staff. Located on Stafford Creek, the station was our base of operation on Andros.



Young specimen of Andros Island Rock Iguana, *Cyclura cyclura cyclura* from North Andros. Note iguana-injured index finger of Robert Ehrig. Timothy G. Haack photo.



Robert Ehrig holds Andros Island Rock Iguana, *Cyclura cyclura cyclura*. Timothy G. Haack photo.

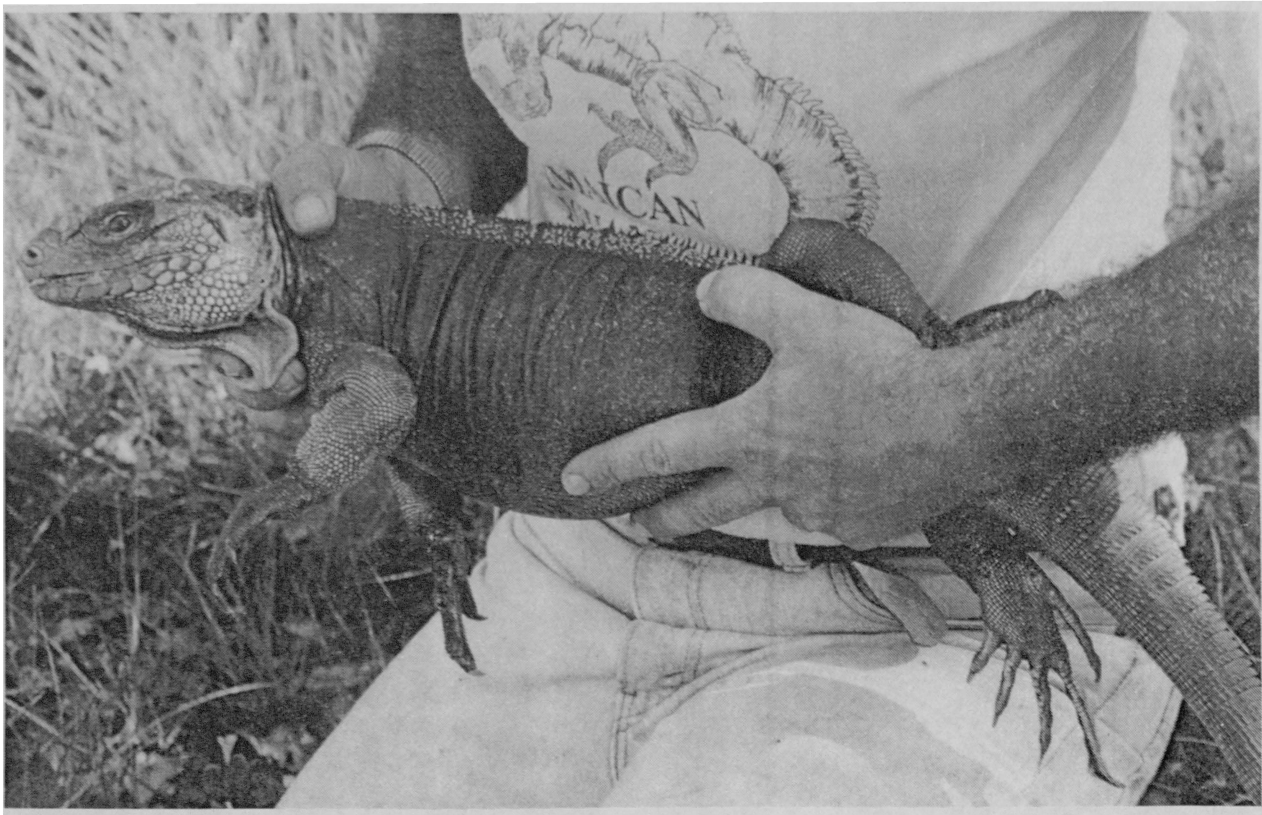
Everywhere we went on North Andros, we were greeted by waves from the local people who recognized the Forfar vans and trucks. Goombay festival in Nicholstown, Andros' largest settlement, was a pleasant diversion from our iguana plans and a source of delicious Bahamian food. Our visit to Red Bays, the only settlement on the west coast of Andros, had a dual purpose. Red Bays is where Bahamians with Seminole Indian blood live and sell beautiful hand-woven baskets. The fronds of the local Silver Palm, *Coccothrinax argentata*, are used. Most of the last iguana hunters on North Andros also live in Red Bays. Although it is illegal to hunt iguana, enforcement is nonexistent. Fortunately, there are fewer hunters than in the past. But this means that feral hogs are becoming more common since hunters primarily hunt hogs. After hunters, the hogs are the greatest danger to the declining North Andros Rock Iguana. Hogs are notorious iguana egg eaters. How the Andros iguana has been able to successfully nest is another mystery.

On 16 June 1991, we left Forfar Station well before dawn on our predetermined course for the interior of the large island. The morning air was crisp from the rain hours earlier. The drive down the logging road was bumpy, but our spirits were high. Bobwhite quail and white crown pigeons were the most common birds in the area. The slash pine forests were very reminiscent of Big Pine Key, my home.

We spotted our first iguana about 8:45 a.m. basking on a level open spot in the forest. He stood his ground as we stopped the van and I approached on foot. Had I been a poacher, the animal would have been an easy target. With the assistance of Tim Haack and the others in our able group, the iguana was herded towards me. Crouched under a poisonwood tree, *Metopium toxiferum*, I was able to grab the animal as it approached. Sexual dimorphism is not apparent in *Cyclura cyclura* in young and middle age animals, although, all very large Allan's Cay iguanas, *Cyclura cyclura inornata*, are male. The 32 inch animal was examined, some preliminary scale data collected, and then it was lectured on being so bold around humans. The



Iguana, R. Ehrig, and Forfar Research Station Director, Rachel Cartwright. Timothy G. Haack photo.



Andros Island Rock Iguana, *Cyclura cyclura*. Timothy G. Haack photo.

iguana had a large v-shaped scar on the left base of its tail, possibly due to a hog encounter. Upon release, it immediately retreated into the bush, probably safer in that it would be more wary of people in the future.

Hog sightings were increasingly common as we traveled. By mid-morning six had been sighted. The largest was about 130 pounds. Their presence explained the extreme abundance of cocoplum, *Chrysobalanus icaco*, in this area. This native shrub has a large edible fruit attractive to both hog and iguana.

Several hours and miles later two more iguanas were spotted. These animals were considerably smaller, and were proof of successful reproduction of this increasingly rare species. One was wary and immediately fled. The other showed some curiosity at our arrival. After an interruption by a brief, but strong, thunderstorm, we continued our trek. Shortly after we turned to begin the long trip back, an iguana ran across the trail ahead of us. Bursting from the vehicle, we pursued the animal to a gap between two boulders. With more luck than skill, I was able to carefully extract the iguana from its hole. After scale counts and measurements were taken, this lizard was returned to its habitat.

Our adventure could not have gone better. We had managed to examine two specimens of a species few have ever seen. On our return to Forfar, we stopped at Marky's Bar for our celebratory beverage. In order to procure service at Marky's, you must first cross the road and knock on the door of the bartender's house, who obliges by opening up the establishment.

The Andros Island Rock Iguana is not currently endangered. This could soon change. On South Andros, there are probably healthy populations. They are only protected by their isolation and the ruggedness of the habitat. On North Andros, *Cyclura cyclura* is already exceedingly rare and continuing to decline. It is largely absent from its prime habitat, the coastal ridge of the east coast of Andros. The future of the iguana and of the natural history of Andros itself is dependent on the people of Andros.

Andros is a West Indian gem, relatively unspoiled, beautiful, and vulnerable. The world's third largest barrier reef frames a land with a large, untapped eco-tourism potential unparalleled in the region. Hopefully, future development of this island will take advantage of its unique natural resources and avoid the mistakes and waste that has occurred through much of the Caribbean.

Special thanks go to Rachel Cartwright and the staff of Forfar Field Station, Timothy G. Haack, Mike Robson, Doug and Jane Wynn, and Kingston Brown.

### Literature Cited

Nickrent, D.L. 1988. The Vascular Flora of Andros Island, Bahamas. Kendal/Hunt Publ. Co., Dubuque, Iowa

### Articles and Letters Solicited

Members of the I.I.S. are encouraged to contribute articles for publication in the Newsletter, following a format like that shown in this first issue of the Newsletter. The articles can deal with any aspect of iguana biology, ecology, behavior, husbandry, systematics, etc. Members can also submit letters to the Editor for publication in a Letters section of the Newsletter. The Editor.