Nature & Landmark Guide

Fauna

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BANANAQUIT This small, active bird is easily distinguished by its white eye stripe and yellow breast. It also has a slender, curved bill that is used to steal nectar from flowers by piercing them from the side—and consequently, never pollinating the plant. Its affinity for sugar bowls has earned it the nicknames "sugar bird" and "sugar thief."

ROSEATE FLAMINGO The most brightly coloured of the world's six flamingo species, the Caribbean flamingo is historically native to the BVI, but disappeared in the early 1940s due to hunting and egg harvesting. They would be considered extirpated for the next 50 years until Guana Island's owners, the Jarecki family, brought 26 captive-bred flamingos to the BVI in 1992. 18 were released at the historical salt pond on Anegada, and eight at Guana's. The first flamingo chicks hatched four years later, marking the project's success. They have continued breeding on Anegada ever since, and there are now hundreds of these grand birds flying to ponds all over the BVI.

STOUT IGUANA Historically found in Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and the BVI the stout iguana can grow up to 2 metres long and weigh around 30 kilos. The population declined because of predation and competition for food, with the only surviving natural population being on Anegada Island. In the mid-1980s, eight iguanas from Anegada were brought to Guana Island with the purpose of growing a sustainable population and then returning them to Anegada, as well as to other islands. One from the original group was pregnant, and from this small beginning (with no predators on Guana), their population grew to over 400—one of the largest colonies of one of the most endangered species in the world.

BRIDLED QUAIL DOVE. This dove is a plump, ground-nesting dove that is reluctant to fly. Its name refers to the white stripe on its head. It can be found walking along the forest floor throughout the island—especially at the Garden of Eden and near the orchard. Bridled quail doves are confined to this region, and their individual numbers are decreasing on many of the islands. Fortunately, this bird remains common on Guana Island, which provides it with prime habitat.

AMEIVA LIZARD These ground lizards can be seen all over the island and feature two narrow, lightly coloured (almost yellow) stripes along each side of their back. The adults have a teal tail with a pink nose. These brightly coloured lizards are very skittish and will scurry away unless you are very quiet.

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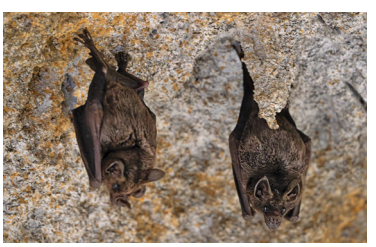
HUMMINGBIRDS Tiny, crested hummingbirds and much larger green-throated Caribs zoom from hibiscus to tabebuia to frangipani blossoms. The Antillean mango hummingbird (thought to be long gone from the Virgin Islands) has been seen right by Dominica House on Guana. It is stocky with a long, strong, and curved bill. While the male is nearly black and hard to distinguish from a Carib, the female is like no other area hummer: brown with white outer tail tips.

TERMITES Guana Island is home to nine species of termites. These insects build large brown nests in trees and are ecologically important because they recycle wood and other dead plant material and then return important nutrients to the soil. They also contain bacteria in their abdomens that fixes nitrogen—a rare ability in the natural world.

TURTLES Guana Island provides a nesting habitat for sea turtles—especially the green hawksbill turtles. We have scarce records of nesting because few people walk the beaches (particularly White Bay) at night; the tracks left behind by turtles are regularly reported in the spring. The leatherback sea turtle (which is the world's largest living reptile, weighing up to a ton) is known to nest on Tortola.

DONKEYS Donkeys and mules have a rich history on Guana, having once helped to build homes whose foundations still support many of our structures. Today, we have two white donkeys (Jeremy and Jill) who live in an enclosure near the Orchard. They prefer to abstain from manual labour but will happily accept the gift of a palm frond for a snack.

SNAKES All four species of snakes on Guana Island are harmless and beneficial to the ecosystem. The only frequently seen snake is the Puerto Rican Racer.



BATS Guana is home to a number of species of bats. The mastiff bat is the most common (owing its name to having a face like a mastiff dog) and eats thousands of insects each night. The Antillean fruit bat is larger (at 40cm) with a big nose leaf and no tail. The rare cave bat roosts with the fruit bat in the bat cave. The fishing bat (at 60cm) may be seen over White Bay late at night scooping fish from the water with its hind legs.

Flora

Flora

SEA GRAPE Sea grape grows in dense thickets along the beaches and on the flats of the island. Its large, thick, round leaves are marked by striking orange veins. It produces an edible, grape-like fruit which hangs in clusters and is a favourite among the iguanas, tortoises, and locally in baked tarts.

TURPENTINE TREE Known as the "turpentine tree" due to the thick pungent gum it produces, it has also garnered the name the "tourist tree" because of its red, peeling, papery-thin bark resembling tourists who get sunburnt. These large trees can easily be found across Guana Island.

ORGAN PIPE CACTUS This is the most conspicuous cactus found on Guana Island and can be seen on any trail. It grows in a tree-like fashion with long, tubular-shaped branches and flowers during the night. Each branch is ribbed with multiple sections and sharp spines where bananaquits build nests to seek protection from predators.

FRANGIPANI The frangipani is a type of plumeria featuring beautiful white, fragrant flowers and large leaves with prominent veins. Its name comes from a 16th century noble Italian family that invented a plumeria-scented perfume. Despite its alluring aroma, the plant's sap can be an irritant for the skin and eyes. Tetrio sphynx caterpillars, with their distinguishable yellow and black striping, primarily feed on frangipani leaves.

TURK'S CAP This is a round, barrel-like cactus crowned with a red growth, much like the fashionable red, cylindrical hats (fezzes) that became popular in the 1800s. Its barrel-like base has vertical ribs which contain strong, sharp spines. The "cap" of the cactus is a wooly structure that grows every year and houses colourful fruit. The Turk's Cap may flower and produce fruit any time from May to October. The small, edible, fuchsia-coloured berries taste like kiwi or mild strawberries (depending on your palate) and are very popular among the local wildlife.

Flora

TAMARIND While the tamarind tree is not native to Guana Island, it is one of the largest trees that can be found here. It has compound feathery leaves with rough, dark brown bark that tends to flake off in large slabs. Tamarinds also produce an edible pod containing pulp which is used to make juices, candies, sorbets, ice creams, chutneys, and syrups. You can find tamarinds by the orchard and at the base of the Quail Dove Ghut.

WHITE CEDAR TREE The white cedar tree is native to the British Virgin Islands. It can be found on sand, limestone, or in heavy clay soiled areas. The tree grows to be a small to medium-sized and most deciduous tree with showy, pink flowers. These flowers are also the Territorial Flower of the British Virgin Islands. White cedar trees were integral to the territory's economy, as they were used to build the Islands' sloops.

HIBISCUS The Chinese hibiscus plant is the most common species of hibiscus in the tropics where it grows as a hedge. The red funnel shaped flower has 4-5 petals and varies in size from 2-10 inches. On Guana the hibiscus blooms all year and forms an important part of our departure tradition with one being presented to each guest.

GUAVABERRY The Guavaberry is an important part of the British Virgin Islands culture. It is used locally to create wines, jams, pies, and tarts. Guavaberries are small, round fruits that have a unique tart, but also a sweet flavour. They can be yellow-orange, dark red, or purple, and are about half the size of a cherry. Guavaberry trees are slow-growing trees that can reach between 39–66 feet tall. The trees have red-brown branches with small pink and white flowers. The Guavaberry usually ripens in November.

Landmarks

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SUGAR MILL By the late 17th century, sugar production was the primary industry in the West Indies. This production led to a rise in other commodities like molasses and rum and fueled massive wealth growth in England. As the region flourished, many cultural and religious groups came to colonize the islands. One such group was the Quakers, who came from England. In 1743, two Quaker families settled on Guana Island: the Parkes, whose home site is unknown but likely on or near the Flat, and the Lakes, whose home site ruins can still be seen on the southeast part of the island near Monkey Point. The families built the sugar mill (located on the east side of the salt pond) and produced sugar, molasses, and rum for approximately 16 years. At the ruins, archaeologists identified a crushing mill, boiling house, curing room, two wells, and a rum distillery. There is debate over whether the sugar mill was actually used, as there were few artifacts found near it.

SALT POND Coastal wetland in the Caribbean feature salt ponds like the one adjacent to Guana's Flat. They are often surrounded by mangrove trees, which can grow near the hypersalinated water. Salt ponds provide an important ecological habitat for flamingos, migrating birds, and other wildlife, yet they are poorly protected because many people see them as unattractive or wrongly believe them to be a source of mosquitoes. In reality, the high salt content and direct sunlight make them unsuitable for mosquito breeding.

IGUANA HEAD Perhaps you read about Guana Island before you came and learned that it was named for an iguana-head rock formation staring out over the sea from a high cliff on Guana's western coast. That was true until 2017 when the extraordinary hurricane winds of Hurricane Irma sent the massive rock to the bottom of the sea.

Since Guana is now home to these exotic creatures, perhaps some time in the future when the missing iguana head rock is long forgotten, it will be incorrectly assumed that Guana was named for them.

Geology

Geology

All islands from Puerto Rico itself to Anegada, northeastern-most of the Virgin Islands, are known as the Puerto Rico Bank. Only St. Croix and its small satellite cays are not part of this geological unit. During glacial maxima ("ice ages"), the entire Puerto Rico Bank was dry land; the British Virgin Islands were hills or ranges on a broad plateau, and the climate was generally much stormier due to the close juxtaposition of tropic heat and ice caps.

During interglacial periods, such as the one we currently live in, sea levels rise 100 meters or more and the Puerto Rico Bank becomes an archipelago. During the Sangamon Interglacial period about 100,000 years ago, the sea level was about 20 metres above its present level. At that time, aragonite from algae and corals capped many shallow water features. Today, some of these "caps" protrude from the water and are the aragonite islands of Anegada (BVI) and Lovango, Grass, and Thatch (USVI). There are smaller interglacial aragonite deposits on most other Virgin Islands too—including Guana.

Most of the Virgin Islands and the entire foundations of the Puerto Rico Bank are of ancient volcanic origin—called extrusive igneous rocks. Guana is typical, mostly made of andesite (hardened lava) and tuffs (composed of ash). Hot, eruptive ash consolidates to form welded tuff. Chunks of rock (usually andesite) may be included in the tuff. If so, the result is agglomeratic tuff; it looks like sedimentary conglomerate, but the included rock fragments are jagged, not rounded.

How the Greater Puerto Rico Bank originated is the subject of impassioned debate. In the early 1900s, geologists and biologists envisioned great mountain ranges extending across the Caribbean Sea. They thought the present islands were fragments of these continuous land areas called "land bridges." However, this view was wholly discredited by a new wave of geologists and biologists who combined evidence to "prove" the islands had independent origins and never had land connections to each other or the continents. Recent enthusiasm for plate tectonics and continental drift has produced a coterie of geologists and biologists who believe the islands are fragments of other lands (most from Central America, but perhaps some from Africa or a hypothetical Atlantis) that have drifted to their present positions. This is dubbed the "land barge" theory.

Humans first came up into the Antilles somewhere around 3,000–5,000 years ago, migrating from Central and South America and over the water from the west as they hopped up the island chain. There were large, flightless birds, several giant tortoises, and huge rodents. Parrots and sea cows (or manatees) once also thrived in the Virgins. Today, these species cling to survival, rare and endangered, in Puerto Rico. Perhaps the saddest case is that of the little monk seals called "sea wolves"—known as lobos marinas by the Spanish and "sea dogs" by the British. We know them now only from their bones and the names they inspired for the small islets (the Dogs and Seal Dogs) they were abundant in when Columbus and Drake passed this way. The last one was killed in 1954.

Geology

The relative richness of our fauna results in large part from the geological history of the Puerto Rico Bank, alternating vast continuity (glacial maxima) with fragmentation to many islands (interglacial). Successful species may spread over the entire Bank at low water. Then, a few tens of thousands of years later, high water isolates them from their relatives and they begin independent evolution, thus leading to new species. This pattern has been repeated at least four times in the last million years, and uncounted times before that. These islands provide a theatre of dynamic evolution where speciation processes can be documented and studied to advantage. Human activities have disrupted evolutionary patterns in most lowland areas, at least, but Guana remains (to a large degree) an example of how things were before we came.