



M A G A Z I N E

SPECIAL FEATURE

Birds of Paradise



TAKING FLIGHT





PHOTOS BY YVES-JACQUES REY-MILLET

Grace in flight: Snowy egrets populate the Cayman sky.

BIRDS OF Paradise

By Jenny Gabruch

"She laments sir ... her husband goes this morning a-birding."
SHAKESPEARE'S THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR, 1602



**Cayman's expert birders:
Photographer
Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet,
author Patricia Bradley,
and spotter and recorder
Alexandra Calhoun.
Opposite Page:
Cayman Brac parrot;
red-footed
booby (white morph)**

Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet spent several years in one of the most glamorous, jet-setting cities in the world.

His stint in Monte Carlo – the jewel of Monaco set on the photogenic French Riviera on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea – made for fashionable living but the Swiss-born lawyer and nature photographer felt something was missing.

“Monaco was too urban, too built-up, too noisy,” he says. “I didn’t like the absence of wildlife. I couldn’t practice my bird photography. I was unhappy there.”



As heir to a family inheritance, Yves-Jacques chose Monaco for its tax-friendly environment but longed to be closer to nature. His grandmother, who lived in Palm Beach, Florida at the time, suggested he move to the Cayman Islands.

Yves-Jacques made the move in the early 1970s – when Cayman was still relatively obscure on the world stage – and it turned out to be just the right fit: a tax haven and a bird heaven.

“I liked the island immediately. It was a beautiful, peaceful, undeveloped place – exactly contrary to Monaco. I lived in a very posh and very comfortable place but I chose Cayman because it was unspoiled,” he says. “There was nothing here but mosquitoes!”

And, of course, birds.

It’s the passion and pastime of Yves-Jacques, who has dedicated his

life to documenting birds in the Cayman Islands – and around the world. Yves-Jacques has traveled extensively observing and photographing birds through the lens of his Canon cameras, spanning from South America and Africa to the Antarctica. He’s amassed thousands of photos, and it’s a passion shared by his partner Alexandra Calhoun, who assists as a spotter and, as well, records bird song.

His exquisite photographs can be found in several notable field guides, including two editions of *Birds of the Cayman Islands*, considered to be the best source of information on the islands’ avifauna.

“I’ve been photographing birds since I was 14 years old. I’ve just always liked them. It has always been a hobby,” he says. “It’s really an obsession – that’s all I do all day.”

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– Yves-Jacques Rey-Millet

That focus, enthusiasm and attention to detail make his images stand out.

“To get photographs of good quality is now possible with the new camera technology, but to produce photographs that capture the essence of the bird is very difficult, and YJ is able to do this routinely,” says Patricia Bradley, Cayman’s resident bird specialist who authored *Birds of the Cayman Islands*, now finishing its second edition. “It takes a lot of experience and a lot of knowledge. That’s what separates a good photographer from a brilliant photographer.”

Yves-Jacques’ skills have earned high praise from birding enthusiasts, including his photographs in a field guide for Jamaica, *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Jamaica*, authored by bird specialists Ann Haynes-Sutton and the late Audrey Downer and Robert Sutton.

Yves-Jacques and Patricia are now working together on a similar book. *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of the Cayman Islands* is to be published by Bloomsbury Publishing, London, and U.S.A., and scheduled for release in 2013. It will be their third collaboration and the first photographic field guide to Cayman’s feathered residents.

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

Yves-Jacques and Patricia are certainly birds of a feather, sharing a lifelong passion for birds. When Patricia moved to Cayman in 1982, she began putting together comparative monthly records of bird sightings on all three islands. The Irish-born biologist was in the midst of writing the guidebook when she met Yves-Jacques, introduced through former Governor Peter Lloyd in 1983.

Birds of the Cayman Islands was first published in 1985, and updated for its second edition 10 years later. It documents more than 230 resident and migratory species. The comprehensive guide describes the bio-



geography of the islands and the history of bird migration and settlement.

The foreword is by the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, an avid bird watcher. He writes, in part: “Bird-watching and recognition may seem like a gentle hobby but it is much more than that. It is a window onto the natural world and with growing experience it is possible to appreciate what is happening to indigenous and migratory bird populations. This in turn leads to a better understanding of the major issues of the conservation of nature.”

Indeed, Patricia and Yves-Jacques have both observed a significant erosion of habitat and bird population since they first moved to Grand Cayman. “The avian population and its diversity have declined significantly because development removes their habitat,” says Patricia.

Several species are vulnerable or threatened, among them the country’s national bird, the Cayman parrot. Also on the threatened list is the vitelline warbler and West Indian whistling-duck. Once a resident, the Grand Cayman thrush is now extinct.

Despite erosion of habitat, the Cayman Islands remain a bird-watcher’s paradise, an attractive destination for this rapidly growing outdoor activity.

BIRDING TAKES FLIGHT

No longer viewed as a pastime for retirees, birding is indeed enjoying extraordinary popularity as a hobby. One indicator: *Sibley’s Guide to Birds*, a field guide written and illustrated by ornithologist David Allen Sibley, is a *New York Times* bestseller. Another sign: the world of birding hit mainstream Hollywood late last year



**From Left:
western spindalis;
northern flicker;
red legged thrush**

with the feature film, *The Big Year*. The comedy starring Steve Martin, Owen Wilson, and Jack Black has the three main characters competing to see who can count the most species in a single “big year.”

Next to gardening, bird watching is the second largest hobby in the United States. According to a survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it’s a pastime enjoyed by 51.3 million Americans. And, more people are taking it up as a regular activity. It’s also

big business. According to the survey, birding contributed US\$36 billion to the economy – birders are shelling out bucks for trip-related and equipment-related expenses, spanning from food, lodging, and transportation to cameras, binoculars, and field guides. The survey shows the average birder tends to have a higher than average education and income.

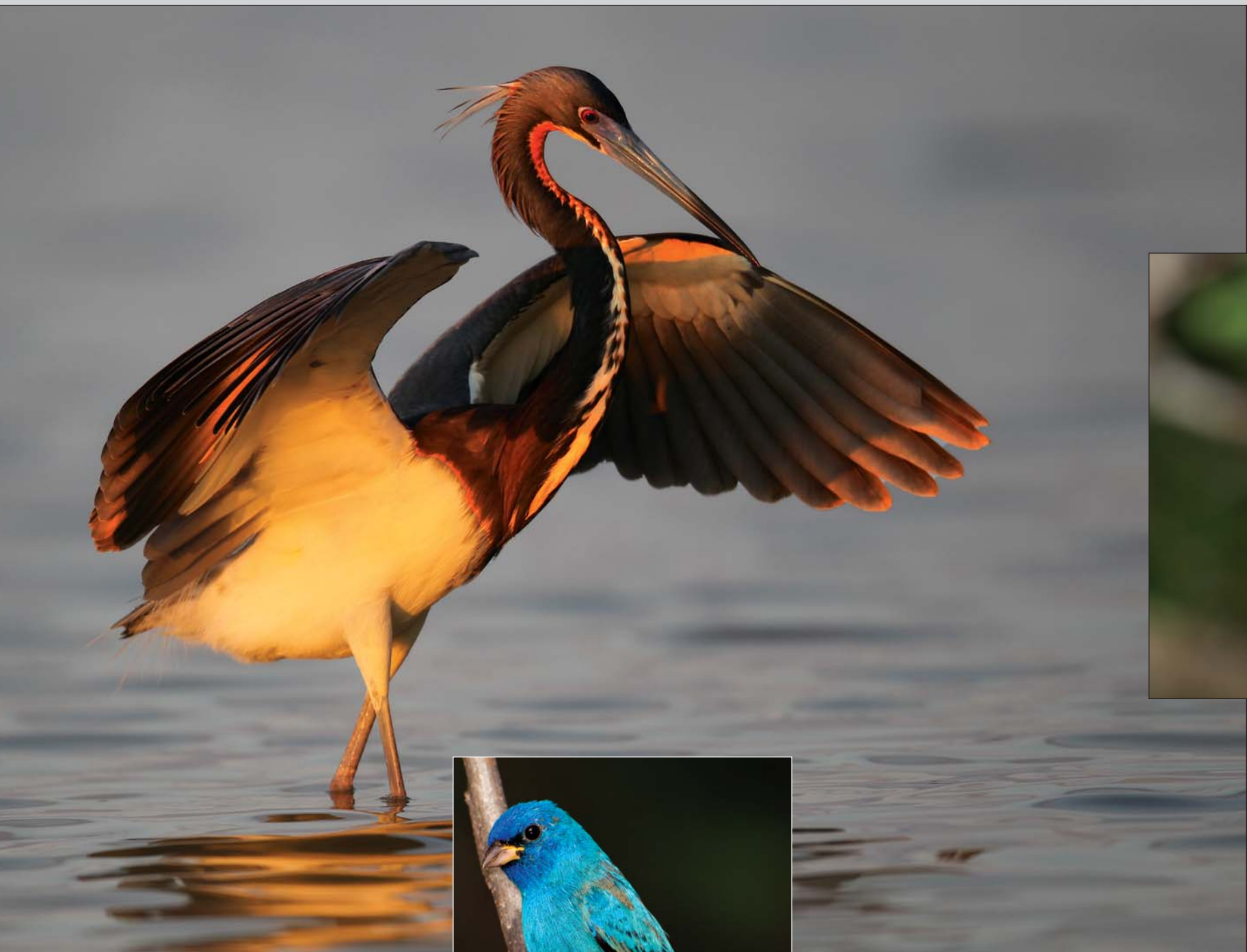
While no similar survey has been conducted in the Cayman Islands, eco-tourism travel is on the rise worldwide. Thanks to the foresight and efforts of individuals here, as well as the non-profit National Trust for the Cayman Islands, there are several large areas of forest and wetlands protected bird sanctuaries on all three islands, where birds can sometimes be viewed remarkably up close.

“The appeal of birding in the Cayman Islands is the very refreshing approachability of our birds,” says Paul Watler, field officer with the National Trust. “I’ve taken bird-watchers on tours who insisted they

had to see as many endemic subspecies as possible, and I got them to within an arm’s reach – no need for binoculars! I think Cayman is great relative to other destinations, where you are not guaranteed so much as a fleeting glimpse of the bird you want to watch.”

The Trust organizes bird watching activities and offers guided tours (booked in advance for groups of at least four people) for a fee. While it’s difficult to gauge how popular birding is locally (the Cayman Island Bird Club is undergoing a renewal), it is definitely a popular outing for visitors. There are regular repeat customers, says Paul, including a U.S.-based group called Carefree Birding which organizes field trips on ports of call on cruises.

Boasting around 230 species of rare, beautiful, and colorful birds, Cayman is home to 17 endemic subspecies, among them, the Caribbean dove, West Indian woodpecker, red-legged thrush, bananaquit, parrot, and Greater Antillean grackle (often



called the “ching-ching”). Cayman has the largest population of the endangered West Indian whistling duck in the Caribbean. The vitelline warbler is only found here and in Swan Island, where its population is minute. The Cuban bullfinch is also only found here and in Cuba.

The beauty of such birds as the stripe-headed tanager, indigo bunting, and West Indian woodpecker are also awe-inspiring for visiting birders. Other significant attractions are Cayman’s colonies of seabirds including the brown booby, red-footed booby, least tern, magnificent frigate,



and the beautiful white-tailed tropicbird with its long tail streamers and which spends its life at sea and comes to shore only to breed.

PRIME BIRDING SPOTS

Little Cayman is home to one of the largest breeding colonies of red-footed

boobies in the Western Hemisphere. They can be viewed at the National Trust’s Booby Pond Nature Reserve, a brackish mangrove pond that is also home to Cayman’s only breeding colony of magnificent frigatebirds. West Indian whistling ducks are commonly spotted here as well. The pond has been designated as a Wetland of International Significance under the terms of the Ramsar Convention (an international treaty on the conservation of wetlands).

In the Brac, the dramatic bluff rising up through the middle of the island is the favorite haunt of the



(Below Opposite Page)
indigo bunting;
(Top Opposite Page)
tricoloured heron;
(Above) vitelline warbler

brown booby, which nest in its caves and ledges. Guided tours are available at no cost through Nature Cayman.

It's possible to observe the boobies up close, as they have a curious nature. A sight to behold is their adorable pure-white fuzzy chicks, best spotted in spring. Another top birding spot is the Brac Parrot Reserve, home to around 400 Cayman Brac parrots (which are different from the Grand Cayman parrot), as well as many other fine-feathered friends.

An excellent bird watching excursion on the Brac is hiking the two-mile Bight Road footpath, an ancient footpath which goes along the edge of the parrot reserve. Patricia upgraded the trail with a boardwalk, installed interpretative signs, and produced a tourist map showing all nature sites. "It takes you right across the island. It's a great walk and a great place for birds."

There are several prime destinations on Grand Cayman as well. Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park and the Governor Michael Gore Bird Sanctuary are two favorites.

Botanic Park is located in North Side, a 65-acre garden and woodland preserve. It's home to some 700 species of trees and plants, both native and exotic, that attract an abundance of birdlife. Its floral gardens are prime spots for scenic photography, while the buttonwood swamp along the trail is home to numerous waterfowl such as the West Indian whistling-duck, green heron, blue-winged teal, American coot, and common moorhen. The brilliantly colored purple gallinule can also be spotted. Among the other birds that frequent the park are

the Caribbean dove, cattle egret, Cuban bullfinch, and the Cayman parrot, which feasts on berries and seeds of native trees.

Governor Michael Gore Bird Sanctuary – known locally as Governor's Pond – is located in Spotts Newlands, right before Bodden Town. Some 60 species of land and water birds have been observed here, one of only a few fresh water ponds on island. A wooden boardwalk leads to an observation blind, where you can commonly see moorhens, herons, sandpipers, terns, warblers, grebes, plovers, egrets, ducks, kingfishers, and woodpeckers along with such rare species as the purple gallinule and least bittern.

The sanctuary was named after Michael Gore in recognition of his conservation efforts during his tenure as governor from 1992 to 1995. An avid birder and photographer, he was instrumental in the establishment of the National Trust house in Little

Cayman, and having the Booby Pond designated a RAMSAR site. He facilitated the establishment of the Department of Environment in 1993 and the purchase of important parcels of land and habitats for the Trust, including the pond.

"He made a great contribution to the conservation of birds when he was here," says Patricia, a long-time friend, who, along with Yves-Jacques, would join him on birding excursions.

Birding was a regular outing for the former governor, who also authored several nature and field guides during his diplomatic career.

"I spent most Saturday mornings going around Grand Cayman with members of the Bird Club, ending up for a beer midday in some country bar and, afterwards, a light lunch at Government House," he recalls.

"Birding is one of the most relaxing pastimes, so long as you do not become a 'twitcher' – competing to see as many species as possible. Simply looking at birds in their natural habitat is a joy."

Like Yves-Jacques and Patricia, Governor Gore had his favorite spots:

"I loved visiting Little Cayman to watch the boobies and on Grand Cayman, the West Bay mangrove is a great area for water birds," he recalls.

Other prime locales for bird-watching include the Mastic Reserve and Trail in North Side, Meagre Bay Pond in Pease Bay, and Colliers Pond in East End. Best of all, many birds can be spotted all around the island including in the backyard gardens of residents.

Not surprisingly, the backyard of Yves-Jacques and Alexandra is a birding oasis. Special plants, trees and shrubs, feeding stations, and nesting boxes designed to attract birds are scattered throughout their tropical garden.

"We have always enjoyed watching birds in our backyard," says Alexandra. "Over the years, we've arranged the garden in a way to make it more interesting for birds to visit." 