TROPIC NEWS

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

JULY 1991

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EXTINCTION

It can be said with certainty that all species will become extinct at some time. Major extinction periods have occurred in the past and will undoubtedly occur again. However, these differ from the extinctions occurring now, in that one species, *Homo sapiens* (Man), is directly responsible for an extinction spasm possibly unprecedented in the history of our planet, unprecedented because of the rate at which it is occurring.

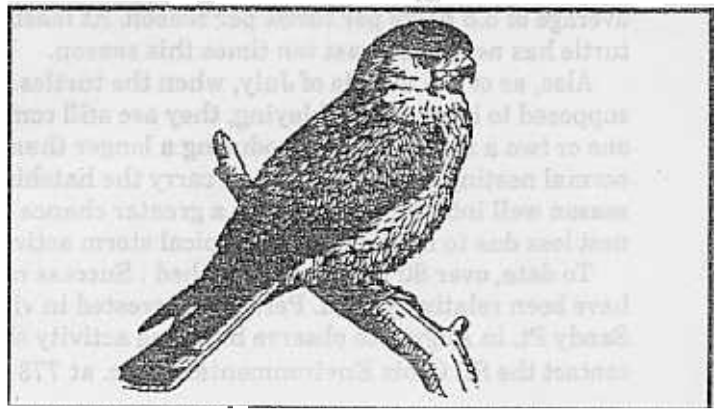
Extinctions are not confined to tropical areas, they are occurring throughout the world. In temperate New Zealand, the impact of humans on the endemic bird fauna has been catastrophic, with 40 - 50% of all bird species having become extinct since human settlement some 1200 years ago. New Zealand plant species have come under considerable pressure since human settlement, especially in the 100 - 150 years of European settlement. Researchers describe 97 plant species or varieties now under direct threat of extinction in the wild and one researcher considers that some 17% of the New Zealand flora is presently at risk of extinction.

Islands have been particularly prone to extinctions, with invasive animals (especially mammals such as mongoose, rats and donkeys) and habitat destruction being the major agents. The vulnerability of islands has been largely a consequence of the absence of mammals until the arrival of humans, and rapid habitat destruction (especially forest clearance) within the short period of human settlement.

To conserve species at risk from extinction, we need to understand the processes that lead to species extinction. In some cases these are obvious and direct (e.g. habitat loss) but in many cases they are more subtle and include a mixture of factors that may be random or the result of a sequence of events. Unfortunately, in most cases we have little information on the factors that forced a species into extinction. It is important to document those species where there is information, to help prevent the extinction of other species.

FISH TRAP MESH SIZE

Commercial fishermen are reminded that as of September 14, 1991 all fish traps set in federal waters must have a mesh size of not less than 2 inches unless a regulatory amendment is passed which will change this requirement to a mesh size of one and one-half inch hex mesh. All traps will also be required to have two 8" x 8" escape panels fastened with 1/8 inch untreated jute. The regulatory amendment will most likely be approved in time. Please call 775-6762 for additional information.



The American Kestrel ("Sparrow Hawk"), *Falco sparverius,* is the commonest of Antillean birds of prey. Typically seen in pairs, this little falcon (9 - 12" from tip of beak to tip of tail) may be seen to hover as it searches for food. Food consists mainly of insects and lizards which are often hunted from a high perch. Nests are made in cavities in trees or on cliff ledges from February to June.

The Division of Fish and Wildlife is starting a project to study the use of artificial nest habitat by this species. Nest boxes are available for interested persons who wish to place a nest box on their property, monitor it and provide us with the information. Please call if interested.

NEW EMPLOYEE

The Division of Fish and Wildlife recently hired Craig Barshinger as a Fisheries Biologist II on St. Thomas. Craig has lived and worked in the Virgin Islands off and on since 1979. During that time, Craig earned a Masters degree in marine biology from the University of Aix-Marseille, France. Craig will be collecting, computerizing and analyzing commercial and recreational fisheries data from the USVI.

We welcome Craig on board.

COMING SOON

MARLIN STUDIES

ST. CROIX PROJECTS

MARINE RESERVE INFO

LEATHERBACK NEWS

While the 1991 leatherback turtle nesting season has not set any records for number of turtles (as we had thought it might) it has set a new record for number of nests in one season. As of the middle of July, 38 individual turtles (the record is 48) have laid over 260 nests (the previous record was 248). This means that the turtles this year are laying many more than the usual average of 5.5 nests per turtle per season. At least one turtle has nested at least ten times this season.

Also, as of the middle of July, when the turtles are supposed to have stopped laying, they are still coming in one or two a night. This is producing a longer than normal nesting season which will carry the hatching season well into September with a greater chance of nest loss due to hurricane and tropical storm activity.

To date, over 80 nests have hatched . Success rates have been relatively good. Persons interested in visiting Sandy Pt. in August to observe hatching activity should contact the St. Croix Environmental Assoc. at 773-1989.

V.I. SEABIRD UPDATE

The Division of Fish and Wildlife continues to monitor seabirds on the breeding grounds of the offshore cays of St. Thomas and St. John. Sooty terns continue to be the most abundant seabird in the territory and the large colony on Saba appears to be stable. With the assistance of twenty volunteers from Portland State University, over 600 sooties were banded -- not a bad effort for two hours of work.

Three mixed-species colonies of Sandwich and Royal terns were found on offshore cays. The USVI breeding population of Roseate terns was higher than last year's. The Division has begun a study of the breeding and distribution of the Caribbean population of the Roseate tern as part of a joint effort with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for the recovery and conservation of this threatened species.

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Trees were saved by printing on recycled paper

For as yet unexplained reasons, the Bridled tern populations in the USVI have continued to decrease since hurricane Hugo.

1990/1991 WHALE SEASON

The 1990/1991 whale season was better than the previous three years. Eighty one reports of marine mammals from October 1990 to June 1991 resulted in observations of over 90 adult humpbacks, 20 humpback calves, two sperm, one finback, one minke and 20-22 pilot whales. In addition, 437+ spinner, nine bottlenose and four possible Atlantic spotted dolphins were reported. Four goosebeak and one Bryde's whale were reported stranded on St. Croix. The Bryde's whale was assisted in freeing itself and hopefully survived.

February was the peak month for sightings of humpback whales with over 50 adults and calves reported. The majority of the humpback whale sightings occurred north of St. Thomas and St. John (from .25 to 10 miles offshore). Other sightings were from the British V.I., the south and east sides of St. Thomas and St. John, the North Dropoff and the west side of St. Croix.

Most of the reports were made by fishermen, sailors and coastal residents. To every one of these people we extend our thanks.

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QUOTE

When the last individual of a race of living things breathes no more, another Heaven and another Earth must pass before such a one can be again.

William Beebe

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