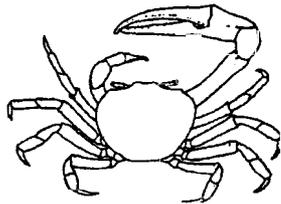


## The Landing of the "Land Crabs"

In the Virgin Islands, when we talk about land crabs we are usually referring to the robust, heavy shelled *Cardisoma guanhumii*. *Cardisoma* is a pantropical lowland genus, living in muddy soils near mangroves, swamps and streams where its burrows can reach groundwater. The land crab is a large, ash grey crab with a carapace (shell) width of about 11cm (4.5") and a weight up to 500g ( more than 1 lb). Males and females can easily be distinguished by the major claw or chela which in the male is considerably larger than the minor claw.

Living on land imposes many problems to crabs. The carapace of crabs is permeable to water. In order to avoid drying out the land crab digs burrows that reach down to the groundwater.

The burrows can be as deep as 1.8m (6ft). Land crabs are most vulnerable to drying out when they molt. During these times they retreat to their burrows, plug the entrance from the inside with mud and remain in the sealed burrow for a couple of months or even longer.



**Great Land Crab**

Most people only see land crabs on rainy days when the burrows get flooded and the crabs sit outside next to the entrance. Land crabs are mainly herbivores, feeding on fruits, seeds, leaf litter, certain grasses and roots, but are also known to eat dead fish or large insects. While feeding, neighboring crabs often come close to each other and eventually start to compete and fight over food. Land crabs are very territorial and aggressively defend their burrows against other crabs.

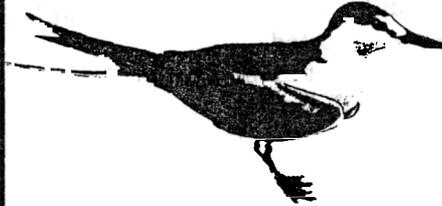
Although land crabs spend most of their life on land, they depend on the sea in order to reproduce. Reproduction usually takes place in the beginning of the rainy season. Copulation occurs on land outside the burrow. The female produces tens of thousands of eggs and after internal fertilization carries the egg mass underneath her body for 16 days. The female then migrates to the sea to release the larvae into the water. These migrations often takes place around full moon between May and September. The larvae spend approximately one month in the water and then return to land as tiny crabs no bigger than a few millimeters.

As you see these remarkable creatures scurry about our tropical soil remember that they play an important part in the web of life.

## Seabirds Are Here Again !

During summer months, the offshore cays become transformed into noisy rookeries (nesting areas) for many migrant species of seabirds. Migrant birds are those that travel to different locations with the change

of seasons. Terns constitute the largest group of breeding migrants here in the Virgin Islands.



**Sooty Tern**

All terns are similar in size and shape, but are colored differently. The brown Noddy is easy to distinguish

due to its brown-black color and white patch on its head. The Bridled and Sooty Terns both have dark backs and heads with white underparts. The Bridled Tern is somewhat lighter on the back and has a white eye patch farther back over its eye than the Sooty.

The Roseate is light gray and white. During the breeding season, it has a red base on its black beak. The Sandwich tern has a black bill tipped in yellow.

Terns differ in their egg-laying habits. Sooty Terns prefer areas shaded by tall grass. Bridled Terns lay their eggs in crevices formed in rocky areas. Noddy Terns nest on cliff ledges or in tree branches. The less numerous Roseate and Sandwich Terns nest on open rocky ground. Most all of these birds lay a single egg.

Here a few reports from the field:

Sooty Terns are just settling on Saba where dry conditions may affect nest success.

Laughing Gulls, the only gulls that nest in the Virgin Islands, have been seen everywhere. A complete survey will done this year.

There have been a few Noddy Terns on Saba.

In mid May we expect the Roseates to arrive.

We really enjoy having these visitors return year after year so let's remember to keep off of the cays during these months to avoid chasing away the seabirds or worse yet, damaging their nests.

## QUOTE

" The more we know of other forms of life, the more we enjoy and respect ourselves... Humanity is exalted not because we are so far above other living creatures, but because knowing them well elevates the very concept of life."

-Edward O. Wilson

## Turtle Tours are available to Youths

The Fish and Wildlife Service, Rotary Club of St. Croix West and V.I. Resources Conservation and Development Council are recruiting youngsters for their annual turtle-watch program.

Mike Evans, manager of Sandy Point National Wildlife Refuge, states that their main aim is to get more young people out to Sandy Point to see the turtles.

In 1994, 55 leatherback sea turtles came ashore at Sandy Point laying 355 nests, which according to the V.I. Division of Fish and Wildlife, sets a new record for number of nests.

Leatherbacks nest from February to late July with their peak nesting period falling between late May and early June. Females come ashore once every 10 days to nest, so tours are scheduled for the nights when at least three or four turtles are expected.

A new, expanded presentation including a lecture and slide show will allow students to become familiar with all of the sea turtles that nest on our shores.

A typical evening starts at 8:30 with an orientation lecture and a slide show. Afterwards the students wait until a turtle researcher has located a turtle, and then go out to observe the animal laying eggs. A visit to the refuge lasts till midnight. Groups consist of no more than 20 students and five adult chaperones.

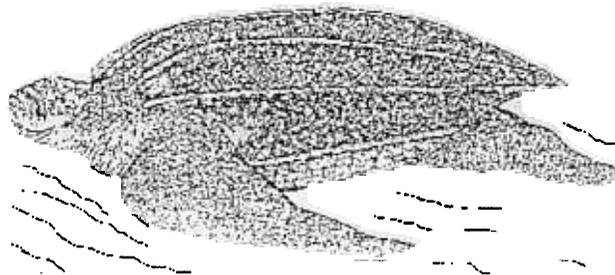
Unfortunately, not every group gets to see a turtle, said Evans. Trying to predict animal behavior and nature is tricky business. "You have a better-than-even chance of seeing a turtle," he said.

### TO SEE TURTLES

Teachers and youth group leaders may contact Mario Morales or Faye Williams at 778-9838.

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Trees were saved by printing on recycled paper

## Leatherback Turtle



### Food for thought

To date, we have identified only about 1.4 million species on Earth. Experts think there may be millions more. It's estimated that every day we lose about 70 species. That is about one every 20 minutes! Before humans lived on Earth, we lost only one species about every 100 years.

**Keystone species** are usually the largest animals in a natural habitat. They are also any species that may be used to assess the environmental health of a habitat or area. If something happens to them, the whole habitat changes. (For instance, the long spined sea urchin in the Caribbean is a keystone species.)

If we don't change things, in 50 years half of all the world's large animals will be endangered or extinct.

### COMING SOON

- \* Mooring in V. I. Waters
- \* Marine Debris



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GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS  
OF THE UNITED STATES

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