SANDY CAY FIELD TRIPS:
Semi-annual Report
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INTRODUCTION

During the first six months of 2007, Jean-Pierre Bacle visited Sandy Cay three times. The first trip (February 19th) included Chris Thomas (Resortscapes) and David Blyden (Jost Van Dykes Preservation Society) and focused on trail maintenance and rat monitoring. On April 28th, David and Jean-Pierre visited the island primarily for rat monitoring activities. During the third trip (June 23rd and 24th), Jean-Pierre camped overnight on Sandy Cay for the primary purpose of re-confirming that the island remained rat free. The experience was very uncomfortable as the population of sand flies (locally called "no-see-ums") was at its peak following many periods of rain. The screen size of the tent was not small enough to deter insects from entering, and winds outside were not strong enough to blow them away.

Other than the dates indicated above, David Blyden visited the island on a number of times for trail maintenance and rat monitoring, and his activities are reported in documentation submitted by the JVD Society to the Rockefeller Estate.

POST RAT ERADICATION MONITORING

So far this year, we observed no evidence of rat activity. Rat droppings in and around the 15 bait stations as well as signs of gnawing on vegetation (twigs or fruits) were absent. Also absent were the numerous networks of rat trails that existed prior to the eradication phase.

During the June 23-24 trip to the island, a dozen snap traps were set up. Periodically, once a year or at least once every two years, the snap traps are used in order to confirm that the island remains rat free. In order to avoid non-target species such as lizards and birds, the snap traps were tied to tree branches one to two meters above ground, and traps were left open from dusk to dawn. At dawn, none of the traps had been tripped.

The consecutive days on Sandy Cay during the June trip also provided an opportunity to re-examine the ongoing hermit crab problem. On Saturday, all bait stations were replenished with rodenticide. By the following morning about two-thirds of these stations had hermit crabs slowly crawling up the bait station. The only stations not yet attracting crabs were the newly designed ones constructed entirely of PVC pipe. Unfortunately, it is only a matter of time before they too are invaded by hermit crabs. Although the newer stations have slowed the ability of hermit crabs to access bait, the design needs further modification to make it full proof.

Earlier this year, a supply of rodenticide was provided to David Blyden. The amount should be enough to cover use for the remaining months of 2007. Shipping rodenticide to the US Virgin Islands and then carrying it by ferry to Tortola, through BVI Customs, is becoming more difficult and time consuming; therefore, during the next phase of this long-term rat monitoring project, it may be more efficient to order the product through a local pesticide supplier.

Since the beginning of the monitoring program, all stations have been replaced at least once, and their position on the ground moved on several occasions. During the June 2007 trip, geo-positions of the stations were taken with a GPS (Garmin - GPS 76). Table 1 provides the new locations of each of the 15 bait stations.

Table 1. Bait stations with new GPS location.

Stn #	Stn. Type	Latitude	Longitude	Location
1	New	18° 26′08.2″	64° 42′ 38.1″	seaside of trail / lowland
2	New	18° 26′07.8″	64° 42′ 36.8″	seaside of trail / lowland
3	New	18° 26′08.0″	64° 42′ 35.0″	Inland side of trail /lowland
4	New	18° 26′08.1″	64° 42′ 33.4″	Inland side of trail /lowland
5	2nd G*	18° 26′08.8″	64° 42′ 29.2″	Inland side of trail / lowland
6	2nd G	18° 26′09.6″	64° 42′ 28.2″	Inland side of trail / upland
7	2nd G	18° 26′11.2″	64° 42′ 29.8″	Inland side of trail / upland
8	2nd G	18° 26′10.8″	64° 42′ 33.4″	Interior pond
9	2nd G	18° 26′10.1″	64° 42′ 32.6″	Interior pond
10	2nd G	18° 26′12.5″	64° 42′ 34.3″	seaside of trail / lowland
11	2nd G	18°26′12.3″	64° 42′ 35.8″	seaside of trail / lowland
12	2nd G	18°26′12.8″	64° 42′ 38.2″	seaside of trail / lowland
13	2nd G	18°26′12.0″	64° 42′ 39.7″	seaside of trail / lowland
14	2nd G	18°26′10.1″	64° 42′ 38.4″	seaside of trail / lowland
15	2nd G	18°26′09.3″	64° 42′ 38.7″	seaside of trail / lowland

* Second generation of bait stations (first generation were all replaced)

TRAIL CONDITION

During the first trip of 2007 (February 19th), the project team, headed by Chris Thomas, undertook a good cleaning and pruning of the trail corridor. Subsequent maintenance trips by Dave Blyden insured that the trail was kept in good condition. Jean-Pierre Bacle reported that on his last trip to the island in June, his overall impression was that Sandy Cay is clearly being looked after on a regular basis and the trail is being well-maintained.

BIRD OBSERVATIONS

The June 2007 trip in particular was highlighted by an abundance of bird activity. With the return of migratory birds during the months of May and June, many species of terns were observed foraging around the island. At one point on Sunday morning (6/24/07), about 40 terns were observed resting and grooming along the southwest sandy spit. The flock was represented by six different species, including two Roseate Terns (*Sterna dougallii*), which are listed as federally (U.S.) threatened.

Terrestrial birds, such as the scaly-naped pigeon (*Columba squamosa*), and zenaida dove (*Zenaida aurita*), were nesting everywhere on the island. The yellow warblers were also plentiful, especially the juveniles.

Noteworthy during the first annual trip in February was the sighting of five Red-billed Tropicbirds (*Phaethon arthereus*) along the northeast rock cliffs. Although we did not observe any activity on following trips, our records show that this species frequently uses this site as a staging area and for shelter and nesting.

Since January 2007, we observed 21 different species of birds on or flying around the island (Table 2). Included for the first time on record was the Yellow-crowned night-heron (*Nyctanassa violacea*) (see Photo 2 by JP Bacle). This individual heron was foraging the intertidal pools along the northwest shore. The sighting becomes a new entry to our on-going **Bird Count Records** dating back to January of 1970, and extends the total number of species to 50.

Table 2. Bird observations at Sandy Cay.

Species	2/19/07	4/28/07	6/23/07	6/24/07
Red-billed Tropicbird	5			
Magnificent Frigatebird	2	1	2	2
Brown Pelican	3	8	4	3
Brown Booby	2		2	1
Laughing Gull		6	22*	18*
Royal Tern				1
Least Tern				2
Sandwich Tern			1	6
Roseate Tern				2
Sooty Tern			30	34
Yellow-crowned night- heron				1
Semipalmated Plover		2		
American Oystercatcher			3	1
White-cheeked Pintail		6	3	4
Scaly-napped Pigeon		16*	54*	48*
Common Ground Dove			2	
Zenaida Dove		10	26*	27*
Green-throated Carib		6	4	3
Gray Kingbird	2	1	1	5
Yellow Warbler	15	28*	22*	18*
Bananaquit	17	22*	18*	24*
* *nesting activity*				

VISITATION

Sandy Cay remains a popular destination for recreational users as indicated by the figures presented in Table 3. It is important to note that this data reflects a snap shot in time, when visitation is most active, (i.e., between 10 am and 2 pm). Fifteen to twenty boats is usually the limit at any point in time, given the limited space for anchorage. **A more systematic boat survey should be undertaken in the near future, particularly as it may affect the number of mooring buoys proposed for this area currently used as anchorage**.

During the weekend of June 23-24, few people were walking the trail, evidently due to the ever-present sand flies and mosquitoes.

Table 3. Visitation at Sandy Cay on selected days, 2007.

	2/19/07	4/14/07*	4/28/07	6/23/07	6/24/07
Anchored boats	15	9	9	7	8
Persons on the beach	31	63	31	19	12
Persons on the trail	30+	32	17	6	8

* The figures for April 14, 2007, record the observations of the caretaker, David Blyden.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Vegetation on Sandy Cay continues to show signs of healthy growth due primarily to regular rains and limited destructive storms. During the June 2007 trip, many species with blooming flowers were observed, for example: ground plants such as spider lily (*Hymenocallis caribaea*) (see photo 3) and Sea purslane (*Sesuvium portulacastrum*); trees such as frangipani (*Plumeria alba),* Seagrape *(Coccoloba uvifera)*, and Loblolly (*Pisonia subcordata*); and shrubs such as sage (*Lantana involucrate)* and Joe wood (*Jacquinia aborea*).

Blocking access to the vista clearance caused by a visiting film crew a few years ago remains an issue. Although vegetation has slowly recovered since then, trail hikers can easily gain access to the cliff edge for the panoramic view. This area is very sensitive as tropicbirds usually nest along this cliff edge. Furthermore, the only stands of tree cactuses (*Opuntia rubescens*) found on this island are confined to this area (see Photo 4). **To further protect this sensitive area, we recommend that the access be fenced off until natural vegetation completely recovers**.

Coconuts continue to be harvested on a regular basis. During the June trip, a few climbing ropes were noted, left dangling from the base of the fronds where the coconuts are usually clustered. This customary local practice will remain difficult to control.

During the first six months of 2007, evidence of shoreline erosion was significantly less than in previous years. In fact, during June, we were pleasantly surprised to see that the western beach in general has experienced some substantial accretion, especially in elevation. The presence of a minimal number of tropical storms in the last year is certainly a contributing factor.

Photo 1. Camp site on Sandy Cay during June 23-24, 2007 field trip.

Photo 2. Yellow-crowned night heron foraging along inter-tidal pools.

Photo 3. Spider lily flowering throughout the island.

Photo 4. Tree cactus along the northeast ridge, Jost Van Dyke in the background.