

TRIBUTE TO AUDREY DOWNER 1918-2007

By Catherine Levy

On January 6, 2008 a notice appeared in a daily newspaper announcing the passing of Audrey Constance Downer who had died on Dec. 21st 2007.

This very quiet demise is so typical of Audrey whose most noticeable trait was her shyness. Few people knew this, and perhaps fewer still of the members of BirdLife Jamaica knew her well.

Audrey moved with the family to Montego Bay in 1957 where she became very conscious of the bird life around her home on Mango Walk - in her own words – “when we went to live in Montego Bay in 1957 our house was the last on the road and we had lots of birds around that I had never seen or heard before.”ⁱ

INITIATION INTO BIRD STUDIES 1960-1968

While she was living there, Audrey made contact with Lisa Salmon who lived near Reading, St. James. She had many good and interesting memories of going birding with Lisa who was then active in bird-watching and in writing on nature for the daily newspaper. From early, Lisa Salmon was expressing ideas on conservation that were far in advance of the times.

Audrey's hand-written notes continue to describe how her attraction to birds began:

“... I started to put out seed and water in March 1960 hoping to attract saffron finches, grassquits, and to my amazement got a flock of indigo buntings.

[This] is a small sparrow like bird, which is brown in autumn in both sexes but the males molt into beautiful blue plumage in spring before migrating back to the eastern USA where they breed. . .

Just about this time the Gosse Bird Club was started and I wrote a description of my experiences. This came to the attention of a Professor at University of Florida who asked me to undertake a study of this bird with him. He was interested primarily in fat deposition. . . .

Another point of interest that came out of our study was the high incidence of return. This was the most thrilling part of the study.”

The person who contacted Audrey about the Indigo Bunting study was Professor David W. Johnston, then at the University of Florida, Gainesville.ⁱⁱ It would appear that permission to trap and band the Indigo Buntings must have come through Professor Johnston's U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service permit,ⁱⁱⁱ while the cost of nets and banding equipment may have been part of his research funding.

This work resulted in an article co-authored with Professor Johnston: DAVID W. JOHNSTON and AUDREY C. DOWNER. **MIGRATORY FEATURES OF THE INDIGO BUNTING IN JAMAICA AND FLORIDA** (Journal of Field Ornithology: Vol. 39, No. 4, October, 1968); and a note in Journal of Field Ornithology, Vol. 43, No. 4, October, 1972 (see text box).

At one time, Audrey mentioned that he also taught her to prepare specimens of skins, whether or not he also taught her to prepare mounted specimens is unknown.

This introduces another talent that Audrey had – she was extremely practical and adept with tools to the point where she herself constructed the stands for mounted specimens, and even made a parabola. She

Longevity records of Indigo Buntings wintering in Jamaica.--

-I started banding Indigo Buntings (*Passerina cyanea*) in my garden in Montego Bay, Jamaica in the spring of 1964. During that spring 172 birds were banded with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bands. All returns caught the following spring as well as all birds banded in subsequent years were also color-banded for individual recognition. Of the birds caught in 1964, two males first banded 24 February and 9 March have returned each year (one "missed" 1968) until 1971. Usually these birds arrived at my feeder in mid-February and remained until mid-April. They were last seen on 18 April 1971 when I left home, and they were not there on my return on the 28th. The house was unoccupied between 4 March and May in 1972 and, although food was provided, the caretaker advised that no Indigo Buntings had visited the feeder this year. When last seen, therefore, these two birds were each at least eight years old and had made at least eight round-trip flights from North America to my feeding station in Montego Bay.--Audrey C. Downer, 1 Oakridge, Kingston, Jamaica. Received 10 August 1972, accepted 28 August 1972.

- Journal of Field Ornithology, Vol. 43, No. 4, October, 1972.

prepared numerous bird skins and mounted specimens (including a mongoose) and presented many to the Institute of Jamaica's Natural History Division where they are still often on display.

THE GOSSE BIRD CLUB 1968-1989

Audrey's name has been associated with the Gosse Bird Club for so many years that many persons presumed she was a founding member. Before I mention Audrey's participation, let me set the context of the founding of the club. This is gathered from informal conversations with Anna Black prior to her departure from Jamaica and evidence from Audrey's notes, among other things.

In the mid-1950s May Jeffrey-Smith issued an invitation to interested persons to come together and form a club;^{iv} finally there was some success, as seen in the editorial of the first Broadsheet (August 1963) – "It would undoubtedly be very valuable if members could meet one another at regular intervals to exchange ideas and share experiences, but up to the present this has not proven practicable. We hope, therefore, that these Broadsheets will go far towards filling this lack and keeping our members throughout the island in closer touch."^v The Editors of this issue were Mrs. Clinton (Anna) Black, Mrs Kingsley (Helen) du Mont and Mrs. Herbert (Phoebe) Hart.

There appear to be no written records of informal meetings between these and other bird-watchers, but Anna Black recalled visiting the Jeffrey-Smith sisters in Spanish Town where observations were exchanged. Audrey was not a member of the club at this time, although she submitted an article describing her experiences of the Indigo Bunting study.

In the third issue (August 1964) a list of the subscribers to the Broadsheet was included and her name appears out of alphabetical order, it is the last on the list, presumably she had recently joined.^{vi}

What would Audrey have consulted to identify the birds she saw in her Montego Bay garden? The first issue of the Broadsheet mentions "Bird Guides for Jamaica"^{vii}. These are: Gosse's Birds of Jamaica^{viii} and the Illustrations to the Birds of Jamaica^{ix} (both long out of print). Introduction to the Birds of Jamaica by Lady Taylor^x published in 1955; Birds of the West Indies by James Bond, 1960^{xi}; A Field Guide to the Birds by Roger Tory Peterson, 1947^{xii} (for migrant species); and "as a valuable companion volume" Bird-watching in Jamaica by May Jeffrey-Smith, 1956.^{xiii}

The Downers apparently returned to live in Kingston in 1967 or 1968, and in issue no. 10, March 1968 Audrey's name appeared for the first time as co-editor with Mrs. Pam Smith. Thereafter, for 27 of the next 40 issues, her name appears as co-editor or editor.

Some of the Broadsheets indicate fluctuation in numbers of personal members over the years. Before 1989 there was no formal structure to the club, someone undertook to collect observations from members and this information was the meat of the Broadsheet. By agreement, the material would be typed up, mimeographed, collated and distributed.

B/S	YEAR	MTH	TOTAL
3	1964	AUG	104
5	1965	AUG	140
6	1966	MAR	90
31	1978	SEPT	123
42	1984	MAR	91
54	1990	MAR	97

Many members contributed time to these tasks over the years, but from 1976 to 1988, it is obvious that Audrey became more and more prominent as editor - one reason may be that the 1970s was a time of social turbulence with a number of active members leaving the island. Not only was assistance with the publication somewhat depleted, but the unsettled period made field excursions by a few persons a risky undertaking. But Audrey was fearless, and with even one female companion she would venture out undeterred.

BIRD-BANDING

The Broadsheet no. 2, Feb. 1964 (pg.4) tells of the origins of bird-banding on the island. At that time a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (to band migrant birds) was held by the Institute of Jamaica's Natural History Division^{xiv}. Thereafter activity was sporadic until a report appeared in No. 23, September 1974 (pg.2) which recounts that only local birds were being banded with Robert Sutton in charge of the project (at Audrey's urging). Again, she came to the rescue as it is known that Anna Black and herself were persuaded to attend an ornithology meeting in the U.S. where they lobbied for the Gosse Bird Club to be given a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permit to band migrant birds. This was successful

and was reported triumphantly in 1975.^{xv} Since then various projects were undertaken – some by visiting researchers, some by Robert Sutton and others. In 1987 Audrey felt an additional need to record plumage colours and molt information so banding (which proved most useful for her projected book) took place every two months from July 1987 to June 1988 in the Blue Mountains beyond Newcastle. This effort came to an end after the passage of hurricane Gilbert in September 1988 when the field station house was destroyed.

THE BIRDS OF JAMAICA, A PHOTOGRAPHIC FIELD GUIDE

Audrey's involvement with the Gosse Bird Club brought other benefits, visiting researchers and bird-watchers often called on her for assistance and advice. In turn she acquired publications, information and perspective on life history of Jamaican birds. This was all stored up to be used over the busy period up to 1990 as she was working (with her cousin Robert Sutton) on a publication, so she was constantly checking and re-checking species, banding notes, locations for good photographs, research papers, publications, etc. Although hurricane Gilbert interfered somewhat with the work (the area in which Audrey lived was without electricity from September to December 1988), it was also the time when few personal computers were available here. Audrey was mechanically inclined and she took like a duck to water to these "new" machines, using one to edit and design exactly how she wanted the book to appear. The Birds of Jamaica, a photographic field-guide was launched in 1990.

The favourable review of the book in the Journal of Field Ornithology in 1992 mentions "the authors' lofty goals ... that through this book people will become more aware and appreciate Jamaica's birds, that they will carry out the research that is needed, take action to protect species that are being affected by hunting and habitat destruction, help others to know and understand them, and simply enjoy a hobby that can last a lifetime, and add a new dimension to travel to foreign countries."^{xvi}

THE GOSSE BIRD CLUB 1990-2003

In 1988 hurricane Gilbert crossed the island from southeast to northwest. There were few locations on the island left untouched by the destruction of this powerful storm. So it was that the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP – forerunner of BirdLife International) became concerned about a number of endemic birds already considered at risk and they commissioned a study to discover what effect the storm had had on these species. At the end of his study, Nigel Varty met with a few active members of the Gosse Bird Club at Audrey's home in Stony Hill. There he encouraged the group to structure the club in a formal manner so that funding for necessary work could be accessed.

Although most persons present agreed with the idea, Audrey expressed doubt as she had little faith in committees, it was perhaps a natural reaction - one should not try to fix something that was working. On the other hand, little field-work was being carried out and records of Jamaican birds were basically restricted to occasional observations. Out of this meeting arose the effort to construct a non-governmental organisation, and in 1989, members agreed to formalize a constitution and elect officers. At the inaugural meeting in November 1989, Audrey Downer and Lisa Salmon were made Honorary Members and Audrey accepted the post of first elected President of the Gosse Bird Club.

She remained on the Executive Committee until 1995 in one role or another – always careful with expenses, always offering advice or willing to go on field-trips, and to give slide presentations – at the time the main method of education. Her interest was not in conservation - in reality, her main preoccupation was species. As the Gosse Bird Club re-directed its emphasis somewhat, she gradually withdrew from participation but continued her own work editing of the second edition of Birds of Jamaica, her notes on molt and plumages, and she also continued to assist with banding at Marshall's Pen.

If asked to mention outstanding traits of Audrey, my impressions remain – a lover of nature in a practical, no-nonsense, unemotional manner; adept with her hands (banding, preparation of specimens), a great note-taker, and familiar with tools – she made stands for mounted specimens, often gathering driftwood on field trips; a good and very fast driver willing to go anywhere at anytime birds could be observed. She kept remarkably good health and was almost unstoppable - even after falling a short distance in the mountains and hitting her head on a stone – she kept on banding; on a field trip to a mangrove

swamp, she tripped and sat down abruptly, but the camera and binoculars around her neck were saved from the mud, held high in her hands.

Thus Audrey's sterling contribution to the Gosse Bird Club lasted for 35 years from 1968 to 2003, when her last note appeared in *The Broadsheet*, "Diary of nesting and behaviour"^{xvii}.

AWARDS

Audrey was presented with the Institute of Jamaica's Centenary Medal in 1979 for her contributions to natural science, and the Jamaica Scientists and Technologist's award for contributions to Ornithology 1991.

ⁱ Handwritten notes made by Audrey Downer.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/resshow/perry/bios/JohnstonDavid.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ At this time, no Jamaican was banding on the island. Probably the first person to band birds in Jamaica was C.H. Blake, a U.S. citizen.

^{iv} Taken from a mimeographed invitation found and retained in the files of BirdLife Jamaica.

^v Gosse Bird Club. *The Broadsheet*. No.1, August 1963, p.1.

^{vi} Gosse Bird Club. *The Broadsheet*. No.3, August 1964, p.23

^{vii} Gosse Bird Club. *The Broadsheet*. No.1, August 1963, p.2.

^{viii} Gosse, Philip Henry. 1847. *Birds of Jamaica*. Assisted by Richard Hill, of Spanish-Town. John Van Voorst, London.

^{ix} Gosse, Philip Henry. 1849. *Illustrations of the birds of Jamaica*. John Van Voorst, London.

^x Taylor, Lady. 1955. *Introduction to the birds of Jamaica*. Macmillan, London.

^{xi} Bond, James. 1960. *Birds of the West Indies*. Collins, London.

^{xii} Peterson, Roger Tory. 1947. *A field guide to the birds*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

^{xiii} Jeffrey-Smith, May. 1956. *Bird-watching in Jamaica*. Pioneer Press, Kingston.

^{xiv} Even today, there is no procedure for ensuring expertise of local banders, though permission must be sought for any project from the government's NRCA.

^{xv} Gosse Bird Club. *The Broadsheet*. No. 24, March 1975. Pg. 2.

^{xvi} Jacobson, Susan K. 1992. [Review]. *J. Field Ornithol.*, vol.63 no. 1, pp.102-103

^{xvii} Gosse Bird Club. *The Broadsheet*. Nos. 80/81, March & September. 2003, p.10.