

## VOLUME 22, NO. 1 Spring 2004

### Changing Island Attitudes

How one BCI member creates a commitment to conservation

Elaine Acker

Lois Blumenthal strolls casually into the Cayman Islands Northward Prison workshop. Inmates greet her with a pleasant island lilt, “Good morning, Bat Lady.” Today, they are building houses for bats, and while they sometimes seem a bit amused at the idea, they are eager to help this enthusiastic woman who is changing island attitudes. Blumenthal arrived on Grand Cayman, a British territory 480 miles (770 kilometers) south of Miami, in 1990, when her husband Jim retired. They packed up their two children, Janice and David (then 11 and 7), and turned their favorite vacation destination into their permanent home. A member of Bat Conservation Inter-national, she volunteers as BCI’s Carib-bean Coor-dinator for Bat Conservation.

Her commitment to bats and BCI be-gan a decade ago. She homeschooled her children and discovered the sad plight of Cayman Islands’ bats during science studies. “A pest-control company had a float in the Pirate’s Week Parade featuring rats, roaches and bats,” she recalls. “We didn’t know much about bats but thought they didn’t be-long in the same category as non-native pests. We wrote for information from BCI. When the materials came and we read that bats have only one young per year and how important they are to eco-systems, we realized that this single pest-control company could do enormous damage.” Blumenthal requested a BCI slide show and launched her first public-education campaign. Efforts to contact the pest-control company were met with hostility. “Here in the Cayman Islands, bats form colonies under people’s roofs, and this can be a serious nuisance,” she says. “When I first began working to conserve bats, they were all called ‘rat-bats,’ pest-control companies were poisoning them, and the Cayman Islands Health Depart-ment was erroneously advising that bats be killed because of ‘disease.’ People were either living with the odors of bats or using drastic and usually ineffective me-thods to try to remove them.”

Things have changed since Blu-men-thal began working for bats. Now islanders usually call her first if they have a bat problem. Pest-control agencies use hu-mane ex-clusion methods with one-way valves that let bats leave but block their return, and bats are not excluded during the summer birthing season. Blumenthal has created a *Bats Study Guide* for the Cayman Islands and gotten bat-educational materials in all island schools. The media portray bats in a positive light, and most residents appreciate the ecological benefits of bats.

“The whole family has helped with bat counts, answered hundreds of phone calls, loaded and transported heavy bat houses and been very supportive in every way,” she says. Her kids once climbed into sweltering roof spaces, dripping sweat while roaches ran up their legs, to rescue a group of exceptionally stubborn bats that refused to use the exclusion device. “Only once, when David was 14 and I planned to sell bags of guano at the Agricultural Fair, did he beg me, ‘Mom, please don’t make me be the kid whose mom is selling bat poo at the fair.’ I had to honor this request, although now that he is grown and beyond the reach of peer pressure, I’m planning to sell bags of guano at the next fair in March.”



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Blumenthal's schedule rivals that of any full-time executive. On a typical day, she rises early to call a local hardware store to schedule a delivery of bat-house materials to the prison. By mid-morning, she's presenting an educational program at an elementary school. At noon, she meets with a homeowner who's concerned about bats living in her roof. Then she dashes off to meet the staff of Caribbean Utilities Company Ltd. (CUC) – one of her most active partners.

Her efforts to install bat houses for excluded bats really took off when CUC agreed to donate and install utility poles for the houses. "CUC recognizes the importance of the bat-conservation program to the fragile island ecosystem," says CUC Vice President Lee Tinney. "Our participation in this program is one way that CUC can make a valuable contribution to the community."

A creative carpenter, Ron Moser, designed a way to build two bat houses into a single unit with a cavity in the center for the utility pole. Each pair of houses fits on top of its pole like a hat, held securely in place with a single, large bolt through the landing pads. More than 40 of these houses are now installed on the island, and velvety free-tailed bats (*Myotis molossus*) inhabit almost all of them.

"BCI has been there for me at every turn since the very beginning," says Blumenthal. "I'm not a scientist, just an ordinary person, and yet I was encouraged and helped along at every step of the way. BCI sent my first slide show at no charge and funded Annie Band, a wildlife biologist who came here and conducted extensive research to help us identify our island species and understand what they need to survive. BCI also provided a Global Grass-roots Conservation Fund grant of \$500 that I stretched even further by spending it on educational supplies from BCI's catalog. The National Trust for the Cayman Islands, a partner in many wildlife conservation initiatives, also received materials from this grant."

While the news is mostly good from Cayman, Blumenthal worries about bats on other islands. "Though Caribbean islands share similar ecosystems and species," she says, "communication among them is not easy. Travel to another island usually involves changing planes in the United States." So she founded an Internet forum ([Caribbean-bats@yahoogroups.com](mailto:Caribbean-bats@yahoogroups.com)) that lets over 50 members around the Caribbean communicate instantly, ask questions and share ideas and resources.

Island environments highlight the challenges facing bats and other wildlife worldwide. Here the land is clearly finite, and almost all impacts are magnified. Grand Cayman, largest of the three Cayman Islands, is a limestone outcropping just 22 miles (35.4 kilometers) long and 8 miles (12.8 kilometers) across at its widest point. When non-native species threaten wildlife or companies plan to dredge sensitive estuaries, there is no doubt of the consequences.

"Our bat-conservation program here became a model for the Caribbean," Blumenthal says. "The challenge now is to make it clear that bat houses are not the entire answer. We have other species of bats here that are cave dwellers or that live in dense vegetation. Saving habitat for these bats is my biggest challenge today – especially in the Lower Valley Forest."

This small, beautiful forest is home to five rare bats, including the white-shouldered or fig-eating bat (*Phyllops falcatus*), a species shared only with Cuba and Haiti. It had not been seen in Cayman since 1932 – until BCI member Annie Band visited Blumenthal and discovered a colony surviving there. "This little bat is entirely dependent on a few patches

of ancient *Ficus* forest – and this is imminently threatened by development,” Blumenthal says. “These bats are slow, clumsy fliers that don’t like to go out across cleared land. They don’t fly high and fast like the free tails, so they are essentially marooned in their tiny remaining habitats.”

The Lower Valley Forest is also home to cave systems used by Waterhouse’s leaf-nosed bats (*Macrotus waterhousii*), the Grand Cayman subspecies of big brown bats (*Eptesicus fuscus*), buffy flower bats (*Erophylla sezikorni*) and some Mexican free-tailed bats (*Tadarida brasiliensis*). The forest and cave systems are dominated by large *Ficus* trees, a critical food source for bats, birds and other wildlife because they produce fruit year round.

“My job now is to save the forest and cave habitats,” she says. “The land in the Lower Valley Forest is valued at millions of dollars, so we’ll need to find a large donor who wants to save a rare ecosystem, including these extremely rare bats, before this land is hopelessly subdivided and cleared for housing.”

Enthusiasm and persistence can make the impossible possible, and Blumenthal has both in abundance, whether the task is saving a threatened forest, changing pest-control attitudes or convincing power companies and prisoners to create innovative solutions for bats. Back at Northward Prison, she unveils a cake and cookies to express her gratitude for the inmates’ hard work. She gives them a broad, approving smile and a quick good-bye. Then she’s off to tell another islander about the benefits of bats.

ELAINE ACKER is Associate Executive Director of BCI. Lois Blumenthal credits many companies and individuals for the bat-conservation successes on Grand Cayman. Among them: Bat Conservation International, Caribbean Utilities Company Ltd., Cayman Islands Department of Environment, Cayman Islands Department of Public Works, Cayman Islands Lion’s Club, Blanford Dixon, John Gray Recyclers, Ron Moser, National Trust for the Cayman Islands, Northward Prison (Frank Marshall, Assistant Director), Peter Pasold, Alan Patino and photographer Courtney Platt ([www.courtneyplatt.com](http://www.courtneyplatt.com)). Joan Kelleher’s donation to BCI made many of these achievements possible, including Annie Band’s work with Lois Blumenthal in researching the island’s bat species and making critical conservation recommendations that have since been implemented. If you’d like to help support BCI’s Global Grassroots Conservation Fund, which makes vital bat-conservation efforts like those of Lois Blumenthal possible around the world, please contact [development@batcon.org](mailto:development@batcon.org) or (512) 327-9721.

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