

CAYMAN ISLANDS

WILDLIFE EXPLORERS GUIDE

Visas

UK citizens do not require a visa to visit the Cayman Islands, but they do need a passport that is valid for at least 90 days after you leave (and a minimum of six months is recommended). For more information visit www.immigration.gov.ky

Getting there

The main passenger airport of the Cayman Islands is Owen Roberts International Airport, close to George Town, on Grand Cayman.

British Airways flies direct to Grand Cayman (GCM) from London Heathrow four times a week.

Money

The currency is the Cayman Islands dollar and it is permanently fixed to the US dollar – CI\$1 = US\$1.25. You can pay with US dollars anywhere, but you'll get your change in CI dollars.

Health

There are good medical facilities on the Cayman Islands, but all visitors should have comprehensive travel insurance.

Malaria is not a problem, and no vaccinations are required, but it's recommended that all visitors have had Hepatitis A and MMR and are up-to-date with their Tetanus-diphtheria inoculation.

More information at: The National Travel Health Network and Centre www.nathnac.org

When to go

Between December and April, temperatures and humidity are lowest and most pleasant.

July and August can experience temperatures rising to an average of more than 28°C.

There can be frequent afternoon showers between May and October.

UK Tour Operators

Many UK tour operators offer package trips to the Cayman Islands. A full list can be found at www.caymanislands.co.uk.

Useful organisations

Cayman Islands Department of Tourism www.caymanislands.co.uk. In the UK, phone 020 7491 7771.

The National Trust for the Cayman Islands is a non-profit, statutory body with a mission to preserve natural environments and places of historic significance.

It owns and manages a number of important nature reserves, including the Mastic Reserve and Trail and Salina Reserve on Grand Cayman, the Booby Pond Nature Reserve on Little Cayman, the Brac Parrot Reserve on Cayman Brac.

www.nationaltrust.org.ky

www.naturecayman.com is a website guide to the ecology and wildlife of Cayman Brac and Little Cayman.

www.caymanwildlife.org is a comprehensive guide to wildlife on all three islands.

Further reading

Caribbean Islands travel guide (Lonely Planet, ISBN 9781741794540) costs £16.99. You can download the chapter on the Cayman Islands for £2.99.

www.lonelyplanet.com

The Bradt travel guide to the Cayman Islands, by Tricia Hayne (Bradt, ISBN: 9781841622149)

www.bradtguides.com

The Rough Guide to the Caribbean, by Robert Coates (Rough Guides, ISBN 9781858288192)

www.roughguides.com

Cayman Islands: Diving & Snorkeling guide by Tim Rock.

Birds of the Cayman Islands by Patricia Bradley is a checklist of 222 species found on all three islands is available from the Natural History Book Service www.nhbs.com

Flora of the Cayman Islands, by George R Proctor

Butterflies of the Cayman Islands by RR Askew and Ann B Stafford, has details of all 57 species of butterfly recorded in the islands.

Threatened Plants of the Cayman Islands: The Red List, by Frederic J Burton, Royal Botanic Gardens Kew

Any information about The Cayman Islands can be obtained from:

The Cayman Islands Department of Tourism,
6 Arlington Street, London SW1A 1RE

Phone: + 44 (0) 20 7491 7771

Email: info-uk@caymanislands.ky



Everything you need to know to plan your wildlife adventure in the Cayman Islands

10 amazing things

you never knew about the Cayman Islands and its wildlife



one The Cayman Islands are part of a mountain range called the Cayman Ridge, which rises more than 7,500m – or the size of a very large mountain in the Himalayas – from the ocean floor. The abyss known as the Cayman Trench is very deep and home to the hottest hydrothermal vents in the world. These are cracks in the seabed from which super-heated water, up to 450°C, is emitted. Having said that, the highest point above sea level is actually near the east end of Cayman Brac – and that's just 46.6m.

two There are no rivers in the Cayman Islands. Because the islands are the peaks of a limestone mountain, and limestone is really porous, all the water just runs through it rather than off it. This lack of 'run-off' means that the visibility in the sea is exceptional and makes Cayman one of the world's top diving locations.

three There are many parrotfish in the Cayman Islands and what's interesting about parrotfish, apart from the fact that they can go from being male to being female and back again, is that they excrete sand. They munch on rock and coral, and it comes out as sand. Which is why there are so many great beaches in the islands.

four Cayman has its very own blue dragon, an iguana found nowhere else in the world which is incredibly rare and really is blue. It is estimated there were about a dozen of these amazing beasts remaining in 2002, making it 'Functionally Extinct' but thanks to an extensive breeding programme in Grand Cayman the blues are back in force. In 2012 over seven hundred were counted, taking the species off the IUCN Red List as 'Critically Endangered', they are now classified as 'Endangered' and are prevalent enough to be spotted, you can even walk right up to them. Find out more on pages 10-11.

five In the middle of North Sound on Grand Cayman, wild Southern stingrays gather in huge numbers at a place called 'Stingray City'. You can get in the water with them, and meet them personally, your boat captain will even be able to tell you some of their adopted 'names'.

six The Cayman Islands are home to three sea turtle species: the green, the loggerhead, and the hawksbill. Green and loggerhead turtles nest on beaches all around the Cayman Islands, including Seven Mile Beach. From May to September, female turtles crawl up onto the beach to lay eggs in the sand, and from July to November the eggs hatch. Each nest produces about 100 baby sea turtles! Hawksbill turtles can be seen in our waters while snorkelling or scuba diving. By the early 20th century, the Cayman turtle nesting population was nearly extinct, but due to conservation efforts, nesting numbers are now increasing each year.

seven The only native land mammals of the Cayman Islands are bats. Some of them only eat fruit such as wild almonds and some only eat insects such as moths, beetles and mosquitoes. There's also the buffy flower bat, which is only found in the Caribbean and drinks nectar from flowers like a hummingbird.

eight There are over 230 birds in the Cayman Islands. Little Cayman has the largest colony of red footed boobies in the Western Hemisphere. A close relative of the Atlantic gannet, these remarkable birds may fly up to 125km in a single day on a fishing trip, and then 125km back home again, and can be away for more than 12 hours.

nine The Grand Cayman pygmy blue *Brephidium exilis thompsoni* is a Grand Cayman endemic subspecies of butterfly, found nowhere else in the world. It was first discovered in 1938 and was not found again until 1985, when two colonies were located on the north and west coasts.

ten In a secret bay on Grand Cayman, one of only a dozen places worldwide, there exists the rare and magical phenomenon of bioluminescence. This extraordinary natural light show is caused by a high concentration of a particular species of plankton alongside red mangroves and minimal light movement in the sheltered water, resulting in a stunning bioluminescence light, best seen on very dark nights on a tour with Cayman Kayaks.

MarineLife

The average visitor to the Cayman Islands – indeed, the average person – may not have ‘swimming with stingrays’ on their bucket list, but they should. This name is misleading, and not only are these oval-shaped rays with a wingspan of up to 1.8m, gentle with people (if not threatened or stepped on), for fish they are also surprisingly enchanting. During the mid-1980s, a unique phenomenon called ‘Stingray City’ was born when the rays learned to gather in a particular spot in Grand Cayman’s North Sound to feed on scraps thrown overboard by fishermen.

Today, it’s a thriving tourist attraction, and for anyone with even a passing interest in nature, it’s not to be missed. You can go diving with the stingrays in 4m of water if you wish, but you can also join them in just 0.5m on the sandbar, and for this you’ll just need a mask and snorkel. You’ll find them completely approachable and loveable in a ‘Dr Who aliens meet excitable puppy-dogs’ sort-of-way. There really is nothing else like it on Earth. And whether you are snorkelling in the shallow waters of Point of Sand and round Owen Island on Little Cayman or just off the Carib Sands Beach Resort on Cayman Brac, you’ll find the experience is mostly the same – fish and other marine creatures that are clearly so absorbed in looking stunning or just plain weird that they don’t have time to run away from you. In the case of the queen conches, they really can’t run away from you.

If you’re looking for real adventure, then Bloody Bay Marine Park on Little Cayman is the place to be. Renowned as being one of the greatest dive sites in the world, here the ocean plunges vertically to a depth of 1,800m. If you’ve got a head for depths, then here you’ll find eagle rays, sharks and huge Nassau groupers. You’ll be amazed by the proliferation of coral down here, too. All over the world, coral is under threat from issues as diverse as disease, fishing, pollution and global warming, but at least on Little Cayman something is being done about this – founded in 1998, the Central Caribbean Marine Institute (CCMI) is researching the impacts of these threats and what can be done about them. CCMI scientists give talks and CCMI representatives welcome visitors for talks and site visits, so do get involved if you are in Little Cayman, as this can enrich your dive experiences around all three islands.

But as with much in the Cayman Islands, the real pleasure of the marine experience here is being able to fin lazily in warm shallow water watching a hawksbill turtle completely unfazed by your presence or a small shoal of reef squid moving like synchronised swimmers. Or it’s the plethora of angelfish, damselfish and snappers that take you back to a time when life on Earth didn’t seem so fragile.

Cayman is serious about protecting its wildlife and so Marine Parks, Replenishment Zones, Environmental Zones and Animal Sanctuaries have been set up all over the Islands to ensure that Cayman’s wildlife treasures will be in pristine condition for generations of visitors to enjoy. Find out more on pages 15.

■ Southern stingrays at Stingray City



Peter Hillenbrand is a professional diver and chairman of the Central Caribbean Marine Institute (CCMI) and owns the Southern Cross Club Fish and Dive Resort on Little Cayman.

When did you first visit the Cayman Islands?

In 1973, when I was 11 years old. I visited, and fell in love with, Little Cayman in 1981, and I have lived on there since 1995.

What is your first wildlife memory?

Taking a live copperhead snake I had caught to ‘Show and tell’ when I was six.

How did you become interested in marine wildlife?

I inherited my passion for diving from my father, and he had me diving in lakes in Indiana when I was just eight.

What is your favourite Cayman Island species?

If I had to pick one, it would be the juvenile spotted drum [a small fish]. No other creature can make black and white look so beautiful and delicate.



What is your favourite place in the Cayman Islands?

Any dive within Bloody Bay Marine Park on Little Cayman.

Southernstingray

■ **Looks like...** A large, diamond-shaped flat fish that can be up to 1.8m wide from one ‘wing’ tip to the other. It has a long barbed tail and is olive-brown in colour, though the underside is completely white.

■ **Eats...** Shellfish, crustaceans and small fish, which they hunt by disturbing them from the sandy seabed.

■ **Can be seen at...** Stingray City and Stingray Sandbar in North Sound on Grand Cayman.

■ **Did you know...** Female southern stingrays grow to more than twice the size of males – while females may grow up to 1.8m, males can only manage 0.75m.

Queenconch

■ **Looks like...** The shellfish equivalent of Triceratops, with a spiky large shell that can grow up to 30cm long. It can weigh more than 2kg.

■ **Eats...** Algae and detritus on the seabed.

■ **Can be seen at...** Almost anywhere where there are shallow waters with a sandy seabed and seagrass, or

among coral reefs. Point of Sand and Owen Island, on Little Cayman, are excellent places to start.

■ **Did you know...** A queen conch lives on average for between 20 and 30 years, but can live to be up to 40. And when carrying oxygen, this mollusc’s blood appears to be blue, not red!

Information Centre

For more information about Stingray City and the many operators offering tours: www.caymanislands.co.uk and www.discovercayman.co.uk

Many outfits will take you snorkelling, too. There’s good snorkelling off Seven Mile Beach on Grand Cayman, and other popular spots on that island include Cemetery Beach, Smith Cove, Eden Rock and Devil’s Grotto.

The Central Caribbean Marine Institute (CCMI) offers various courses, talks and information sessions for visitors of all ages. www.reefresearch.org

At the time of print the Marine Parks were under extensive review. For more information on Marine Parks: The Cayman Islands Department of Environment www.doe.com email doe@gov.ky

Lionfish are an invasive species in the Cayman Islands and eat unsustainable numbers of young reef fish. Some dive operators offer ‘lionfish safaris’ in which you can join a spearfishing expedition. More info: www.ambassadordivers.com, www.oceanfrontiers.com or www.divetech.com

■ Marine research at CCMI



■ Diverse coral life



■ Queen Conch



BirdLife



■ Frigatebird

As well as being famous for the rum punch and steel bands, the Caribbean is surely the area of the world most closely identified with ‘pirates’ – at least, if you go back 400 years or so. But the Cayman Islands still have their own pirates, and you can watch them every day at the National Trust Booby Pond Nature Reserve on Little Cayman.

Arrive here an hour or so before sunset and look for the red-footed boobies – diving seabirds closely related to gannets – returning from their day’s fishing. Most of them have dark-brown plumage (though some are snowy-white with brown wingtips), but they all have one thing in common: their blood-red feet and dagger-shaped bills.

Now look for the much larger magnificent frigatebirds, iridescent-black beasts with a huge 2m wingspan. Like old-fashioned pirates or modern-day muggers, they try to force the boobies to regurgitate their meals – known as ‘kleptoparasitism’, in the business – and the aerial ‘dogfights’ between the two species can be spectacular.

Strangely, once the boobies have landed on their roosting tree, they’re safe, as if there is a commonly agreed ‘no fly zone’.

There’s plenty of other birdlife here, including egrets and herons stalking for fish in the shallows, but it’s the antics of the boobies and the frigatebirds that make this a must-visit location for any visitor to Little Cayman.

There are more boobies on Cayman Brac. These are brown boobies – smart, chocolate-brown birds with striking yellow-pink bills and pure-white under bellies – and they nest at the east end of the island. The aerial antics of the juveniles learning how to fly are remarkable.

Also on ‘the Brac’ is a quite different bird: the Cayman Brac parrot. In the dry forest reserve in the middle of the island, listen out for these birds’ raucous squabbling and peer into the upper reaches of the canopy. You may only get fleeting glances, as there are probably less than 400 of this unique parrot left in the world.

Also much-loved, but considerably more common, are the tiny bananaquits, which can be seen just about anywhere. They have distinctive yellow breasts and will come and eat sugar and other tidbits from garden feeders.

Contrasting with the cheeky bananaquits are the West Indian whistling-ducks, elegant waterbirds with an upright stance. Though rare in the Caribbean these days, visitors can reliably see them at Bel Air pond just off South Sound Road.

In total, the Cayman Islands have a record of 246 different bird species, though only 50 of these – and all of the birds mentioned here – breed there. And all but six of the breeding birds are resident, so they can be seen at any time of year.

Of the rest, 90 are migrants, including such beauties as great and snowy egrets and great blue herons, while more than 80 are irregular or often accidental visitors. Because of Cayman’s position between North and South America 80% of the birds found there are migrants.

But because Cayman is relatively unexplored by birders, those who do take the trouble to look are more likely to find surprises. “They can expect the unexpected,” notes resident National Trust biologist Stuart Mailer.

■ Brac Parrot



■ Woodpecker



■ Bananaquit



■ Brown Booby



Patricia Bradley is Cayman’s foremost expert on the islands’ birds, and the author of two editions of ‘The Birds of the Cayman Islands and A Photographic Guide to Birds of the Cayman Islands with Yves-Jaques Rey-Millet

When did you first visit the Cayman Islands?

In 1982, and I have lived here ever since, apart from a break when my husband was Governor of the Turks and Caicos Islands.

What is your first wildlife memory?

Feeding ducks with my grandmother at a park near her home in Co Down, in Northern Ireland, where I was born.

How did you become interested in birds?

It became a passion when we lived in Malawi and Botswana for six years.



What’s your favourite bird of the Cayman Islands?

The Cuban bullfinch, which is only found on Grand Cayman and in Cuba. It is a very self-possessed bird: the males are andramatic black with a touch of white – while the females are drab olive-grey.

What is your favourite place in the Cayman Islands?

I have a favourite on each of the three islands, including Booby Pond on Little Cayman, where there is a 10,000-or-more red-footed booby rookery.

BracParrot

- **Looks like...** Medium-sized, green parrot with distinctive rosy-pink on the throat and cheeks, with white on its forehead and around its eyes.
 - **Eats...** Fruits and seeds of a wide variety of fruits, including cultivated mangos and papayas.
 - **Can be seen...** Only in the Brac Parrot Reserve on Cayman Brac,
- though you are more likely to hear one.
- **Did you know...** The Brac parrot also survived on Little Cayman well into the 20th century – until a hurricane hit the island in 1932. It’s thought that the hurricane destroyed too many trees, and the parrot was unable to cling on.

Red-footedbooby

- **Looks like...** A large brown or white seabird with a long, dagger-like, pale blue bill and bright red legs.
 - **Eats...** Fish – mainly flying fish or squid. They forage far out at sea and use spectacular ‘plunge-diving’ to seize their prey beneath the surface.
 - **Can be seen...** At the Booby Pond Nature Reserve on Little Cayman
- they return from their fishing expeditions towards the end of the day.
- **Did you know...** They’re nimble birds and can even catch flying fish in flight. And they often feed in association with predators such as tuna and dolphins, which herd shoals of fish to the surface.

Information Centre

To see the red-footed boobies coming into roost, go to the National Trust House at the Booby Pond Nature Reserve. There’s no charge. More info email: naturecayman@gov.ky

For birding tours on Grand Cayman, contact the National Trust’s Stuart Mailer smailer@nationaltrust.org.ky www.nationaltrust.org.ky

See also www.caymanwildlife.org

The Cayman Brac Parrot Reserve is also free and you can visit it on your own or with a free guide. More info www.naturecayman.com or email naturecayman@gov.ky

ReptileLife

There be dragons in the Cayman Islands – and not just any old dragons, but bright blue ones up to 1.5m long with dandyish crests running the length of their backs and tails. OK, these dragons can't fly, and they appear to spend the bulk of their time skulking in the shade rather than breathing fire and guarding treasure troves...

...but then this is real life, not a fairy tale, even though the story of how the blue iguana was rescued from the brink of extinction might read like one. Once down to around a dozen known wild animals, this extraordinary reptile was just about to join the dodos until a young British scientist called Fred Burton stepped in.

Over a period of three decades, Fred has worked tirelessly to protect the blue iguanas and breed them in captivity. And though it is still incredibly rare, it is at least safe from extinction.

What's more, you can see blue iguanas very easily. No need to go rampaging through the bush, although you can also do that if you'd like to, a quiet stroll round the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park on Grand Cayman will get you as close as you could wish. Even better, you can get the inside story of how they were saved by joining a tour of the breeding facilities.

Blue iguanas aren't the only large reptiles of the Cayman Islands: on Little Cayman, a subspecies of the Cuban Rock iguana flourishes, and is as approachable as its blue cousin.

Going down in size from the iguanas, you'll find a variety of other terrestrial reptiles. Most spectacular of these is the blue-throated anole, a small lizard no more than 7cm long, but with a whip-like tail nearly three times that. Males colour range can be bright turquoise or even green and have a stunning pattern of white spots that make them look as if they are mimicking the Caribbean night sky.

They are arboreal, and despite their vivid colouring, they can be hard to spot, but a good place to look for them is the Mastic Trail on Grand Cayman.

There are various species of snake, too (relax, none are poisonous), and of course, turtles – the huge numbers of which prompted Columbus originally to call these islands Las Tortugas. Green and loggerhead turtles nest on beaches all around islands and hawksbill turtles can be seen in our waters while snorkelling or scuba diving. For more see point 6 of our 10 Amazing things on page 4.

■ Blue iguana



Fred Burton runs the Blue Iguana Recovery Program at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park and which has saved this endemic reptile from going extinct.

When did you first visit the Cayman Islands?

I moved here in 1979, from England where I was born, and I've stayed here ever since.

What is your first wildlife memory?

Searching for insects and other wildlife in the Kuwaiti desert, where I spent my early childhood.

How did you become interested in reptiles?

In Kuwait, monitor lizards and snakes were interesting enough and hard enough to find for them to become quite a childhood obsession for me.

What is your favourite Cayman Island reptile?

The blue iguana. It is such an improbably spectacular and magnificent creature, and it epitomises the wonderful biological uniqueness and diversity you find on tropical islands.

What is your favourite place in the Cayman Islands?

The eastern flanks of the Mastic Forest on Grand Cayman, where humidity from a nearby wetland fuels an explosion of orchids and bromeliads.

Blue iguana

- **Looks like...** A large, blue-grey lizard with a crest running down almost the entire length of its back and tail. Turns vivid azure blue during the breeding season
- **Eats...** Mostly plants, though will also take fruits, fungi and even crabs when they are available.
- **Can be seen...** In the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park on Grand Cayman. Though recently reintroduced to Salina Nature Reserve on the east side of the island, they can't be seen here.
- **Did you know...** In 2002, a survey estimated there were around a dozen blue iguanas anywhere on the island – it was one of the rarest reptiles on Earth.

Blue-throated anole

- **Looks like...** A small blue, turquoise or green lizard with spots on its back. They can also change colour to dark brown, beige or pale grey. And males can puff out their throats, too.
- **Eats...** Insects such as grasshoppers or crickets.
- **Can be seen...** Anywhere on Grand Cayman where there are trees or shrubs providing cover and habitat.
- **Did you know...** Grand Cayman's blue anole is most closely related to the blue anole of Jamaica. It is believed to have arrived on Grand Cayman 2 to 3 million years ago, but how it got there is anybody's guess.



■ Little Cayman rock iguana



■ Pygmy boa



■ Green anole



Information Centre

Take a blue iguana safari by turning up at the QEII Botanic Park Monday to Friday at 11am. The 'safari' includes a tour of the captive-breeding facility and a gentle stroll round the park. More info www.blueiguana.ky

On Little Cayman, Mike Vallee of Pirates Point offers tours to see the Cuban rock iguanas. They start at 4pm every Friday

at the museum. Ask at your resort for more information.

There is a good chance of seeing blue-throated anoles and other reptiles on tours of the Mastic Trail with Ann Stafford. Email caymannature@candw.ky More info www.caymannature.ky

See also www.nationaltrust.org.ky and www.caymanwildlife.org

Plants & Butterflies

A world away from the offices, bars and restaurants of George Town, or even from the golden sand of Seven Mile beach, the National Trust's Mastic Trail is actually less than an hours' drive from the west side of Grand Cayman and easy to get to. And once inside, you'll be plunged into tropical forest full of 'shake-hand trees', 'duppy pumpkins' and other weird and wonderful plants.

With luck, you'll also see Cayman's national flower, the Banana orchid (though it only flowers in May and June), and this is also a good spot for reptiles such as the blue-throated anole and birds such as the Cayman parrot.

But this is one place where flora really take pride of place, and while you can easily go it alone, it is worth going with a guide such as Stuart Mailor from the National Trust or Ann Stafford from CaymANNature. Stuart is resident expert at the National Trust Visitors Centre, which provides information, tours, events, books and souvenirs related to the preservation of natural environments and places of historic significance in the Cayman Islands. Ann Stafford isn't only knowledgeable about plants, but as she puts it, "I am interested in food chains – who eats what – and everything goes back to dependence on plants."

So, for example, if you're looking for Cayman's largest butterfly, the Grand Cayman swallowtail, then you should know that its caterpillars only feed on leaves of citrus family trees. These grow naturally and are also cultivated, so the butterfly can be seen across Grand Cayman.

In contrast, the pygmy blue butterfly is tiny and requires low-lying saline habitat where a plant called glasswort grows. One good place for this is Barkers National Park on the north-west tip of Grand Cayman. Barkers is also excellent for water birds such as herons and egrets and has beautiful, mangrove-edged and desolate pale sandy beaches.

On Cayman Brac, you'll find some completely different habitats, not least the Brac Parrot Reserve. This ancient dry forest is notable for its huge cacti which stand up to 3m high and epiphytic orchids and bromeliads.

The limestone karst substrate on which everything on all three islands grows is more evident here than anywhere, and you'll be grateful for a stout pair of shoes and making an extra effort not to trip. Keep alert for hermit crabs under your feet too, they're just about everywhere.

Finally, don't forget to visit the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park – and not just for the blue iguanas. There's a special orchid section where you can see the two most famous Cayman species, the banana and the ghost. They are fitting reminders to Ann Stafford's plea for the islands as a whole: "Keep Cayman unique," she says.



■ Botanic Park



■ Ghost orchid



■ Cayman Swallowtail



■ Cayman Lucas's Blue butterfly
Cyclargus ammon erembis



■ Cayman House Botanic Park



■ Wild Jasmine

■ Cayman Julia pair mating



Ann Stafford runs island nature tours, which can include the Botanic Park and the Mastic Trail. Ann is co-author of the book 'Butterflies of the Cayman Islands' with RR Askew.

When did you first visit the Cayman Islands?

In 1973, after my husband got a job here – he's Guyanese, and we'd been living in Guyana.

What's your first wildlife memory?

Rabbits and pheasants in the countryside of Warwickshire where I was born.

What got you interested in plants?

Growing up in Warwickshire, we were surrounded by woods and fields. My uncle got me interested in butterflies. He later wrote a book about them.

What's your favourite plant of the Cayman Islands?

The silver thatch palm tree – it's an endemic species and it was the mainstay of the economy in times gone by. The growing fronds were made into rope, baskets and hats and traded, and the open fronds were used for thatching houses.

What's your favourite place in the Cayman Islands?

The remnant of the ironwood forest to the south-east of George Town. Ironwood is another culturally significant tree that was used for foundation posts for Cayman houses – it is termite and rot resistant.

Bananaorchid

• **Looks like...** White or pale yellow petals with purple lips, though it is from the shape of the 'pseudo-bulbs' at the base of the plant that the orchid gets its name – they are a greeny-yellow colour and look like, well, unripe bananas. Don't try eating them, however.

• **Can be seen...** In the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park and on the Mastic Trail. Flowers in May and June.

• **Did you know...** Like many orchids, it's an epiphyte, which is Greek for "upon a plant".

Epiphytes grow on trees, or occasionally artificial places such as buildings, but – unlike parasites – don't harm their hosts.



Silverthatchpalm tree

Looks like... A tall, spindly palm tree with fan-like leaves at the crown. The leaves are green on top but silvery underneath, hence its name.

Can be seen... On all three islands, but one very good place is the east end of Cayman Brac. This is the highest point anywhere on the Cayman Islands, and the trees look

spectacular in this wild and often windswept terrain.

Did you know... The leaves of the silver thatch do not rot in saltwater, so they became highly prized by the ropemaking industry. Cayman Islanders established profitable trades with other Caribbean islands such as Cuba and Jamaica.

Information Centre

You can visit the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park every day of the year except Christmas Day and Good Friday, price \$10. More info www.botanic-park.ky

The National Trust organise Mastic Trail hikes, contact stuartmailor@nationaltrust.org.ky or www.nationaltrust.org.ky

To take a tour of the Mastic Trail or any parts of Grand Cayman with Ann Stafford, contact caymannature@candw.ky. More info www.caymannature.ky

For more information see www.caymanwildlife.org

Bats

Though some attempts are being made to base ecotourism projects around Cayman's only native mammals, these are very much in their infancy. Some visitors will be unaware that there are bats on the islands, however some will notice some of the 80 inhabited bat houses which are visible all over the islands. These bat houses look like little houses set on top of utility poles, visitors can watch bats fly in and out at dusk, either on their own or by signing up for one of the National Trust 'Bat Fly-Out informative talks', which are held under the bat houses.

The commonest species is the velvety free-tailed bat, a species that is widespread in the Americas and is found as far south as Argentina. It eats insects and so is a keystone species in natural pest control.

There are nine species in total on the islands, and four of these are fruit and nectar eating bats which – like the Caribbean fruit bat – tend to be much larger than their insect-eating cousins.

One of the most interesting bats is the Antillean nectar bat, which is described as looking like a "tiny flying piglet" and eats nectar and pollen, as well as fruits and insects. The buffy flower bat has a long nose and a long sticky tongue like that of a hummingbird and is an important pollinator of many plants such as night-blooming jasmine and many cactus and agave plants, including the large cactus and agave so noticeable on the Bluff on Cayman Brac.

Both of these species are very rare and you are unlikely to see them – but, still, it's nice to know that they are there pollinating night-blooming flowers and planting the seeds that keep the ecosystem healthy.



Lois Blumenthal initiated the National Trust Bat Conservation Programme for the Cayman Islands in 1992. It is the most successful in the Caribbean and is internationally acclaimed as a prototype for tropical countries worldwide.

When did you first visit the Cayman Islands?
1975

How did you become interested in bats? Helping my children with a school project on native animals.

What's your favourite bat of the Cayman Islands? The big-eared bat (*Macrotus waterhousii*) because it eats roaches as well as garden pests like moths and beetles. This bat lives only in caves and is becoming increasingly rare.

What is your favourite place in the Cayman Islands? The remaining bits of untouched forest. They have a magical peaceful quality that must be experienced to be understood.

Information Centre

Bat further info:
The National Trust hold 'Bat Fly-Out' informative talks for more information contact the National Trust or visit

www.nationaltrust.org.ky
For more information see
www.caymanwildlife.org



Ethical Wildlife Watching

Marine Parks, Replenishment Zones, Environmental Zones and Animal Sanctuaries have been set up on the Islands to ensure that Cayman's treasures will be in pristine condition for generations of visitors to enjoy. At the time of print a full review of marine parks was being conducted. For up to the minute information contact the Cayman Islands Department of Environment at doe@gov.ky or go to www.doe.com.

Ethical Stingray interaction

The Cayman Islands Wildlife Interaction Zones' Regulations make it an offence to lift rays from the water. This is because rays are marine creatures which, like fish, breathe with the aid of gills while in the water – if they are out of the water they cannot breathe. Your tour operator should give you a safety and good conduct briefing before you get in, divers should remove any sharp pieces of equipment and jewellery that might damage the musous coating which covers the rays with provides protection from parasites and other infections.

Ethical Nature Tips

The rule of thumb for snorkelling or diving on or around coral reefs is don't touch anything. It could bite or it could be poisonous – or worse, you could harm the creature. So that means don't touch the coral – and don't stand on it and don't stir up sediment near it, either. Coral is very sensitive and is easily damaged – it takes most coral species between 1 and 10 years to grow a single inch.

Don't harass or chase marine creatures. Molestation of marine turtles is illegal, and the feeding of sharks is also banned. There are some species, such as lobsters, conch and whelks for which limited fishing is permitted, and then only at certain times of year. Our advice is make sure you fully understand the regulations if you would like to do this.

More info: www.caymanislands.co.uk

Ethical bat watching

To protect the Cayman Islands valuable native bat populations please remember:

Avoid visiting caves in the spring and summer when newborn pups are present. Due to ingrained survival mechanisms, panicked mother bats may abandon a cave that is too often disturbed, leaving helpless pups behind. NO flash cameras inside bat caves. Do not shine any lights directly on the bats.

Minimize disturbance of the bats by passing through their roosting areas as quickly and quietly as possible. Do not shout or squeal. Bats will not remain long in a cave that is frequently disturbed. Because habitat is increasingly scarce, any additional hardship, like changing a roosting site due to disturbance, impacts the overall survival of the populations.

Summary of Cayman Islands marine conservation laws

LOBSTERS

- Closed season: 1 March through 30 November. No one may take lobster from Cayman waters during these months. No one may purchase, receive or possess lobster taken from Cayman waters during these months.
- Open season catch limit: Three per person or six per boat per day, whichever is less.
- Size limit: Six inch tail minimum size.
- Only spiny lobster (*P. argus*) may be taken.

CONCH

- Closed season: 1 May through 31 October. No one may take conch from Cayman waters during these months. No one may purchase, receive or possess conch taken from Cayman waters during these months.
- Open season catch limit: Five per person or ten per boat per day, whichever is less.
- No one may purchase or receive more than five conch from Cayman waters in any one day.

WHELKS

- Closed season: 1 May through 31 October. No one may take whelk from Cayman waters during these months. No one may purchase, receive or possess whelk taken from Cayman waters during these months.

- Open season catch limit: Two-and-a-half gallons in the shell or two-and-a-half pounds of processed whelks per person per day.
- No one may purchase or receive more than two-and-a-half gallons in the shell or two-and-a-half pounds processed whelks from Cayman waters in any one day.
- Chitons, periwinkles and bleeding teeth may not be taken from Cayman waters at any time.

TURTLES

- No one may disturb, molest or take turtles in Cayman waters without a licence from the Marine Conservation Board.
- Possession of turtle eggs is prohibited.
- For licensed fishermen, closed season runs from 1 April 31 October.

SHARKS

- No one may feed, attempt to feed or provide or use food to attract any shark in Cayman waters

NASSAU GROUPERS

- Size limit: Twelve inch minimum size limit applies throughout Cayman waters year round EXCEPT:
- Designated Grouper Spawning Areas are protected.

- No one may take Nassau grouper from of the Designated Grouper Spawning Areas from 1 November through 31 March.
- No one may spearfish or set a within a one – mile radius of any Designated Grouper Area from 1 November through 31 March.
- No one may use a speargun to take Nassau Grouper.

GENERAL RULES

- Damaging coral by anchor, chains or any other means ANYWHERE in Cayman waters is prohibited.
- No taking of ANY marine life alive or dead while on SCUBA.
- No taking of any coral, sponges, etc. from Cayman waters.
- Wearing gloves while diving or snorkelling in Cayman waters is prohibited.
- Export of live fish or other marine life is prohibited.
- Fishing with gill nets, poison or other noxious substances is prohibited.
- Dumping ANYTHING in Cayman waters is prohibited.
- The export of more than three conch shells and or any black coral requires a CITES permit, issued through the DOE.