

ST LUCIA WHIPTAIL LIZARD, OUR PRIDE AND JOY

The St. Lucia Whiptail Lizard (*Cnemidophorus vanzoi*) formerly called the Maria Island Lizard is the only St. Lucian species that carries the color of our flag; white, yellow black and blue. ***This unique lizard is endemic to St. Lucia. This means that it is found nowhere else in the world with St Lucia bearing the entire world population!*** The lizard was unknown to science before 1958, at which time Gregor Williams and Earl Long discovered it.

The Maria Islands are approximately 25 acres in area and about 1000 yards from mainland St. Lucia. The lizard is the flagship species on the Maria Islands and an important part of St. Lucia's biodiversity.

The species is sexually dimorphic. This means that males and females are dissimilar. Males are of very dark gray brown coloration with a pattern of black, with white dots, and fine gray lines running from the neck to the base of the tail. Their bellies are of a brilliant sulphur yellow colour, while the underside of the hind legs, vent area and entire tail comprise a vivid sea blue patch to turquoise. Adult male Whiptail lizards can measure 14 inches from the snout to the tip of the tail. Females are generally smaller, reaching a maximum length of 10 inches. They are also paler and browner in color than the males, with a pattern of stripes and dots running laterally from the neck to the base of the tail. Some females may also display a bright rust red belly. Juvenile males are colored very much like females, with a color change emerging as they reach maturity.

The lizards are active on warm sunny days, and spend most of their time basking in the early mornings and late afternoons. When foraging, the lizards scurry along the ground searching on and beneath the leaf litter for insects and other food items. They are opportunistic feeders and will eat a wide variety of food items including other lizards smaller than themselves. They always flick their tongue while foraging, and food is located both by sight and smell. They have been observed feeding on insects, flower and fruit of various plants, small marine animals and fish, which have been washed up from the sea. Male lizards defend their food items from approaching lizards, by chasing the intruder for a short distance. Juvenile lizards are always chased away from their food and must stay clear of adult lizards, as they can potentially become part of their menu. Living on a small Island that can be 'bone-dry' in the dry season is a challenge to the lizard who have lived with for centuries and survived.

The St. Lucia Whiptail lizard shares its home with several of other inhabitants including 7 reptiles and over 19 species of birds. Found on Maria Major are the tree gecko, ground gecko, St. Lucia tree lizard, St. Lucia pygmy gecko, St. Lucia racer, worm snake and the zandoli terre. Occasionally the hawksbill turtle would come to nest on the Island. From April to September the Maria Islands serve as a haven for nesting birds especially seabirds. Sooty terns come to nest by the thousands, with estimates of over 60,000 sea birds recorded in previous years. Hundreds of red-neck pigeons

(ramier) and zanaida doves (toutwelle) rest peacefully on the Islands away from rats, mongooses, cats and opossums that are major predators.

The vegetation of Maria Major can be described as a mosaic of stands of dry scrub woodland, grasses and cacti. The main tree species are Poirier and Gommier modi, Ti bomn species and Bwa flambeau. They dominate the scrub areas, while Prickly pear and Organ pipe cactus dominate the cactus forests. Over 70 plant species occur on Maria major.

The Cactus stands provide cover for the lizards, which although free from mammalian predators still have to contend with avian predators such as the American kestrel known locally as Grigri poulet. The Whiptail population on the Maria Islands is healthy with over 1000 individuals.

As a further step to safeguard the survival of the St. Lucia whiptail lizard, a second population of lizards was established on Praslin Island in 1995. Praslin Island is 7 miles north of the Maria Islands has an area of three and three quarter acres. Most of the plant species found on the Maria Islands occurs on Praslin Island. The Island has an intact woodland that provides cover for the lizards. There is a small beach area, many large stones, leaf litter and soil for foraging and digging. Before the lizards were released on Praslin Island, the Island had to be made free from rats. A 2-week rat eradication programme rid the island of all rats present. The lizards are doing well on the island, and number over 200 according to the latest survey.

The author and the Praslin Island Warden made the following observation in June 1997. It was about 10am. one day, when a Caribbean grackle or black bird was seen grappling with a large centipede that it had uncovered in a bromeliad about 10 feet up in a Manchineel tree. The centipede was too difficult for the blackbird to handle and it dropped it to the ground. Without a moment to spare, a large male Whiptail lizard that was foraging nearby, moved in and caught the centipede by the head. It thrashed it around, and within a short time had bitten the head to a pulp. The lizard attempted to swallow the entire body of the centipede. It swallowed and swallowed, until all that could be seen of the centipede were the two hind legs sticking out of the lizard's mouth. All its efforts to swallow the protruding hind legs failed, as the centipede was too long for its gut. The lizard then no choice but to regurgitate the whole centipede, which it did. It remained looking at the centipede for a while, then proceeded to swallow it again. It went through the same ordeal but could not swallow the two protruding back legs. It began to wrench as if to make more space but to no avail. It finally decided to again regurgitate the creature. This time it abandoned the dead centipede on the ground and continued foraging at some distance away. We were quietly watching the drama, thinking to ourselves that we should have had a video camera to record what we had seen, when the same whiptail had made a full circle, and headed in our direction towards the centipede. On reaching the centipede it jumped backwards, made an about turn and disappeared into the woods. It was as if it had seen met a devil. We both burst into laughter and recorded the incident for posterity.

This is just one of the golden moments in nature when one sees things happen that may never again be seen in a lifetime.

Remember that the wild things of this land are not ours to do with as we please. They have been given to us in trust, and we must account for them to the generations which will come after us to audit our accounts.