

An attorney and a saviour

Sir Christopher Ondaatje recalls the outstanding career and legacy of the Bahamian attorney.

In Anthony W White's exemplary book "A Birder's Guide to the Bahama Islands" (1998) he informs us:

"Long Island has one of the largest flocks of endangered West Indian whistling ducks in the world, approximately 450 birds. Despite their large numbers they can be difficult to see. The whistling ducks are concentrated at the northern end of the island, and gather nightly at Hog Cay off the southern end of Galliot Cay. The owner of Hog Cay puts out nearly 200 pounds of feed every night for the ducks. You cannot go onto Hog Cay without permission from the owner. The best way to see the ducks is to hire a small bonefishing boat ... to take you out between Hog Cay and the Galliot Cay mangrove swamps at dusk. From May to September you have a good chance of seeing the ducks flying to Hog Cay, when the adult birds have finished nesting and escort young birds to and from Hog Cay. In winter when the nights are longer, many whistling ducks wait until dark to fly to Hog Cay and return to Long Island before



A flock of West Indian whistling duck in flight

dawn, so your chances of seeing them are reduced."

In 2000, I met the man Anthony White talked about. His name is Peter Graham, and he was the lawyer who bought our house *Tradewinds* for us in Lyford Cay. We soon became very good friends. He is a most extraordinary man.

Peter D Graham was born on October 11, 1927, and founded the firm of Graham Thompson in 1950. For more than 50 years he has played a leading role in the growth of one of Bahamas' leading legal firms. He still continues to serve as a valued advisor in the long-term planning and strategic development of the firm, and for over 65 years he has usually been the first to arrive at work in the morning.

"I have always gone to work very early. I'm always in the office before 7am. This is because I like the peace and quiet, and can usually get more work done before 9am. than the entire rest of the day."

Peter Graham's work ethic and focus on public service has set the tone for several generations of lawyers – still critical for long term career success at Graham Thompson.

From 1956 to 1972, Peter Graham served in the Bahamas Parliament as the Member for the Constituency of Long Island and Ragged Island. He was Minister of Labour from 1964 to 1967, as well as Minister of Housing from 1964 to 1967. He was a member of the Board of Governors of the Central Bank

Peter D Graham, CMG



The West Indian whistling ducks, a rare and an endangered species, have found a home on Hog Cay.

of the Bahamas from 1992 to 1998. In 1997, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II appointed Mr Graham as CMG – the Companion of the Most Distinguished Order of St Michael and St George – which honours individuals who render extraordinary or important non-military service. He has been a board member of the Lyford Cay Club from 1994 to 2002, and the Club's chairman from 2000 to 2002.

“My whole government experience was extremely satisfying. I am very honoured to have been invited to serve on the Cabinet during the period of internal self-government. At that time, 1964 to 1967, we were not responsible for foreign affairs.”

It was during Peter Graham's term, when he was elected to the legislature

for Long Island and Ragged Island, that he discovered Hog Cay.

“In those days there was no airstrip on Long Island – but there was a seaplane which flew there every two weeks. It flew over Hog Cay – and I fell in love with the 220-acre island. The Government policy then was that you could buy Crown land – if you spent a certain amount (at that time \$30,000 – a lot of money) on the development of the island – to create local employment. I bought the island in 1962 and built the airstrip and nearly three miles of road, as well as the harbour – which was the most difficult – involving dredging, pumping, and building retaining walls. The actual harbour was created by building the road, dividing the swamp, and creating the harbour on one portion of the swamp. All this was done – not

with a contract, but with a simple handshake. It was a difficult project and was carried out very efficiently.”

Hog Cay in those days was nearly all scrub, some marsh, but mostly sand. It was a flat island, and the wind-blown sand formed low hills around its shore. It may historically have only ever been a sand bank – but, as the Grahams found out, there was good fresh water only six feet under ground – where they found conch shells. This water was important not only for their herd of sheep and their chickens, but to provide sustenance for the small flock of nervous West Indian whistling ducks which they were thrilled to find on the island.

My wife and I have spent many wonderful weekends with the Grahams on Hog Cay where the flock of whistling

ducks has grown considerably in the fifty-six years that Peter Graham has owned the island. The ducks have now completely transformed the character of the island where we have feasted on boiled fish and Johnny cake and other delicacies. The evenings, with a couple of sundowners, watching the birds feeding on the “dance floor” are pure magic. There are now between 1,500 and 2,000 whistling ducks. It is an amazing sight.

The West Indian whistling duck (sometimes called a tree duck) is the largest of the eight species of unique whistling ducks found throughout the world's tropical regions. It is a large goose-like duck with relatively long legs that extend beyond the tail in flight. The feathers on the upper part

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of the duck are mostly brown with pale edging. The throat is white, but the lower neck is streaked with black. The chest is reddish and its underbelly is white with dark spots. It is a beautiful bird with its brown markings merging attractively into each other. It has a long black bill, long head, and longish dark legs. The foreneck is pale, and it has a light brown face. Whistling ducks are mostly nocturnal and secretive, inhabiting wooded swamps, lagoons and mangroves where they roost and feed on plant food including the fruit of the royal palm. They habitually perch in trees, but tends to spend the daylight hours hidden in vegetation.

The voice of the whistling duck is a haunting shrill whistled chirirra chirirra from which one of its Spanish names is derived: Chirirra del Caribe (in Puerto Rico). Other local names are whistler, mangrove duck, night duck (Jamaica), yaguasa (Cuba), and gingeon (Haiti). In flocks the birds seem constantly and nervously to be chatting among themselves – a cacophony which continues deep into the night. Birds are easily disturbed, but on Hog Cay are faithful to their main feeding ground – returning to be fed soon after dawn, and in the early evening.

Whistling ducks have an ill-defined breeding season, and nests, although difficult to find, have been recorded every month of the year. Birds usually nest in a cluster of palm fronds, where branches have fallen forming a conical shape at the bottom of the tree. Nests are usually on the ground, near water, where the birds line a shallow depression with fallen leaves and other loose vegetation, but nests have also been reported in low tree holes and on horizontal branches. Both parents incubate the eggs throughout the day and night, and family bonds are strong. Both male and female parents stay with their young for weeks and sometimes months.

“It is a wonderful sight to see families of ducks feeding together. They are very protective of their young, threatening other birds. Luckily the only predators (apart from humans) on the Island are the snakes – the Bahamian Boa – which go after the eggs and the ducklings. There are no feral cats, racoons or wild boars. But one also has to keep a sharp lookout for Red-tailed Hawks who are dangerous. They tend to follow the activities of the blue-winged teal which



migrate to the Bahamas every year in September and leave in April or early May after the rainy season ends. The hawks migrate with the teal and feed on them. They also attack whistling ducks when they can, killing them first (because they are quite a large bird) then ripping them apart before eating them.

“A pair of Ospreys nest every year on a platform at the very top of our main house. They are always there, look dangerous, but do not endanger the Whistling-Ducks because they are only interested in fish for food.”

The whistling ducks in their amazingly large flocks are now resident on Hog Cay throughout the year – although some birds migrate to Galliot Cay and the mainland of Long Island. Even the blue-winged teal now number over a thousand birds – swooping in at feeding time to share the corn feed put out for the whistling ducks.

“I now use as many as 150 50lb-sacks of corn every month. Some of this

goes to our small herd of sheep, and chickens, but ninety percent goes to the whistlers.”

Only four of the eight species of whistling duck are found in the Caribbean: The West Indian whistling duck; the fulvous whistling duck; the white-faced whistling duck, and the black-bellied whistling duck. Of these birds the rare white faced vagrant was last recorded in 1926, and the black-bellied is also a rare wanderer to Cuba, Jamaica and the Virgin Islands. However, the smaller and lighter yellowish-brown coloured fulvous whistling duck has sometimes been seen on Hog Cay – mixing with their larger cousins and enjoying the plentiful feed provided by Peter Graham. There has never been any recording of the smaller bird nesting in the Bahamas.

Once hunted almost to extinction on many Caribbean islands, particularly Jamaica, the West Indian whistling duck is still considered rare and an endangered species. It is protected by law under the Wild Birds Protection

Act. Peter Graham has certainly carved his name in the history of Bahamas' wildlife and his tireless activities have gone a long way to saving one of the world's rarest and most temperamental ducks.

“I suppose my only claim to fame is that I have nurtured this flock of whistling ducks. There are very specific instructions –to my family – and they have agreed – that they will continue looking after these wonderful birds. Even if the island is sold this responsibility has to be passed on to the new owners. It is in my will.”

What a life Peter Graham has led. And what a legacy!

NEXT WEEK: The extraordinary self-promoting life of an actress and writer who became the first author to have three consecutive novels on The New York Times best-seller list.

• **Sir Christopher Ondaatje is the author of “The Last Colonial”.**