

CAHOW KINSHIP

By Nancy Acton



The cahow has landed! (left to right) Gregg Wilson and Dr. David Wingate admire the Roger Tory Peterson watercolour, 'Cahows', at the Bermuda National Gallery (BNG). The painting was purchased by Mr. Wilson's parents, the late Dr. Howard E. Wilson and his wife Helen, and presented to the BNG by their son in accordance with his parents' wishes. Dr. Wingate is a long-time friend of the Wilson family, and his life's work in connection with restoration of the cahow population here is well known.

Glenn Tucker

Thirty-one years ago radiologist Dr. Howard E. Wilson and his wife Helen travelled to Bermuda for a medical conference, but as dedicated birders with an interest in all things natural, including fossils, they also took the opportunity to pursue those interests.

Their travels included a visit to the Bermuda Aquarium, Museum and Zoo where they saw, for the very first time, fossilised cahow eggs. Entranced, they wanted to learn more and were referred to Government Conservation Officer David Wingate, who was already well known for his efforts to increase the population of the bird that is also known as the Bermuda petrel.

Unable to meet them then, he suggested instead areas of interest for the couple to explore. Time, however, was not on their side so, with their interest thoroughly piqued, they returned again in October 1977 and this time successfully met up with Mr. Wingate.

"A tour of Nonsuch Island to view plans to restore the native habitat was most inspiring," Mrs. Wilson recalls. "David attempted to show us the cahows returning to their burrows, but to no avail. It was an exciting nighttime motor boat trip, nevertheless."

Dr. and Mrs. Wilson were not the only ones to be intrigued by the cahow. Decades before, the famous American ornithologist, painter, photographer and writer Roger Tory Peterson (1908-1996) had painted the bird for inclusion in his renowned field guides.

In 1951, another American ornithologist and world authority on sea birds, Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy and Louis Mowbray, then-curator of the Bermuda Aquarium, accompanied by teenager David Wingate, who also had a keen interest in birds, rediscovered the breeding grounds of the cahow on the rocky islets of Castle Harbour.

Not only did this event become the springboard for a cahow conservation programme, but also it shaped the future career and life's work of young Mr. Wingate.

Fast forward to February, 1984 when, by extraordinary coincidence and good fortune, Dr. Wilson happened to read a birding publication in which he noticed a small advertisement. Listed along with two or three other paintings was one entitled 'Cahows' by the legendary Mr. Peterson. The seller was Alison Murphy Conner, daughter of the late Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy.

"Not only did that cause excitement due to our 1977 experiences, but also Mrs. Conner lived in Olympia, Washington - a relatively short drive from our home in Bellevue, Washington," Mrs. Wilson says. "Howard immediately called, and we drove there that weekend. Mrs. Conner was moving and had to part with some of her treasure-trove of paintings by well-known artists."

Delighted with their purchase, the Wilsons proudly added it to their art collection in the family home.

Son Gregg remembers the painting well as something that was "always there" as he grew up.

Having shared so many vacations with his parents, which were always devoted to birding and enjoying nature and, knowing of the cahow story, he came to appreciate not only the significance of painting but also the work being done locally following the bird's rediscovery.

"I appreciated birds from a very early age, but not the way I do now," he said. "When my parents went to Bermuda and brought back a booklet on the cahow the story was so special that I started to get a greater feeling of how important the bird is."

"Every summer we would take family vacations in different areas of the US, and in each of those places we would go to the museums. If there were special birds around, or fossils, we would go and look for them too. That was a big part of our activities. In fact, I have to 'blame' that on what I am now. I have been out (to Nonsuch) with David a few times."

With the death of Dr. Wilson last May, his widow felt the time was right to fulfil the couple's long-standing wish to donate the Peterson watercolour to Bermuda. Mrs. Wilson discussed the matter with her friend Dr. Wingate, who recommended the Bermuda National Gallery (BNG) as the ideal permanent home because of its controlled climate, given the otherwise deleterious effect of Bermuda's climate on watercolours.

Thus it was that last week, in a small ceremony attended by Gregg Wilson, Dr. Wingate, and BNG collections committee member George Peterich, 'Cahows', joined the gallery's permanent collection.

"This is the first bird to come into our collection, particularly one that is of such importance to Bermuda," Mr. Peterich said. "The story of the cahow is world famous, and we are extremely happy to have the painting, and to be able to show it to the public. During his lifetime, Roger Tory Peterson, whom I met, was celebrated both as an illustrator of birds and publisher of the famous field guides which are still used all over the world."

In an exclusive interview following the presentation, Gregg Wilson recalled his parents' love of the Island, their long-standing friendship with Dr. Wingate, and their abiding fascination with the cahow, and he said it had always been their intention to donate the Peterson painting to the Island. He noted that, as avid collectors, the couple had found many fossil bones in our caves, including those of the cahow, as well as other unknown species which were still being studied "for their importance to the Island's fauna".

Mr. Wilson was also proud to note that Wilson's Cave (which no longer exists but was within the Government quarry), where many of the bones were found, was named after his parents.

"I have a skull and wing bones of a cahow, which my dad collected," he said proudly.

The holder of a degree in resource management, Gregg Wilson is an active member of the US Audubon Society in Seattle. He first met Dr. Wingate five years ago when he was here to study the Martello Tower as part of a research project he was doing on a similar tower in Barbados.

Like his parents, he too left without seeing a cahow, but on this visit luck was truly with him. Not only did he get to see the chicks in their burrows during a nocturnal visit with Dr. Wingate, but also he was able to share with Government conservationist Jeremy Madeiros and Dr. Wingate the excitement of a momentous new development in the cahow project.

"To see the chicks was very special on different levels," Mr. Wilson said. "It was my first listing of a cahow. I am not a lister, but now I have one that my parents never got to see, and neither did Roger Tory Peterson, so I feel very blessed and lucky. It may be one of the rarest sea birds, and the chicks are big, fluffy balls. It was awe-inspiring and wonderful to see them."

Regarding the momentous development: the long and patient work of having cahows ultimately colonise Nonsuch Island, following its restoration as an original habitat, is now bearing fruit.

The process began with hatching the chicks on the little offshore islands, where the parents were allowed to rear them until just before they were fledged. Then, in a process known as 'translocation', they were transferred from the out-islands and rehoused in the man-made burrows on Nonsuch Island in the hope that they would return there at the appropriate time.

"The process, called 'imprinting', is a jump start on colonising another island," Dr. Wingate explained. "When the cahows emerge from their new burrows and go through their wing exercises before leaving, the hope is that they will return to what they think is their original home. You have to trick them into thinking they were hatched on Nonsuch Island."

To the delight of all concerned, 'hope' has now turned to 'affirmative' as the cahows are definitely returning home to Nonsuch.

"This is the fifth year, and they start returning when they are about three to four years old, so the first returnees have been coming back since March," Dr. Wingate revealed. "Cahows are long-live birds, so it takes several years before they first go through puberty and learn to be mature and establish a home. This is the first year they have returned as 'teenagers' who are getting interested in sex, so they are flying to their home colony where they think they have been born. Next year they will probably pick up a mate, and hopefully start breeding a year after that."

Mr. Wilson who, along with experts from the UK, was also here to participate in a workshop designed to help the Bermuda Audubon Society develop a strategic plan for Bermuda, was similarly pleased to be on Island at such a special time. In fact, the news that the cahows are returning to Nonsuch Island might be considered a third tribute to his parents' links with the bird, the first being the presentation of the Peterson painting to Bermuda, and the second his scattering of a portion of the late Dr. Wilson's ashes on the East End nature reserve.

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