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INTRODUCTION

GOAL

The primary goal of this guide is to promote an interest in the natural world of the Caribbean islands. The book is intended to serve as a practical guide for local people and tourists alike. We presume its users have no particular experience or expertise with nature, so, to make identification easier, illustrations or photographs accompany every species description. In some cases, particularly plants, more than one picture is provided.

Aid in identification of commonly encountered species is a primary objective, an aim we supplement with text that attempts to highlight interesting facts about the species presented. By promoting interest in the Caribbean's extraordinary fauna and flora, we hope to enhance appreciation of and respect for nature. After all, it is only when we appreciate nature that we will ever take steps to conserve it.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

The Caribbean, also commonly referred to as the West Indies, is taken to include all islands of the Bahamas, Greater Antilles, Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, and Lesser Antilles. Other adjacent islands, particularly San Andres and Providencia, while sharing many of the species in this book, are not specifically referred to in the text.

Omitted are Trinidad, Tobago, and other islands off the north coast of South America. These islands, though sharing many introduced plants and much marine life with the other Caribbean islands, differ substantially in their fauna and flora, thus their omission.

Finally, the coasts of the continental mainlands adjacent to the Caribbean are not included, due to their plant and animal species being decidedly different from those of the islands covered in this book.

SPECIES COVERAGE

The text presents accounts of 451 species of both terrestrial and marine animals and plants that occur in the Caribbean. Species were selected primarily based upon their likelihood of being seen. As a consequence, species included are typically either highly conspicuous, widely distributed, very common, or a combination of all three. A few exceptions, such as the Cuban Solenodon and Rhinoceros Iguana, are presented because of their uniqueness to the Caribbean as well as for their strikingly unusual characteristics. There is a heavier focus on birds, a more attention-getting portion of our natural world, than on plants or on deepwater reef fish that are common but more difficult to see.

Terrestrial species are treated first, marine species subsequently. The distinction between terrestrial and marine, however, is somewhat arbitrary. Crabs are an excellent example. A number of species are quite terrestrial, occurring some distance from streams, ponds, or the sea most of the year, yet they may be dependent upon such water bodies to spawn. A similar situation occurs in fish. Some "marine" species stray up rivers and streams, while some "freshwater" fish migrate to the sea to lay their eggs. Species in the latter category are treated in the section entitled Terrestrial Life.

Overall the book is a sampler. It aims to include conspicuous and widespread species from a broad range of organisms the novice is most likely to observe and inquire about. A reference section is provided in the back for individuals interested in more comprehensive guides to particular species groups.

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

Each account begins with a Key Features section that highlights the primary characteristics used to identify that particular animal or plant. We have tried to keep this section brief, since the accompanying photos and illustrations are the most valuable tool for identification. As few species as possible are presented on each page to allow for enlargement of the pictures, making identification a bit easier. To some extent, species of similar appearance are grouped close to one another to facilitate comparison.

The section entitled Status and Range includes much additional information, such as details regarding habitat; uses of the species for food, medicine, or the like; other species names; and interesting anecdotes.

Either a photo or illustration is included for each species. For species with variable coloration due to age, season, or gender, the most conspicuous form is depicted, sometimes accompanied by one or more other forms.

A few accounts refer to a higher taxonomic grouping rather than to one particular species. This is the case where there are many species of very similar appearance, such as with the prickly pear cacti and royal palms. When an account addresses a group of species, the common name of the group is not capitalized, except when used in a heading. Also, the scientific name for such a group is represented by a single name (the genus) followed by "spp." An example is the royal palms, *Roystonea* spp.