

On the look out for **BIRD** **LOVERS** of the future

With the Caribbean's birdlife under unprecedented threat, a new programme aims to protect its future by inspiring a generation of conservation-minded youngsters. **James Fuller** investigates

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRIS COLYARD

As adults it's easy to over-complicate things. Kids love being outside, they love interacting with the natural world and we often lose sight of that. We need to harness that enthusiasm and develop it in an active, fun, engaging way. By doing that you make a connection that lasts. That's what BirdSleuth is all about.

Lisa Sorenson



Data collected by the students will be used by scientists



Using binoculars was a big hit with the kids



Lisa Sorenson is the Executive Director of BirdsCaribbean and a passionate conservationist. She has devoted her career to protecting wildlife; it is a career that has seen many initiatives come and go, but she is excited about the potential of BirdSleuth, which is set to reach 10,000 students across 16 Caribbean countries over the next two years.

"BirdSleuth is not about creating another ornithologist or biologist – though obviously that's great if it happens. Rather, it's about making youngsters more aware of the environment around them and being good environmental stewards in the future," she says.

BE A BIRD

The ten-lesson BirdSleuth course focuses on developing a strong conservation ethic by increasing a knowledge and interest in birds. It is based on a Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology programme, run in the United States since 2006. It has been adapted to suit regional birdlife and is looking to inspire the next generation by focusing on topics such as how to observe and identify birds, why birds matter, bird migration, the importance of habitats for endemic, resident and migratory birds, and ideas for student action projects. The result is BirdSleuth Caribbean.

"A lot of people on the islands know very little about bird migration so we want kids to learn how the birds leave the cold north and migrate through the Caribbean during the winter, the issues they face once they get here, how they find habitats, food, water and shelter. But we want to do it in an interactive way with kids figuring things out for themselves," Lisa adds.

One example of how the programme achieves this is the BirdSleuth migration obstacle course. "It's an event that never fails to serve up plenty of laughter and not a little competitive spirit," says Lisa with a smile. "We set up an obstacle course with the students acting as the birds and letting them figure out what they have to do to migrate successfully! We'll have ropes and plastic wrap simulating windows that birds might collide with; we'll have other students playing the role of a cat or a hunter that's killing the birds; for pesticides we'll have a child with a spray bottle full of water; for developments that are destroying habitats we set up chairs that students have to go around. It brings everything to life in a fun race. You then reinforce those themes afterwards with further discussions.

"Throughout this the students are learning how important migration is and about their island's nesting or feeding sites, which play such a vital role in the annual cycle of birds travelling thousands of miles."

CONSERVATION IN ACTION

As well as learning about mankind's impact on nature and their local birds, the students undertake practical tasks such as bird counts. "We get the kids outside doing five- or ten-minute counts," says Lisa. "It doesn't have to be very far away, it could be right in their own schoolyard. Then the data they collect is entered online as part of the eBird project, which is a citizen science project collecting basic information about bird distribution and numbers in the Caribbean and around the world. That information is used by scientists, conservationists and students to assess the health of bird populations and to help guide conservation actions. Again it's about active participation and the fact that the data they're gathering is actually used by scientists; the students find that really cool."

BirdSleuth is proving just as popular with teachers, who are looking for innovative ways to engage their students. "Teachers are often trained to use very traditional approaches such as rote learning or what they call 'chalk-and-talk'," Lisa continues. "This is a chance to do something a little different and we're finding the educators are really enjoying it."

In October 2014 a three-day workshop was held in Nassau, Bahamas, during which 27 educators from 16 different countries and 23 islands were trained in delivering the programme. All participants returned home with a workshop kit composed of binoculars, books, posters and BirdSleuth materials, as well as funding support to implement the programme locally.

Binkie Van Es, of Environmental Protection in the Caribbean (EPIC) in St Martin/St Maarten, was one enthusiastic attendee. "The time spent in this workshop will stay with me for the rest of my life and will spread out to a large number of children who will learn the same appreciation for birds as I have, says Binkie. "I have already contacted our scouting and after-school organisations and they are very excited about BirdSleuth. The scouts have said they will set up a merit badge for it."

Binkie added that the programme will help "children and adults alike to better appreciate our immediate surroundings, and inspire environmental stewardship for our surrounding habitats".

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Students learned about bird migration and habitats





BirdSleuth hopes to foster a lifelong love of birds



INSPIRATION FOR THE FUTURE

For Lisa Sorenson such words are like gold – the programme will ultimately live or die on the passion and commitment of the educators delivering it. It is a commitment that can call for time over and above a teacher's normal hours. But the course's flexibility means that need not necessarily be an issue. "A lot of the activities are applicable to science, mathematics and English," says Lisa. "And there are ways teachers can use the curriculum to meet the standards they are asked to hit. But if they do have limited time they can simply pick and choose which aspects of the curriculum they want to do.

"This is not just a school-based course, though," she adds. "We're working with a lot of after-school programmes, service clubs, boy scouts, girl guides, churches, summer camps, science and nature clubs, nature centres, NGOs – the list goes on."

There is an added incentive for educators, who can become that teacher we all remember from our childhoods. "At the workshops we often ask those who are interested in conservation how they got involved and it's like, 'well, there was this teacher, or a relative, who took me out birdwatching for the first time'. There is always that early experience with a mentor who has introduced you to birds. They see that they can be that person."

Not that educators are always that educated when they first arrive. Lisa explains: "We hear a lot of comments like: 'I don't have any birds near me.' Well of course they do, it's just that they haven't noticed them. Birds can often be just background until you start to look for them.

"When you give a person a pair of binoculars and let them see a bird up close it has this incredible impact. It's like they're seeing birds for the first time. There's this remarkable impression left of how beautiful birds are, how interesting their behaviour is, how they're a part of our environment, what roles they play, how important they are, and ultimately why we should do everything we can to protect them."

GET INVOLVED

✳ For further info on BirdSleuth, and to download the course materials for free, go to www.sites.google.com/site/caribbeanbirdsleuth. ✳ To learn more about BirdsCaribbean visit www.birdscaribbean.org. ✳ Major funding for BirdSleuth Caribbean comes from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act Fund.



BUT WHAT DID THE KIDS THINK?

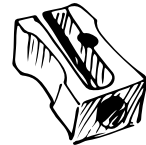
Three students on what they got out of BirdSleuth

"My favourite part of the field trip was getting to use binoculars to see the birds from afar. I saw different species of birds – I didn't know there were so many."

DEJAN MORRIS

"I really enjoyed the workshop because yes, everyone knows about big animals like whales and mammals, but they don't really think about the birds – they take them for granted. If you think about the small animals and how much they contribute to our environment, you'd be really surprised. If other people go and see this I'm pretty sure they'd fall as much in love with this programme as I have. I'm probably going to have this habit of birdwatching for a while!"

NATALIA WINTER



"We have learned how to tag birds and how to capture them using nets that are not very visible to the naked eye. We have even learned about the parts of the birds that we can test for ourselves to see if the birds are healthy. We have learned how to use the binoculars. And everyone, I think, had a great time. The most important lesson I learned is to conserve our forests to save the lives of birds."

GARCES EGRIB