

Ardastra helps replenish native species



● **THREATENED:** White-crowned Pigeons



● **HARD WORKERS:** Staff work to create nesting areas for flamingos



● **NEW NESTS:** Flamingos inspect their nesting areas

★ **IN the game of life, White-crowned Pigeons—a near threatened species—are finally winning, due in large measure to Ardastra Gardens.**

Hunting of The Bahamas' most popular game bird and the loss of its habitat has taken a toll on the White-crowned population resulting in the species' dramatic decline.

For animal curator **Bonnie Young**, White-crowned Pigeons breeding at Ardastra is a win not only for the zoo and conservation centre but also for the species. "We have done rehab and successfully released many white crowned pigeons. This year our rehab birds have started breeding. We have three babies that are doing very well, and we have another clutch of eggs that are being incubated right now," said Ms Young.

"Since these birds have been raised by their parents with little interaction from us, our goal is to be able to release the babies."

The apple of their bird and zoo parents' eyes, not surprisingly Ardastra wants to track their feathered friends' movements post release.

"We wanted to band them so if they're sighted, we'll have an idea of where they are and know that they're doing well," said **Hendrew Haley**, Ardastra's senior zookeeper. "We'll talk to the birding clubs, let them know what we're doing, that these birds came from Ardastra."

Another source of pride for Ardastra is the successful mating of **Indian Ringneck Parakeets**. Last year, a pair successfully reproduced with one surviving offspring.

Still, there are more than just the birds "getting busy" at Ardastra.

"An Ardastra resident Boa and a rescued Bahamian Boa have had a lot of copulation recently. We won't know about babies until around September/October," Young shared.

Boa Constrictors could have anywhere from **20 to 70** babies. Of a clutch of 40 babies, **two to three** might make it through the first year. With more humans moving into the reptile's habitat there is less uninhabited spaces for the population.

"The White-crowned Pigeons and the snake breeding is important because those are native species. If we could provide them with just a little bit of a head start, make sure they are healthy and then release them, there's a greater chance that more of them are going to survive that first year," said Ms Young.

"If they survive that first year then the chance of them making it to adulthood and reproducing on their own goes up as well. It helps ensure the long-term health of the population on the island."

The zoo also intends to breed its newest acquisition, five **Bahamian Hutias**. An endangered species of rodents, the two females and three males are settling in. A pair is expected to be selected to do what comes naturally. "We'll see how it goes," said Ms Young.

Ardastra isn't stopping there. The first and only zoo in The Bahamas hopes to raise funds to renovate its **Rainbow lorikeets** habitat, making it more conducive to breeding.

A popular attraction, visitors get to enter the birds' cage and handfeed bits of apples to the small, brightly coloured birds during interactions scheduled three times a day.

Meantime, the zoo has stepped up efforts to jumpstart its **flamingo** breeding programme. The last chick hatched in 2012. Prior to that, Ardastra's flamingos typically laid eggs almost every year between 2001 and 2012. "We are in a bit of a slump. We're at the time of year where if they are going to have eggs, they are going to start laying them," said the animal curator who noted the flamingos could have stopped courting for a number of reasons.

Chief among them are changing weather patterns and the relatively small flock at Ardastra.

"When the wild ones aren't breeding and ours aren't breeding at the same time, that makes some sense. It may be that they aren't getting the rains at the right time of year or they aren't getting enough rains, which provide an environmental cue that it is time to reproduce," Young noted. "One of the largest predictors of breeding success with flamingos is the number of birds in the flock. The more there are, the more likely they are to reproduce." Ardastra is home to **43** flamingos.

Every year, after the breeding season has come and gone, each group is evaluated to ensure individuals have time to pair off, rest and reproduce.

Although the zoo isn't "overly concerned", it has made attempts to get flamingos breeding. Staff routinely manipulate the birds' environment. They create starter nests which are kept nice and wet, sprinklers simulate the atmosphere of rain and two large mirrors situated on both ends of the area where the flamingos spend the most time give the illusion of a larger flock.

If all else fails, zoo officials are prepared to step up their efforts making major changes to its pond, where sediment has settled over the years. "We're committed to breeding success and getting them in the mood to make babies," said Young.

— IT'S BACK —

BERRY BURST

FROZEN WILDBERRY LEMONADE

UPGRADE & WIN: \$30K
IN CASH & TRAVEL