

EAG TALK

THE ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS GROUP

Action for Habitat: BarbudanGo restores Owny Well and Low Pond



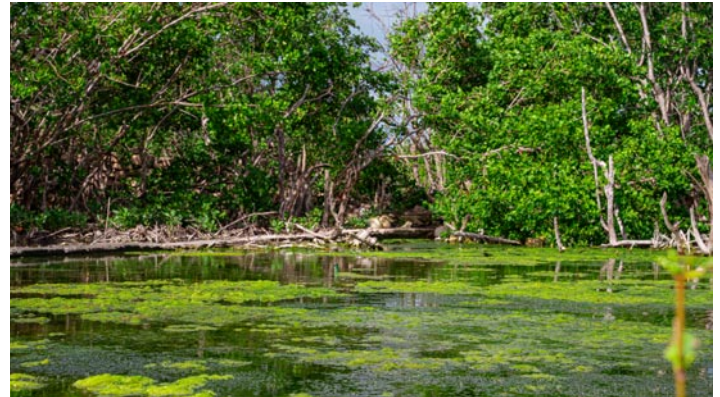
Barbuda warbler, Antigua and Barbuda's sole endemic bird, found nowhere else but on Barbuda (Photo by Jeff Gerbracht, Cornell Lab of Ornithology)



Male yellow warbler (Photo by Jeff Gerbracht, Cornell Lab of Ornithology)



Aerial view of Owny Well (Photo courtesy Chaso Media)



Low Pond (Photo courtesy Chaso Media)

By Natalya Lawrence, National Coordinator – GEF Small Grants Programme

Beautiful Barbuda is coveted for its tranquility, admired for its idyllic landscapes and breathtaking seascapes, and sought after as the perfect retreat. Antigua's almost unspoiled sister island boasts a trove of heritage sites and unique natural wonders, including the

world-renowned Magnificent Frigatebird Sanctuary, some impossibly pink sand beaches, the intimidating Dark Cave, and the awe-evoking Darby Cave.

As if this were not enough to warrant a visit (or even a permanent relocation!), the country's only endemic bird, the highly inquisitive Barbuda warbler, hypnotises the observer with its melodious song.

Unfortunately, some heritage sites and wildlife are in jeopardy of being lost due to several factors, including gradual degradation over the passage of time and manmade interference. "Action for Habitat" is the fittingly-named project, implemented by BarbudanGO (BNGO), a Barbudan-born NGO of young men and women, to tackle the challenge of rehabilitat-

ing key sites for the benefit of people and wildlife.

Low Pond and Owny Well form part of the unique system of natural springs and man-made wells found in Barbuda. These two sites, through this project, are BarbudanGO's first step to restore historical sites. Action for Habitat is a community-led conservation project that aims to transform these two historical water sources, now



Team restoring the dry stone wall at Owny Well
(Photo courtesy Chaso Media)



Archaeologist Dr Reg Murphy assists with the wall restoration
(Photo courtesy Chaso Media)

being misused as illegal dumpsites, into spaces that reclaim their historical and cultural significance.

Low Pond, the natural spring, provided water for domestic use and for animals. It was surrounded by a beautiful stone wall, built in the 18th century. A once bustling community hotspot, over time, became overgrown, the water unfit for use, and the area, sadly, was used for illegal dumping and unsafe disposal of human waste.

Owny Well, a man-made water source, suffered a similar fate, with its stone walls lost and crumbling in the overgrowth, and the well, itself in a dilapidated state, also became unusable.

BNGO's annual report states that, "Action for Habitat is working towards creating ecosystems that restore biodiversity and mitigate habitat loss. A mangrove nursery and bird habitat will be established because there is need to support our mangrove forestry and secure habitats for the endemic Barbuda warbler. Action for Habitat locations - Low Pond and Owny Well - will undergo improved management and as a result biodiversity will thrive."

There are many exciting components to this project. Already, both sites have been cleared, mangrove plantlets are being propagated, water sampling has been conducted at Low Pond, and



Greenhouse for plant nursery at Low Pond (Photo courtesy Chaso Media)

Owny Well has been cleaned and covered.

Barbudans have been trained to conduct bird surveys, which have now been completed, and most recently, the stone wall restoration has begun. Dedicated Barbudans and Antiguan have been on site at Owny Well, carefully dismantling crumbling walls.

Under the careful tutelage of David Arabella, of Arabella Stone Co, the teams have learnt how to reconstruct the walls using historically accurate walling principles. As David explains in the restoration workshops, the teams learnt the fundamentals of walling: learning how to start the base, and angle going upwards, carefully fitting the pieces together one stone on two stones, without gaps, strengthening the structure, laying the stone as flat as

possible (using a hammer to shape them when necessary), avoiding the use of mortar, which could cause faster deterioration of the structure, and several other techniques.

His aim is to complete a wall that is useful, aesthetically pleasing, and that will last for centuries rather than decades more. David, like many others, hopes that the restoration of these two wells is just the beginning, that more wells in Barbuda, and even Antigua, can be restored.

Since project implementation began in 2023, there have been notable, positive outcomes: the sites have seen a resurgence in birdlife - waterbirds at Low Pond, and landbirds at Owny Well. Joseph Prosper, noted local birder, commented with delight on his observations of scores of Barbuda warblers

(found nowhere in the world but Barbuda), Lesser Antillean flycatchers (not found in Antigua), and yellow warblers.

"I only wish I could stay longer in Barbuda," he quipped.

We are also happy to report that illegal dumping has ceased in both locations. Possibly the most heart-warming outcome of all was the unannounced visits by two elders from the community, one who was unable to verbalise his happiness, but expressed it vividly in the bright smile of approval. They were both overjoyed to see a place known to them in their youth being loved once again.

The GEF Small Grants Programme, implemented by the United Nations Development Programme, is pleased to fund this project. We also thank other organisations, agencies, companies, and individuals who have come together to provide co-financing, equipment, material, and expertise.

These include the Barbuda Council, the British High Commission, WAITT Foundation, Department of Environment, the Environmental Awareness Group, Fauna & Flora, Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Agriculture, Trade, and Barbuda Affairs, Arabella Stones Co, and the community.