



## WAYNE "DOC" BURKE

### A RARE BIRD

By Sarah Venable

Photo: Andre Williams

Sanderling

Passing through the long, shallow valley where the southern parishes meet, you wouldn't normally think to turn into the village of Packers and continue past its ragged edge into a grassy track. Not unless you were on a mission. The track ends. The view opens out. Beside a vast cane field, a cluster of nodding pumps extract oil from the ground. An old sugar factory points its chimney at the sky, and a ridge rises on the horizon.

A tiny green hut juts up from a tongue of land surrounded by a series of shallow ponds. Here, snowy egrets stalk small fish and black-bellied whistling ducks plunge their reddish beaks into the water, grazing on weeds. A kingfisher pops by for a look, her crest ruffling in the breeze. As the setting sun infuses the clouds with colour, the ducks begin to call. All is peaceful. This natural wetland's straight embankments show that it was enhanced by man. It looks like a typical Barbadian shooting swamp where hunters come to play out some primeval drive, and for many years it actually was one. Now it functions as the Woodbourne Shorebird Refuge.

It is also someone's home. This person is Wayne "Doc" Burke, a rare bird himself. The grizzled 60-year-old looks the part. He's exactly the kind of person you'd expect to live here, considering that few in their right minds would. "I'm a realist," he insists in his laconic, Bajan-accented way.

Doc is here for a purpose, in service of Bird Life International, the world leader in conservation of birds, their habitats, and biodiversity.

Barbados lacks diversity in its fauna and its bird population is no exception. However, when annual migration brings feathered

arctic visitors, those stats change temporarily. At the Refuge, forty-seven species of shorebirds alone have been recorded, including Whimbrel, sandpipers and Greater Yellowlegs.

Many bird lovers are appalled when they learn that from mid-July to mid-October, members of the Barbados Wildfowling Association shoot migrating shorebirds. It seems ironic that these same hunters now want to limit it too, but Doc has found that everyone has an interest in long-term survival of the species. "I need to emphasize that hunters have been very accommodating on the project," said Doc. "Collaboration is the only way it can work. Without these artificial wetlands, Barbados' avian species-richness would be greatly diminished. Without hunting, the wetlands won't be maintained."

All over the world, species of plants and animals are disappearing in a great die-off. The causes are complex, but "hunting may account for some of the decline in shorebird populations," said Doc. "BirdLife International asked me to find ways to approach that issue and to deal with it." (They knew of him through his former involvement as a naturalist at Graeme Hall Nature Sanctuary.)

What followed next might seem ironic, except that it proves the wisdom of a win-win strategy. Doc said, "It was with the help of two former hunters that I got the lease on the place. They financed the initial restoration, clearing the bush, and getting rid of the old fridges and things that had been dumped around here. They had been associated with this place before and wanted to see it used for conservation."

It takes an unusual person to get such a level of buy-in from hardboiled hunters, someone who knows his facts and can convincingly define common ground.

It also takes an unusual person to commit to a life such as this. It's not as idyllic as it appears. The "hutt", so named in memory of Maurice Hutt, a devoted conservationist and birder, measures no more than 10 X 18 feet, including the deck, with a tiny galley/bathroom attached. "It's what a friend calls compressed minimalism," said Doc with a wry smile. "When funding went dry in 2009, I had to downsize." For the first year there, he had no electricity or phone line. "When a storm comes, it's not much of a shelter," he added, recalling that when Tomas struck the island in 2010, the swamp flooded, sending its waters thigh-deep around the hut. And even with a devoted dog, it is lonely.

Doc's duties entail gathering information from hunters, writing reports on that and on what he observes here, and managing the 14-acre property. Birds won't come to feed and nest unless conditions are right. With vegetation constantly encroaching, no help, and no heavy equipment, it's not easy.

It's a far cry from his former life, which centred so much around the beach: learning shorebirds from his father as a child, then surfing, and later sailing. Harrison College is behind him. Gone too is the muscular, horsey decade of blacksmithing that followed. In his 40s while in Canada for a spell, Doc decided that tertiary education would be a good thing. He enrolled at Queens University, Ontario, and got his master's degree in geography. Coming back, he returned to nature and "living green."

He doesn't attempt to explain his trajectory. "It is what it is. Such is the suchness." Since his teens, he had been flirting with Buddhism. Now he lives it out, with a life pared down to essentials and time alone to contemplate the meaning of impermanence. After a short break to put some jazz on the sound system, he sums it up in four words: "I'm a hedonistic ascetic."

Why live in a room that will hold nothing but a wicker chaise longue to sleep on, a Morris chair to read in, a large old table for a desk, and a bag of tools? Why is doing this so important? Aside from the fact that "birds are part of a whole system of living things," Doc said, "this is not answerable."

The future too is uncertain, and he points out more than once that he's not getting any younger. In fact, overwork led to a mild stroke a couple of years ago. Volunteers lose interest, and funding is slim. The solution? He seeks to establish a Shorebird Conservation Trust that will enable him to get some help and continue to support sustainable bird life on the island.

Stay tuned on the Shorebird Conservation Trust. In the meantime, you are welcome to visit Doc at Woodbourne Shorebird Refuge. Call first on 420-3404. It's a magical place, run by a rare bird indeed.



Photo: Richard Roach

Lesser Yellowleg



Photo: Andrew Hulsmeyer

Woodbourne Shorebird Refuge