

CONTINUED FROM 5E

> Blue iguana

me, his stubby legs racing furiously and his tail thrashing in the grass.

It wasn't a story I wanted to take back to Minnesota.

Mad Max begins bobbing his head at Marotta, warning him to stay away. Seconds later, the iguana darts for Marotta's foot. Our experienced guide reacts quickly, stopping Mad Max's charge with the bottom of his boot. Marotta holds the iguana's head under his shoe and tells us to go on the other side of a fence along the path. When Marotta releases Mad Max, the reptile chases him until Marotta turns the corner behind the fence.

On the other side, my body relaxes, relieved we're safe.

"He was getting quite territorial," Marotta said later. "Typically, we see that kind of behavior during the month of May, which is the height of breeding season."

I visited Mad Max, and other blue iguanas, in January at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park on the east end of Grand Cayman.

During my five-day stay, I questioned whether to leave my chair anchored perfectly along Seven Mile Beach, a tourist haven with pristine beaches and umbrella cocktails priced as much as meals back in the United States, for a 40-minute road trip to the opposite side of the island. But the chance to see a blue iguana eventually got me out of my seat.

The dragonlike reptiles are found only in Grand Cayman. A decade ago, fewer than 10 of the critically endangered animals were found. Today, there are more than 650, thanks to the Blue Iguana Recovery Program's breeding

efforts.

"When you first lay your eyes on these guys, they're quite stunning and very majestic animals," Marotta said. "People who come to see them get enamored right away."

Blue iguanas can't protect themselves from predators, he said. Their first reaction when in danger isn't to run away or fight.

Some might say their biggest enemy is the green iguana, introduced to Grand Cayman from Central America. Today, thousands of green iguanas call the island home, competing for food and nesting grounds with their blue cousins.

ROSES AND MANGOES

Our daylong excursion away from Seven Mile Beach included the Botanic Park, which houses the iguana habitat; the Heritage Garden, where visitors can see a traditional Cayman home; and the Floral Colour Garden, a landscape of plants arranged by color.

Along the way, we passed the popular Cayman Shoe Tree, started after Hurricane Ivan struck the island, when people began nailing washed-up sandals to its trunk and showing its branches.

Our tour starts at the Heritage Garden, where a seashell pathway lined with conch shells leads to a 20th-century pink wood cottage called the Rankin Home. It's surrounded by a traditional Caymanian sand yard and garden, where native plants thrive.

Roses and cat bush bloom among less-flashy plants used for teas and medicines. Mango, breadfruit and other fruit trees are there, too. My group snips a leaf of aloe vera.

Before leaving the garden, I see my first blue iguana, sunning in the grass. Its scales



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CAYMAN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM; DON McDOUGALL
Seven Mile Beach attracts all types of tourists — those who want to lounge on the white sand and those who want to play in the waves.

are grayish more than blue. Apparently, the colder they are, the less blue they appear.

This one must be really chilly, I tell myself.

Although I'm skeptical this is the blue iguana, I begin snapping photos. My group encourages me to get closer, assuring me it won't bite. (We have yet to meet Mad Max.)

I creep a tad closer. The iguana sneaks away slowly, searching for privacy under the stump of a tree. I move around the tree and kneel down for another shot. Its eyes follow me. I decide not to press my luck and catch up with my tour group for the next stop, the blue iguana habitat.

CAPTIVE BREEDING

Marotta, head warden of the iguanas recovery program, meets us at the park entrance.

We hike to the northern side of the reserve over a rocky path that cuts through a tropical forest.

When packing for the trip, I didn't think to bring bug spray. But now as mosquitoes buzz around me, I wish I had. I also forgot to consider what best to wear hiking through the forest. Open-toe platform sandals definitely weren't the best idea.

When the roughly 10-minute walk ends, Marotta leads us to a dirt trail along a wire fence. He unlocks a gate into the habitat, where a waist-high wall separates us from a wild blue iguana. The slate-colored female stares back at us.

Another female is motionless, camouflaged in the weeds.

Although many of the iguanas roam the park freely, 174 remain captive in the breeding program, Marotta said. Iguanas can be bred for up to 20 years, depending on their genetic diversity. All of the iguanas are held captive for at least two years while they grow.

Above the roaming female iguanas, dozens of wire cages in the "old facility" house reptiles still captive. Another set of cages in the "head start

facility" house the hatchlings.

At the end of the entrance, a larger iguana rests in the shaded grass.

He's got "attitude," Marotta says.

I get extra close to examine the animal's scales along its back and tail. They're bluest on hot days and in the spring during breeding season to snag a mate, Marotta says.

Winter isn't the time to see them at their brightest aqua. Also, they're most active between 10 a.m. and noon. In the afternoon, they're busy taking siestas.

That's when I feel a nip on my left foot.

At first, the pinch is lighter than a bee sting, but the pain begins throbbing. I look down and brush a red ant from the top of my foot. Our guides warned us to watch out for red ant mounds. But with the excitement of seeing blue iguanas, I must have forgotten to look where I was stepping. I'm now standing off the gravel path in the dirt and weeds.

"I think I got bit by a red ant," I tell my group.

I've never been bitten by a red ant before. I might be allergic. I imagine my foot swelling in my shoe. Maybe I should go to the hospital.

Maybe I need a special antibiotic. Someone in my group offers me the aloe vera leaf we saved. I rub the jelly on my reddening bump.

"This stuff really works," I say.

We turn a corner to the captive breeding pens, where 44 adults live in pairs for breeding. The bluest male iguana bobs his head as we lean over his pen. Marotta calls all the reptiles by name as we pass. The iguanas are curious why Marotta is there so late in the day — without food.

We decide to return to our tourist haven and call it a day.

And that's when we see Mad Max.

At least, I had a good story to take back to Minnesota.

Maricella Miranda can be reached at 651-228-5421. Follow her at twitter.com/mariwritesnews.

BLUE IGUANA RECOVERY PROGRAM

The Caribbean island of Grand Cayman houses the only blue iguana habitat in the world at the Queen Elizabeth II Botanic Park. About 100 visitors see the endangered animals monthly. Visitors may also volunteer to work in the breeding program. Guided tours cost \$30 for adults and \$20 for children. For more information, go to blueiguana.ky.



DON McDOUGALL

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Health > Turning Point

After shock of husband's sudden death, she used her writing to right herself

By Rhoda Fukushima
rgfukushima@pioneerpress.com

In October 2004, Jane Jonas' husband, Ric, went for a run near their business in Eau Claire, Wis. On his way back, he was hit by a dump truck and died. He was 55. Ric and Jane had been married 2½ years. When Jane heard the news, she quickly returned from Montana, where the couple had a second home and where the 50-something Jane Jonas now lives.

"It was surreal. It was like I was living in a fog. I knew what had happened but was unable to believe it. I started writing him a letter on the plane from Bozeman to Eau Claire. I needed to talk to him about what had happened.

"I wrote my feelings. How did this happen? Ric was a very careful man. He wouldn't put himself in danger. It was difficult for me and my children and family to understand.

"I wrote him letters, stories of our life. He had such a zest for living. I was so fearful I'd forget. My son said we were perfect for each other. We really were.

"I wrote almost every day. Some days, when I was on the couch and couldn't get up, I'd write. A lot of times, I wrote

at night. I had little notebooks all over the house.

"I'd have a couple of good days, then a day when I was devastated. I kept asking, 'When is this going to end? When am I going to be normal again?'

"I'd go to bed at night and say, 'Well, you made it through another day.' Sometimes, that's all I could do. But I knew I was getting better.

"I knew I would survive because I'm a strong person. I knew I had to survive because I knew he'd be very disappointed in me. I knew he expected me to move on, figure out how and to not waste my life.

"Three years after Ric died, I knew I had to make new friends. I forced myself to get out of the house, go to events and fundraisers, meet people. It was really hard. I didn't want to do it but I knew I had to.

"It was the best thing I could have done. I met some incredible people. I've made some marvelous friendships.

"Ric was extremely energetic. We went downhill skiing as much as possible. He water-skied. He played tennis. He golfed. He was very athletic. We started a memorial foundation in Ric's name to help kids who can't afford to go to sports camps.

"I was working on a novel when Ric died, and I couldn't get back to it. And that bothered me.

"We had gotten a puppy, Montana, when we got married. In February 2010, Montana got sick. He had cancer, and I had to put him down. It broke my heart. I went back into grieving. I thought, 'I can't do this again.'

"The dog was my link to Ric. The dog had to die for me to go forward. I wrote a story about the dog.

"That's when I thought of pulling together all the other things I'd written to Ric. I saw it as a way to get to the final phase of grief. I found notes



PHOTO COURTESY OF ESTELA VILASENOR

Jane Jonas in Bozeman, Mont.

all over the house. "My book, 'Upside Down,' came out in December 2011. I self-published it. (It's available on amazon.com.) I thought it could help other people. I wasn't going to give advice, but I thought there could be similarities with other people.

"It's not just a story about healing after death. It's a love story. The book starts by telling about Ric's death. Throughout the book there are the letters I wrote to Ric.

"When you have a tragedy — whether a death, loss of job, illness — it's life-changing. But you need to rebuild and start a new life. Hanging onto the old life isn't possible.

"I've come to a point where I've accepted Ric's death. Would I rather have him here? Absolutely. I didn't get to make that choice. But I'm grateful I had this man in my life. I'm grateful I can give back."

Have you turned the corner toward good health? If so, tell us your story. Email your ideas to rgfukushima@pioneerpress.com (no attachments, please) or call 651-228-5444. For more Turning Points, go to twincities.com/health.

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