

Caribbean's dry forest protection expanded

Title

The National Trust of the Cayman Islands has acquired 8 more acres to add to the [Mastic Reserve](#), bringing the total amount of land protected by the Trust in the [Important Bird Area](#) to 843 acres.

The reserve is home to all of Cayman Islands' endemic orchids and forest birds including the Near Threatened [Vitelline Warbler](#) *Dendroica vitellina*, [White-crowned Pigeon](#) *Patagioenas leucocephala* and [Cuban Amazon](#) *Amazona leucocephala*. It is additionally the main habitat for a critically endangered variety of Black Mastic tree *Termenalia eriostachya* var. *margaretiae*, which is unique to Grand Cayman in the Cayman Islands (a UK Overseas Territory). Aiming to protect and rejuvenate a very rare habitat of great importance to Grand Cayman and its biodiversity, the Trust hopes to acquire a total of 1,397 acres, which will cost several million dollars, through additional fundraising for its Land Reserve Fund.

Established in 1992, the Mastic Reserve protects the largest contiguous area of old growth forest remaining on Grand Cayman. Representing some of the last remaining examples of the Caribbean's lowland semi-deciduous dry forest and home to a unique variety of animals and plants, including all of Cayman's endemic orchids, trees and birds, the Reserve has high ecological, scenic and ecotourism value.

The area of the Mastic Forest has been above water for more than two million years -- as opposed to most of the island, which only emerged 125,000 years ago -- so that is where the native flora and fauna evolved, noted National Trust Field Officer, Stuart Mailer. "It's an island within an island," he said.

According to "Threatened Plants of the Cayman Islands - The Red List" by Fred Burton, the variety of Black Mastic, *Termenalia eriostachya* var. *margaretiae* (named after Margaret Barwick), was once quite widespread on the island, but by 1800 it was thought to have been harvested to extinction for its ebony-like heartwood. However, it was rediscovered in the Mastic Forest in 1991.

The [National Trust](#) maintains the Mastic Trail, a traditional path that passes through the heart of the reserve. Guided nature tours of the Trail allow visitors to experience and appreciate this national treasure. The Mastic Trail was recently awarded a TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence for 2013, based on reviews by their members.

"The Mastic Reserve IBA is key to the conservation of Cayman Islands biodiversity.

Preserving this land is vital in protecting our native plants and animals. The forest performs many other functions; it enhances rainfall and reduces run-off, helping to maintain our groundwater and protect our reefs and it keeps the island cooler; it removes carbon and pollutants from the atmosphere, and it provides locals and visitors alike with a unique opportunity to connect with nature,” said Mailer, who is a renowned Mastic tour guide.

Guided tours of the Mastic Trail are available Tuesday through Friday, and occasional weekends. For details on the National Trust’s Land Reserve Fund or guided Mastic tours contact info@nationaltrust.org.ky.