



ASCENSION ISLAND

CODE OF CONDUCT

Many of our species and habitats are protected by the Wildlife Protection Ordinance and Protected Areas legislation – it is an offence to deliberately harm or remove them without written authorisation.

- Only park vehicles in designated areas
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Do not create fire hazards
- Place all litter in bins provided or take it home
- Keep dogs under close control

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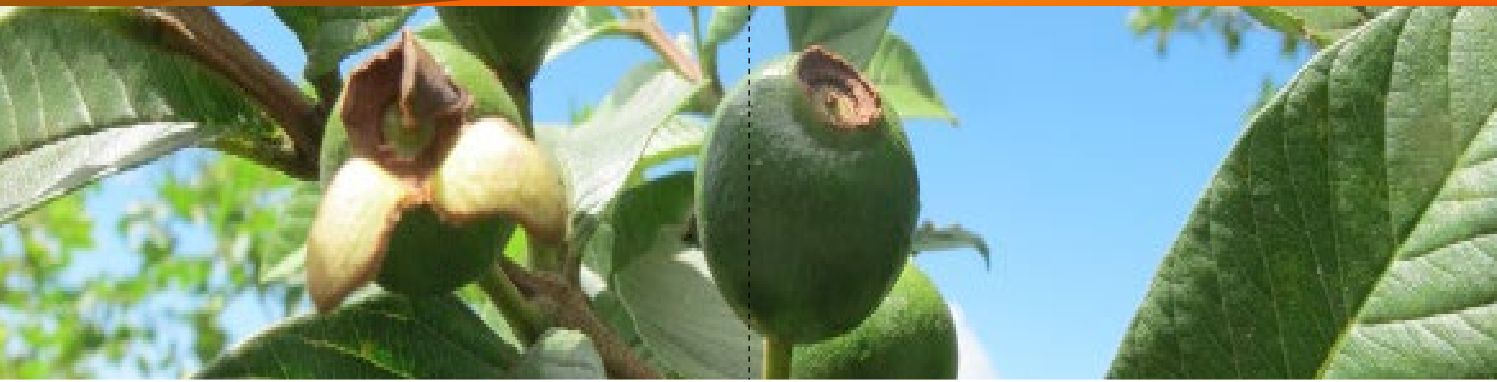
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GREEN MOUNTAIN

PLANTS AND WILDLIFE



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Why is Green Mountain green?

Early visitors to Ascension Island at the beginning of the 19th century, described it as exceptionally barren, with very few plants – including the mountain that we now know as Green Mountain. Only a handful of plant species - mostly ferns, mosses and some grasses, most of them endemic to Ascension – were found on the higher slopes of Green Mountain (around 859m). So how did Green Mountain become the lush, green landscape that we see today?

Charles Darwin visited Ascension in 1836 and admired the “active industry” on the mountain, where the marines had established a garden to supply vegetables and fruit for the garrison, but lamented that the Island was “destitute of trees”. It was Sir Joseph Hooker, close friend of Charles Darwin and later Director of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, who proposed a plan to increase vegetation on the mountain, following a visit in 1843.



Hooker’s strategy involved planting trees to increase rainfall, introducing vegetation on steep slopes to prevent soil erosion and introducing a wide variety of crops. There was mass planting of organised forests, shrublands and pastures on the island, introducing over 220 exotic plant species from diverse parts of the world. Records show early naval ships carrying seed and seedlings from botanical gardens in Europe, South Africa and Argentina. Kew Gardens in the UK sent over 330 plant specimens to Ascension and continue to be closely involved with the conservation work on Green Mountain today. Ultimately only the fittest of the introduced species survived, leaving us today with an eclectic mix of plants from all over the world. Prior to human settlement, the native ecosystems on Ascension were at a relatively early stage of development and while many claim Green Mountain to be a great ecological terraforming experiment, others see it as a man-made biological invasion that has degraded a previously pristine island environment.

Most of Ascension’s native and endemic plants are now being severely outcompeted by those that were introduced; however, the Ascension Island Conservation Department is working to find a balance between the native and endemic flora, the introduced species that are beneficial and those that are just invasive weeds.

The modern flora of Green Mountain can be loosely divided into three zones.

A dry zone below 330 m has patches of grass, dry-adapted shrubs, Mexican thorn, and tree tobacco.

From 330-630 m, there is more complete coverage including grasses, prickly pear, and trees such as juniper, casuarina and acacia.

Above 660 m, a mist zone is completely vegetated, including areas of dense trees and bushes, interspersed with some grassy slopes.

Six of Ascension’s seven endemic vascular plant species can be observed growing in various locations in Green Mountain National Park: *Anogramma ascensionis*, *Asplenium ascensionis*, *Ptisana purpurascens*, *Pteris adscensionis*, *Sporoboulus caespitosus*, and *Stenogrammitis ascensionensis*, as well as the majority of endemic bryophytes (mosses, liverworts and hornworts). Please refer to the leaflet ‘Flora of Ascension Island’ for more details.



Birds

The **red-necked francolin** is a compact, grey-brown game bird with a black and white streaked breast, red bill and a partridge-like appearance. As the name suggests, there are areas of bare skin on the throat and around the eyes. Red-necked francolins were introduced to Ascension in 1851. They feed mainly on seeds, shoots, roots and tubers and occasionally insects and other small animals. Their nest is a scraping in the ground which is lined with dry grass, leaves or feathers. Eggs vary from pinkish buff to light brown, with white speckling.

The **white tern**, locally referred to as the ‘fairy tern’ (*Gygis alba*), is the only seabird on Green Mountain. White terns can often be seen from the mountain road, as well as along Middleton’s path and around the water catchment area. They have a dove-like appearance and are white in colour with a finely pointed black bill and rings of black feathers around their eyes. A single egg is laid in a hollow, on a bare branch or on a rock ledge which is incubated by both parents.

The very vocal common **myna** (*Acridotheres tristis*) can be seen and heard all around Green Mountain (as well as the rest of the Island) and has been present since 1879. It is a strongly built brown starling that has a black head, bright yellow legs, bill and bare skin around the eyes. Its diet includes seeds, seedlings, fruit, insects, worms, young mice, small geckos and the eggs and nestlings of small birds. Large, untidy nests with two to four pale blue, unmarked eggs can be found in the hole of a tree, a rock crevice or a cavity in a building.

The **yellow canary** (*Serinus flaviventris*), introduced to Ascension around 1890, can be seen around the lower slopes of Green Mountain - its golden yellow breast is unmistakable, although females are paler and more heavily streaked. The male has a green back and wings as opposed to the greyish-green of the female.

The **common waxbill** (*Estrilda astrild*) can be seen when walking up the path to the Dew Pond. It is a small red-billed finch with brown feathers, a pink-centred breast and a comparatively long black tail. It feeds mainly on grass seeds. Nests are closely woven globes of grass and feathers, lined with plant material, down or animal hair and sometimes have a short, tube-like entrance. Although nests are often high in trees, particularly conifers, they can be found close to the ground under thick cover or in crevices in cliffs.

Below 330m

Mexican thorn, or mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*), is spread extensively across the drier lowlands of Ascension and is the dominant plant

species in these areas. Its exact date of introduction is uncertain, though its presence was recorded in the 1960s and possibly a decade earlier.

Tree tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*) was introduced after the Mexican thorn and has also spread rapidly in the lowland areas over recent years.

330-630m

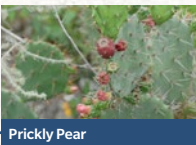
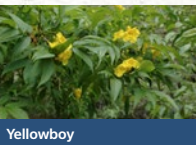
Yellowboy (*Tecoma stans*) is widespread on the lower slopes of Green Mountain, growing by the side of the road.

prevent evaporation of moisture. It has spread very rapidly and in 1974 a moth (*Cactoblastis cactorum*) was introduced in an attempt to control the plant’s expansion, which appears to be having a positive effect.

slopes of Green Mountain. The white flowers are followed by round green fruits which turn yellow when ripe and are edible. Attempts were made in 1900 to remove the shrubs but today guava remains one of the most common shrubs on the island.

Prickly Pear (*Opuntia vulgaris*) can also be seen growing by the road. A cactus, it was introduced to enrich the soil and

Guava (*Psidium guajava*) is widespread on the lower



Above 660m

Coffee bushes (*Coffea arabica*) can be found in small numbers around the car park below the Red Lion. These are likely to be recent introductions, when unsuccessful attempts were made to grow coffee commercially.

Banana trees (*Musa sp*) were introduced in the early days of the Garrison and can be found around the mountain. On Cronk’s path some impressive banana trees grow around Banana Bridge.

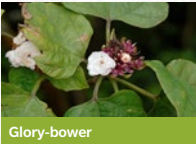
Four o'clock flower (*Mirabilis jalapa*) grows along the side of the Red Lion. The yellow flowers open in the late afternoon, hence its name, and then produce a strong, sweet-smelling fragrance throughout the night.

Raspberry (*Rubus rosifolius*) grows in abundance on the mountain paths. The stems are very prickly with bright green leaves; the red fruit has less flavour than the ‘English’ raspberry, but is edible.

Cape Gooseberry (*Physalis peruviana*) – farm records show this was established in 1825, providing a supply of fruit for the garrison.

Goat Weed (*Ageratum conyzoides*) has small blue fluffy flowers and a pungent smell.

Cape Yew (*Podcarpus elongate*) was introduced in the first half of the 19th century. A tall tree, it can grow up to 30m and has brown flaky bark and dark green slender leaves.



Koster’s Curse (*Clidemia hirta*) has distinctive veined leaves and small white flowers followed by round black berries.

Glory-bower, Lady Nugent’s Rose (*Clerodendrum fragrans*) is a shrub with large dark green leaves and clusters of faintly fragrant pinkish white flowers.

Green Aloe (*Furcraea gigantea*) one of many of the rosette plants that grow on the island. When mature it produces white flowers on a stalk of around 8m.

Ascension Lily (*Hippeastrum reginae*) has a striking red flower and a large bulb which helps it to survive through drought. Large swathes of the lily grow around The Pines. Despite its name, it is not endemic to the island and is native to Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru and Brazil.

Norfolk Island Pines (*Araucaria excels*) were introduced to provide timber for sailing ship masts.

Ginger (*Alpinia speciosa*) is an early introduction that has established well and is becoming problematic in areas, although it makes good wind breaks along many of the mountain paths. It is sometimes called the Shell Flower because the waxy flowers resemble sea shells. The stem was used for making shelters.

Walk up to the Dew Pond and on the highest peak you will find a forest of **bamboo** (*Bambusa sp.*). This was planted in the late 19th century.

Invertebrates

The male **diadem** (*Hypolimnas misippus*) is an easily recognised butterfly with iridescent velvety black wings. There are two white spots on the forewing and one large one on the hindwing. The female is an orange colour with black and white markings with one blackish spot on the upper side of the forewing as well as a second shadow. She has two dark spots on the underside. She can easily be mistaken for the African Monarch.

The **long-tailed blue** (*Lampides boeticus*) belongs to a group of small, brightly coloured butterflies with blue, coppery or brown wings. Although the male is the colour that its name suggests, the female is brown with a fawn grey underside, two white bars and two tiny peacock spots at the back. The male has a violet blue upper side, with two black spots and a small tail at the posterior point of the hindwing. As the caterpillar feeds exclusively on legumes (the pea family) it could only have bred on the island after the arrival of humans.

Land crabs (*Johngarthia lagostoma*) are Ascension’s only large, native land animal, and are one of the island’s most iconic inhabitants. For much of the year, the crabs can be found in the mountainous interior of the island where higher rainfall supports more vegetation, but once a year, between February and April, they make the migration to the sea to spawn. For more information see the leaflet ‘Land Crabs of Ascension Island’.

Other Animals

The **Coconut-palm Gecko** (*Hemidactylus mercatorius*) was probably accidentally introduced to the island at Georgetown Port. It can now be found in abundance in most buildings on Green Mountain and across the island. It has a spotty appearance and is light greyish in colour.

You are also likely to encounter a number of mammals that have been introduced to the island on your walks, including feral sheep and rabbits. The Conservation Department have several fenced off areas for endemic plant restoration work to protect them from these grazing animals.



Schematic diagram adapted from DC Catling & Stroud (2012), The Greening of Green Mountain, Ascension Island