

My Life Among the Birds

A Biography of Lisa Salmon

Lisa Salmon was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1907, into a Jewish family whose roots in the Caribbean were said to reach back to the time of Christopher Columbus. According to family tradition, her ancestors arrived in the region during the late fifteenth century, when the Spanish Inquisition forced many Jewish families to flee Spain in search of safety and a new beginning.

From childhood, Lisa displayed the strong will and fierce independence that would define her life. She attended Wolmer's Girls' School in Kingston, where her fascination with the natural world began to emerge. She was especially drawn to creatures that other people ignored or feared. Lisa would save pieces of her lunch to feed the large ground lizards around the school—an unusual habit in a country where many people possessed a deep fear and dislike of lizards.

Birds also captured her attention. At her family's home in downtown Kingston, she watched them closely and offered them food whenever she could. Even as a girl, she was curious about their movements, habits, and individual personalities. This early fascination would eventually shape the greater part of her life.

Lisa's childhood was not easy. Her father abandoned the family, leaving her mother and relatives with the difficult responsibility of raising seven children. The family struggled financially and moved to different parts of Jamaica in search of work and a way to make ends meet. These hardships helped form Lisa's resilience, resourcefulness, and lifelong determination to stand firmly on her own feet.

For a short time, she taught at Wolmer's, the school she had once attended. She later joined the Shell Oil Company. When the Second World War began, however, Lisa answered the call to serve. She left her position at Shell and travelled to England, where she served with the Women's Auxiliary Air Force.

At the end of the war, Lisa returned to Jamaica and resumed her work at Shell. Her experiences abroad had strengthened an already independent and outspoken personality. She was never afraid to express her convictions, whether they were popular or not. When air-conditioning units were installed in the company's offices, Lisa strongly objected to the change. Rather than remain in surroundings that did not suit her, she left the company.

In 1953, Lisa moved to the hills near Anchovy in St James, overlooking Montego Bay, and purchased a small plot of land. Her resources were modest, but she built a little cottage and named it Rocklands. There, surrounded by the beauty of the Jamaican countryside, she began an entirely new chapter of her life.

Rocklands became her refuge, her workshop, and eventually her kingdom.

Within her hillside cottage, Lisa allowed her creative life to blossom. She wrote poetry and published a children's book of rhymes. She painted, drew, and created pottery figures of birds, some of which were made for the Royal Worcester collection. Around the cottage, she developed a beautiful forest garden filled with plants that brought colour, shelter, and life to the hillside.

Lisa's love of animals extended beyond birds. Her close friend Audrey Downer remembered that she was "mad keen on animals." On one occasion, Lisa refused to use her oven after discovering that a mouse had built its nest inside. She also cared patiently for abandoned nestlings and injured birds, giving names to many of the creatures that came under her protection.

It was only natural that Lisa should begin feeding the wild birds around Rocklands. She placed corn and fruit outside and prepared sugar water for the hummingbirds. Earning their confidence required extraordinary patience. For five years, she worked to gain their trust before the hummingbirds finally began coming to her hand.

That achievement changed everything.

People started visiting Rocklands to see the birds, walk through Lisa's garden, admire her artwork, and occasionally purchase one of her pieces. What had begun as a private passion gradually developed into Rocklands Bird Sanctuary and Feeding Station, which became known throughout Jamaica and, eventually, around the world.

Lisa opened Rocklands to the public each afternoon at 3:30 and closed it at sunset. During the early 1960s, she began charging an entrance fee of fifty US cents. Its reputation spread, and from the 1950s through the 1980s, Rocklands became one of the most popular and distinctive attractions in the Montego Bay area.

Visitors sat quietly on Lisa's porch while hummingbirds hovered before them, perched upon their fingers, and drank sugar water from small bottles held in their hands. The experience felt almost magical, but it was the result of Lisa's patience, discipline, and deep understanding of wild birds.

Lisa was not interested only in feeding birds; she was determined to protect them. She became a forceful advocate for Jamaica's wildlife and natural environment. She wrote letters and articles for *The Gleaner*, arguing for the conservation of birds and their habitats. She also campaigned for shorter and more responsible hunting seasons that would allow birds to nest and raise their young without interruption.

Her campaign extended from confronting neighbourhood boys carrying slingshots to challenging powerful hunting interests at home and abroad. She even wrote to the Pope to protest the reported Italian practice of eating larks' tongues. According to the story, the Pope responded by sending Lisa a photograph of himself.

Her opposition to bird hunting earned her the anger of members of Jamaica's wealthy and outspoken hunting community. Lisa did not retreat. She continued writing, speaking, and lobbying because she believed the cause was more important than anyone's displeasure. In time,

many hunters recognized the validity of her arguments, and some became dedicated conservationists themselves.

Lisa was more than a bird lover. Through extensive field observation, photography, reading, and detailed note-taking, she developed an impressive knowledge of avian ecology. In her younger years, she spent long periods roaming western Jamaica, studying every aspect of bird life and behaviour.

Her curiosity extended far beyond birds. Lisa collected fossils, seashells, and butterflies. She was also an avid photographer who spent countless hours taking pictures of shorebirds, todies, and anything else that caught her attention. Over the years, she accumulated thousands of photographs.

These images became an important part of her work with young people. Lisa visited schools and libraries, where she used slide shows to teach children about wildlife and the environment. She also led field trips and strongly supported the training of teachers in natural-history education.

Much of Lisa's knowledge came not from formal scientific training but from a lifetime of patient observation, reading, study, and direct experience. She wanted children and adults alike to understand that Jamaica's wildlife was precious and that its survival depended upon their care.

Lisa was a founding member of the Gosse Bird Club, now known as BirdLife Jamaica. The club became Jamaica's principal organization dedicated specifically to birds and their habitats, as well as one of the island's oldest environmental non-governmental organizations. At the club's inaugural meeting in 1963, Lisa was made an honorary member in recognition of her contribution.

Her environmental work brought her numerous honours. The Institute of Jamaica awarded her the Silver Musgrave Medal and the Centenary Medal. She also received a GraceKennedy Award and citations from the Natural History Society of Jamaica, the Jamaica Tourist Board, the St James Cultural Society, and the Anchovy Cultural Society. The Natural History Society of Jamaica also made her an honorary member.

As Rocklands grew in reputation, visitors came not only to see the birds but also to talk with its remarkable owner. Lisa was an extraordinary conversationalist who could speak confidently on subjects ranging from classical music and politics to nature and conservation. Her knowledge of Jamaican birdlife became widely respected.

Among those who sought her out was James Bond, the distinguished ornithologist and author of *Birds of the West Indies*. Bond was said to be as blunt and spirited as Lisa, and the two reportedly spent many hours at Rocklands debating and exchanging observations about birds.

Crawford H. Greenewalt, author of an important study of hummingbirds, also visited. Lisa discussed the habits and lives of birds with such experts, drawing upon her careful study and years of direct observation in the field.

The fame of the woman who could coax wild hummingbirds onto the fingers of visitors spread internationally. Lisa and her sanctuary appeared in numerous documentaries and publications, including *Vogue*, *National Geographic*, and the BBC television programme *The Really Wild Show*.

Over the years, Rocklands welcomed thousands of people from around the world. American presidents, international heads of state, European royalty, celebrities, distinguished naturalists, and ordinary travellers all made their way to Lisa's porch and forest garden.

As Audrey Downer recalled, "Everybody who was anybody who came to Jamaica went to see Lisa and her birds."

Yet inside Lisa's sanctuary, fame and rank carried little weight. Rocklands belonged to the birds, and everyone entered on her terms.

Visitors were required to follow her instructions. They came at the appointed hour, sat where they were told, remained quiet, and behaved in a way that would not frighten the birds. Whether the visitor was a president, a queen, a film star, or an ordinary traveller made no difference to Lisa.

On one occasion, the Secret Service officers accompanying a former American president disturbed the birds by remaining on their feet and moving about. Lisa told the president that his men would have to sit down. If they continued frightening her birds, she warned him, he would simply have to leave with them. The former president quickly ordered his security detail to be seated and to follow Lisa's instructions.

Another time, a crew from a major international television network arrived to interview her. Lisa refused to admit them before the official opening time, which they found deeply irritating. When the appointed closing time arrived, the interview was still unfinished. Nevertheless, Lisa brought it to an end.

"Well, the interview is over," she told them. "I have to put my birds to bed now. Good day."

The crew was not accustomed to being dismissed, but Lisa had no interest in its usual protocols. The network later replayed the clip repeatedly. Its reporters may have travelled freely throughout the world, but at Rocklands, the birds came first.

Lisa's determination to protect them was absolute. Fearless and an exceptional shot, she carried a licensed .45-calibre pistol wherever she went. Marauding neighbourhood cats posed a deadly threat to the birds feeding on her patio, and Lisa was known to dispatch any cat that attempted to ambush them with unflinching speed and accuracy.

Her methods could be severe, but within her sanctuary she considered herself the birds' guardian and would not tolerate predators threatening them. Whenever neighbours inquired about the whereabouts of a cherished missing cat, Lisa would respond with a twinkle in her eye and a wry, noncommittal answer concerning the fate of the troublesome animal.

Beyond Rocklands, Lisa became one of Montego Bay's most recognizable characters. Residents often saw her travelling through town in her little bright-blue Ford Anglia, dressed in a crisp white blouse and blue jeans. The image suited her perfectly: practical, distinctive, self-possessed, and entirely unconcerned with convention.

Some people called Lisa eccentric. Perhaps she was, but her eccentricity could not be separated from the courage and independence that allowed her to build an extraordinary life. Her distinctive style, spunk, and wit were all essential parts of what those who knew her came to regard as "the Lisa experience."

On one occasion, Lisa was invited to have lunch with the Governor-General and his wife at King's House, their official residence. She initially declined the invitation because she feared that she would not be able to meet the formal dress code. The Governor-General and his wife, who had known her for years, waived the customary protocol and insisted that she join them. Lisa accepted the invitation with delight.

In 1988, Hurricane Gilbert tore the roof from Lisa's cottage and damaged much of her treasured photographic collection. Years of work—including irreplaceable photographs, bird notes, records, and personal memories—were lost. The destruction was devastating, but Lisa responded in her characteristically indomitable fashion: she rebuilt her cottage and reopened the sanctuary.

Rocklands was the world she created, and within it she helped people experience the wonder of Jamaica's birds at the closest possible distance. Under Lisa's firm guidance, visitors entered briefly into the delicate lives of the creatures she had spent decades observing and protecting.

Age and time eventually caught up with Lisa, and her health gradually declined. Lisa Salmon died on 2 August 2000 at the age of 92. By then, she had welcomed thousands of visitors and transformed a modest hillside cottage into a sanctuary of international renown.

Her work did not end with her passing. Rocklands Bird Sanctuary continued under the care of Fritz Beckford, a local guide whom Lisa had mentored for many years. Through him and those who followed, visitors could still sit quietly, extend a hand, and feel the delicate feet of a hummingbird resting upon their finger.

Lisa's contribution to the knowledge and appreciation of Jamaica's natural history would long be remembered. Her enduring legacy was not merely a place, but an experience: a sanctuary where human beings could become still, enter the world of the birds, and discover that even the smallest living creature was worthy of patience, wonder, and protection.