



# The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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October 2015



# And By and By A Cloud Takes Us All Away\*

By Julie ffrench

When my father Richard ffrench died five years ago, the family were united in our feeling that the place his ashes ought to be scattered was somewhere in the forests of the Northern Range. 'The bush' was his natural habitat, where he felt most at home, whether it was mist-netting and recording data, or leading schoolchildren or ecotourists on hikes, or just walking in the forest, binoculars slung around his neck, cutlass in hand. So when my mother Margaret came on what would be her last trip to Trinidad in 2012, we went up together to the trace at Las Lapas, on the Blanchisseuse Road just above the Nature Centre, and had a small family ceremony as we each took a handful of ashes and said our personal goodbyes to my lovely daddy.

When Margaret passed away earlier this summer, it felt right that she should be reunited with dad, and have her ashes scattered in the same spot. They had had such a happy life together, nearly 60 years, and one of their many joint ventures had been mist-netting at this precise location, a good place on the ridge between two valleys to catch passing birdlife. Dad would place the birds he had caught in the mist nets into small cloth bags mum had sewn, and then together they would weigh each bird, mum noting the results in her very precise handwriting, before carefully and gently extricating the bird from the bag, to measure wingspan, note moult patterns and other features, and then releasing it back into the wild.

The day we came to bring mum's ashes to Las Lapas was one of those

stormy, rainy wet season days, where the whole mountain was shrouded in mist, the only sound being that of the leaves dripping. Three years ago we scattered dad's ashes on a calm, sunny afternoon, but when Tim and I walked down the trace this time, it was misty, dark and dank – hardly auspicious, we thought. But just as I threw her ashes into the same patch of undergrowth, a sudden gust of wind blew up, caught Margaret's ashes and swept them not down, but up, up into the forest, lifting and mingling them with the mist of the mountain.

*\*William Shakespeare: "Two Gentlemen of Verona" Act 1, Sc iii, 84-87.*

*Above: Las Lapas in the mist when they delivered the ashes.*

*Photographer: Tim Baker*





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*Kimberly, Mukesh and Martyn look for as many species as they can.  
Photographer: Ann Sealey*

## Rare Bird Alerts

By Kimberly Chu Foon

The Asa Wright Nature Centre will soon be publishing newsletter articles on the rare birds sighted at the Centre grounds as well as on our external trips to sites such as Caroni, Nariva, Waterloo and Aripo. Sightings of rare species such as the Ornate Hawk-Eagle, Black-and-white Warbler and Scarlet tanager are always great to hear about and are of high interest to the ornithological community. Rare bird recordings have substantially improved our understanding of migration routes and the distribution limits of these species. If you've spotted what you think is a rare bird anywhere in Trinidad and Tobago please, let us know! Your information is valuable and may even be published in our articles. Information on rare birds can be sent to Martyn Kenefick at [martynkenefick@hotmail.com](mailto:martynkenefick@hotmail.com).

Photos of these birds are also welcomed.

# BIG SIT 2015

By Peter O'Connor

The 'Big Sit' is an annual event of birders and those interested in birds. Participants all over the world gather and sit in one place for a full day—daylight hours—to list all of the birds they see or hear within a five meter radius. As we did last year the Asa Wright Big Sit was held on our famous verandah—where else?

Led by Martyn Kenefick, birding guide and author, and now a member of the AWNC Board, the 2015 Big Sit attracted more supporters than

last year. However, we came up with one bird less! In 2014 we counted 70 species from where we sat, but this year the count was 69.

Martyn produced a beautiful essay on the day, capturing the setting of the Arima Valley and the mood which prevailed. Rather than 'split' this extended essay over two Bellbird newsletters we are posting it to our website and to our facebook page.

Make sure that you check for Martyn's story in these pages. Your spirit will soar as you read!



## Coffee Harvest Update

We are not sure if the dry spell in September and early October is responsible, but the berries on our coffee trees have not ripened enough for harvesting.

For those who are interested in volunteering to help pick the berries please stay in touch and we will let you know when we can begin.

Call **667-4655** or e-mail [asawrightconsedu@gmail.com](mailto:asawrightconsedu@gmail.com) for information.



## Wattled Jacana

*(Jacana jacana)*

By Johanne Ryan

The Wattled Jacana possesses unusually large feet for its size. Attached to long legs, these feet are advantageous in its natural habitat of freshwater marshes. The feet cover a wide area, helping to evenly distribute the Jacana's weight. This enables it to walk on floating leaves. For this skill, Trinbagonians have referred to it as the 'Lily-trotter'. Walking on the floating vegetation can be a search for its next meal. It will look for food that fits a herbivorous diet. Plant matter, insects, molluscs or fish are nutritious sources. It goes mostly, for invertebrates. Though able to swim, it does not practice this often. Its long legs replace the tail as a steering device when flying.

When it wants to be heard, the rattling call cannot be missed, for it is loud. Besides the big feet, there are other distinctive features. It has a bright yellow bill and pale yellow flight feathers that are obvious in flight. When disturbed the wader also flashes the flight feathers. At times, it raises its wings to expose its



Photographer: Clive Bowley

spurs. Very memorable is the red wattle on the bare forehead plus the red rictal lappets. The back and most of the wing, when closed, are chestnut. The head, neck and underparts are black.

The Wattled Jacana inhabits both Trinidad and Tobago. It breeds from June to March. Eggs are olive-brown with black streaks, a perfect cryptic pattern to blend in with wetland vegetation. The male takes the bigger role in incubation and parental care. The females, that are slightly larger than the males, are polyandrous. Females will breed with more than one male. The

Wattled Jacana, is 10 inches long and exists in tropical and sub-tropical South America.

### References:

*French, Richard. A guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago. Cornell University Press. 1991*

*Hilty, Steven. Birds of Venezuela. Princeton University Press. 2002*

*2010. Wattled Jacana (Jacana jacana), Neotropical Birds Online (T. S. Schulenberg, Editor). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; retrieved from Neotropical Birds Online: [http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/portal/species/overview?p\\_p\\_spp=148661](http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/portal/species/overview?p_p_spp=148661)*

## YOUNG ENVIRONMENTALIST OF THE MONTH

If you think your child has done something helpful to preserve the environment, please feel free to share it with us. Either write a short story or send a few pictures to [dinetienne44@gmail.com](mailto:dinetienne44@gmail.com)

He/she may be selected as our Young Environmentalist of the Month. Once your child is featured in our monthly newsletter, he/she and two adults will be given a complimentary day visit to Asa Wright Nature Centre, which includes viewing birds/animals on the Verandah, a nature tour and use of the clear water pool. Ages 5-16.

