



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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February 2016

The Return of the Capuchins

By Kimberly Chu Foon

It has been many years since monkeys have been seen at or near the Asa Wright Nature Centre and the last record of any sighting within the Arima Valley is believed to be detailed in a paper written by William Beebe in the 1950's. On Friday 12th February several of our guides and guests were treated to a very big surprise during their tour when two capuchin monkeys were spotted feeding in a padoo tree near to our Oilbird Trail.

There are two species of monkeys native to Trinidad and Tobago, the Red-Howler Monkey and the White-Fronted Capuchin. A third species was, however, introduced to the Chagaramas peninsula known as the

Tufted Capuchin. Our guides believe that the monkeys spotted were in fact the native White-Fronted Capuchin (as opposed to the Tufted Capuchin), however, their movement was so rapid through the forest that there are no photos to confirm.

We're not quite sure what the travelling plans are for these two capuchins. It is possible that they were simply passing through the area but it is a nice thought that they may be here to stay. The precise reason behind the absence of monkeys from the Arima Valley is not quite known but one of the main theories is that they were overhunted. If the habitat is right we may just find that their population slowly expands once again into the area.

YOUNG ENVIRONMENTALIST OF THE MONTH

If you think your child, aged 5-16, 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 asawrightconsedu@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.





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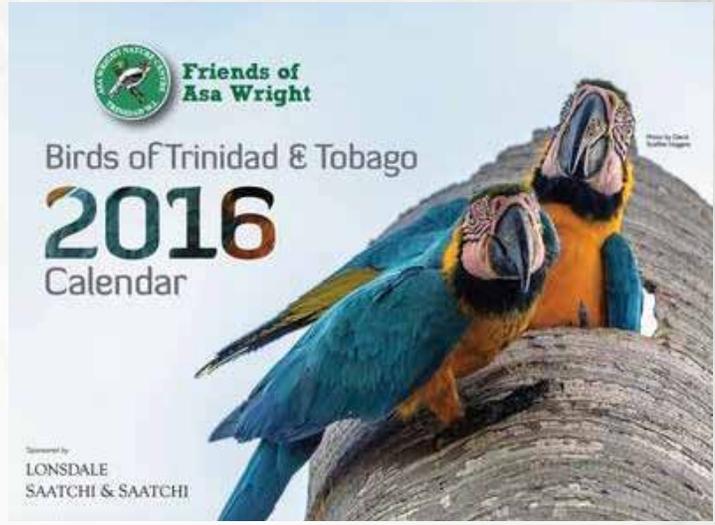
2016 Birds of T&T Calendar

By Johanne Ryan

The Asa Wright Nature Centre has released its 'Birds of Trinidad and Tobago' 2016 calendar which features superb photos of some of Trinidad and Tobago's beautiful avifauna. The Roseate Spoonbill, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and Masked Cardinal are just a few that appear inside. The calendar was first published in 2015 and is part of our Friends of Asa Wright initiative. The Friends of Asa Wright Nature Centre supports our conservation work in the Arima Valley.

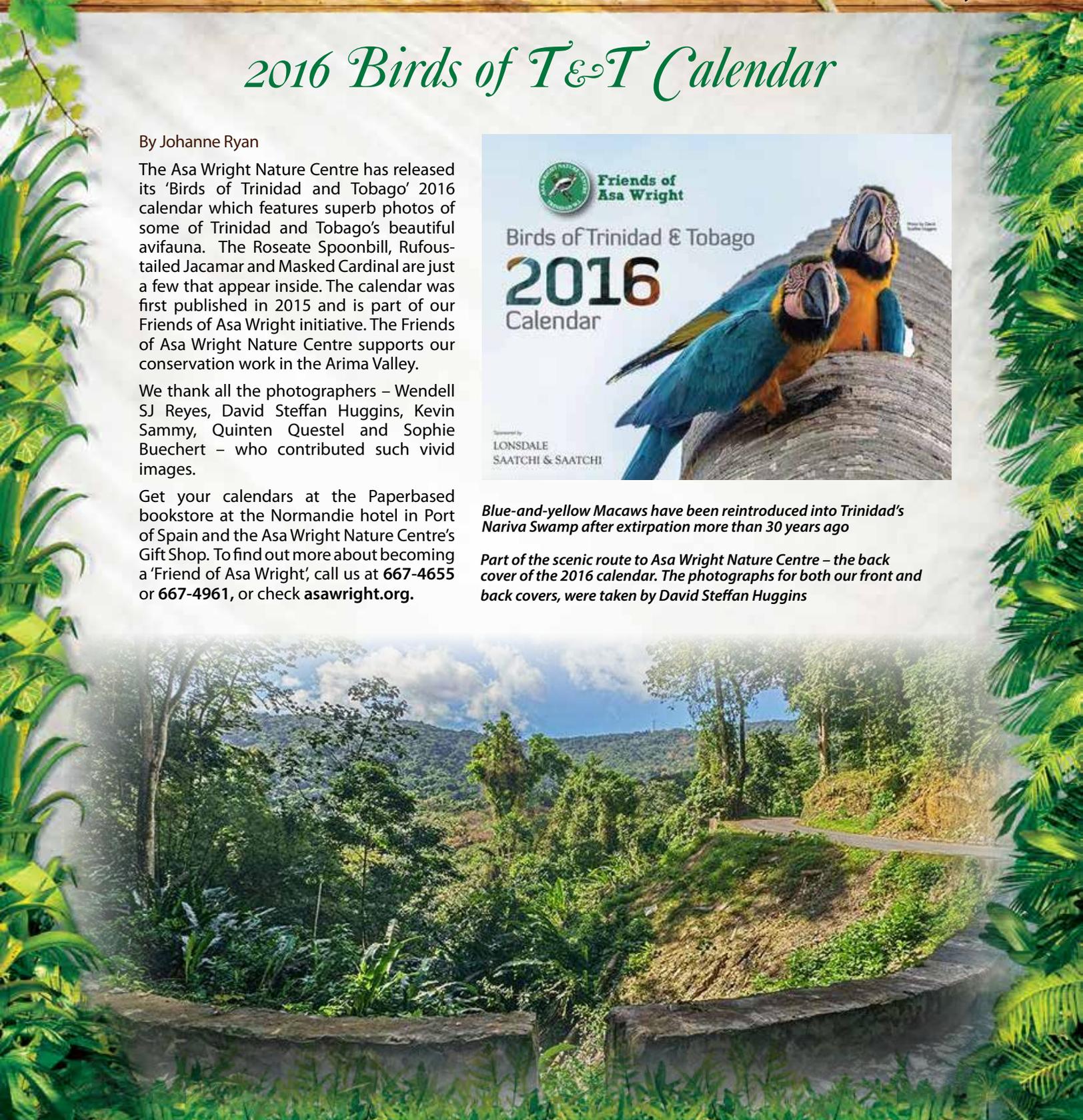
We thank all the photographers – Wendell SJ Reyes, David Steffan Huggins, Kevin Sammy, Quinten Questel and Sophie Buechert – who contributed such vivid images.

Get your calendars at the Paperbased bookstore at the Normandie hotel in Port of Spain and the Asa Wright Nature Centre's Gift Shop. To find out more about becoming a 'Friend of Asa Wright', call us at 667-4655 or 667-4961, or check asawright.org.



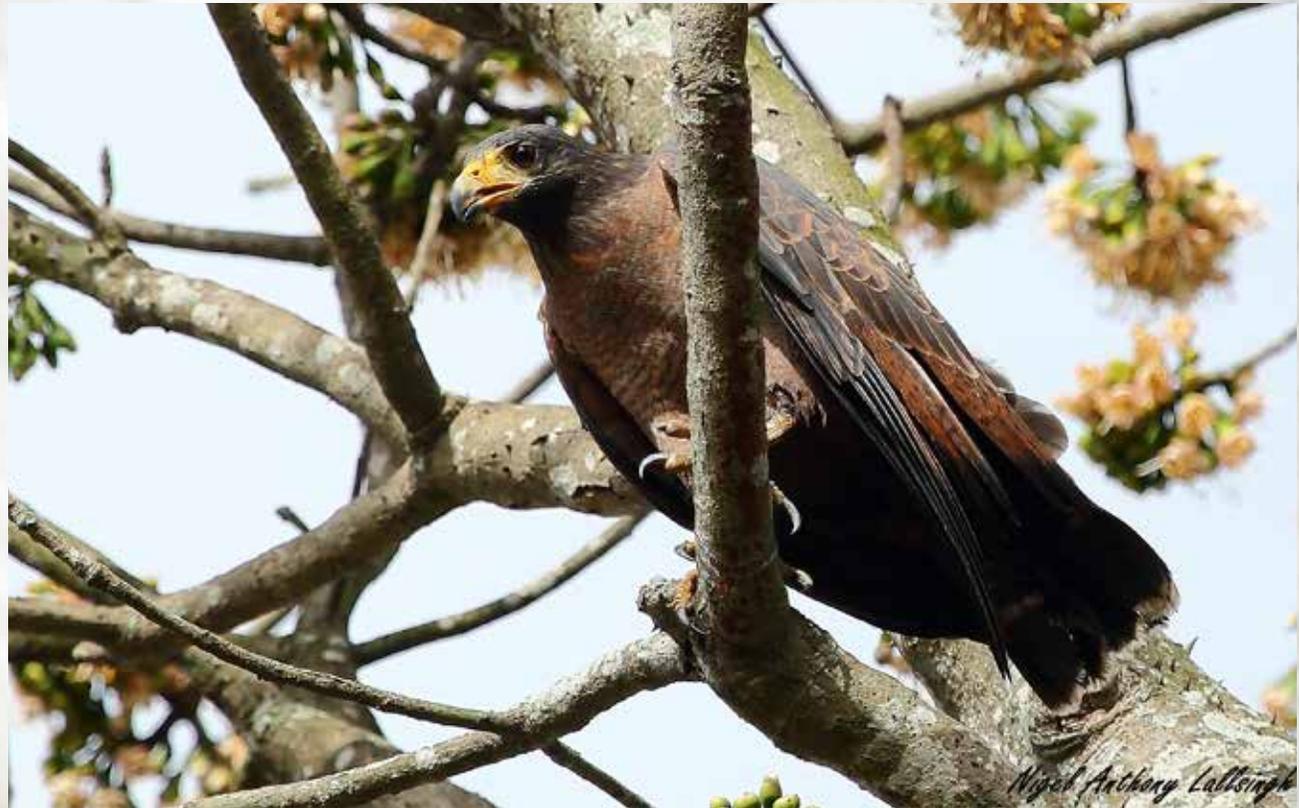
Blue-and-yellow Macaws have been reintroduced into Trinidad's Nariva Swamp after extirpation more than 30 years ago

Part of the scenic route to Asa Wright Nature Centre – the back cover of the 2016 calendar. The photographs for both our front and back covers, were taken by David Steffan Huggins





Unusual Sightings



The Rufous Crab-Hawk Photo by Nigel Lallsingh

By Martyn Kenefick

Without doubt, the most exciting sighting event of the year so far at Springhill occurred on February 12th and there wasn't a feather in sight! Two White-fronted Capuchins were seen foraging in the treetops close to the start of the Guacharo trail. It has been nearly 60 years since we have had a monkey on the property.

Back to birds. Late January is always a great month at the Centre for viewing hummingbirds. Over the last few weeks, we have enjoyed stunning adult males of both Ruby Topaz and Tufted Coquette at the flowering vervine bushes together with adult male Long-billed

Starthroat at the sugar water feeders. Our resident Black Hawk-Eagle put on occasional appearances soaring over the valley but much more unexpectedly, a Great Black Hawk was carefully studied flying over the top car park on February 13th. Meanwhile, the first Piratic Flycatchers of the season were evident calling continuously from the car park on the 19th.

The highlight of a mid-January tour, led by Mahase, was the sighting of an adult Black Hawk-Eagle soaring over the Blanchisseuse Road accompanied by a juvenile. Whilst we have always been confident that this magnificent raptor breeds in the area, it is still gratifying to see "family".

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Unusual Sightings (continued)

From time to time, one particular tour party is exceptionally successful in finding unusual birds. During mid-February, Mahase's tour group had that honour. It all started off with "night-birding" on February 13th, pulling in the crowds with a magnificent tally of 18 Common Pauragues, 10 White-tailed Nightjars, three Tropical Screech-Owls and a Rufous Nightjar. There followed sightings of a Pawi in the Northern Range on the 15th and, without doubt, the rarest bird seen in Trinidad for a while, a dark morph Broad-winged Hawk. This colour morph represents no more than 1% of the world population and breeds exclusively in the westernmost edge of their continental North American range. A White-tailed Goldenthrout was seen at the Aripo livestock station the following day and both Boat-billed Heron and American Wigeon were found in the Caroni Swamp on the 17th. One of the highlights on Dave's tours this month was a Blue-and-Yellow Macaw at a nesting tree cavity in Nariva on February 21st.

Elsewhere, the distribution spread of White-eyed Parakeets in Trinidad continued with a noisy group of five found feeding on a breadfruit tree in Arouca, on January 31st. Blue-tailed Emeralds were being seen as widely spread as St Ann's in the west and Lopinot valley in the east. The tidal mudflats on the west coast were all about numbers in early February with high counts of 12 Wilson's Plovers and 11 Lesser Black-backed Gulls at Brickfield. An unseasonal Aplomado Falcon was a good find along Caltoo Trace, Plum Mitán on February 6th (80% of our records of this bird of prey come from the period May – November when they pre-date migrant shorebirds). Continuing with the unseasonal theme, Stilt Sandpipers are a regular passage migrant during August through October. However, very few are seen over winter. Thus, small feeding flocks on the river through the Millenium Park Golf Course and also

on the edge of the Caroni Swamp were most welcome sights in mid-February. Spring was obviously in the air over the Carnival weekend with not only an adult Black Hawk-Eagle but also an excitable pair of Streak-headed Woodcreepers all displaying at Gran Couva. Also present, was a totally nonplussed Yellow-olive Flycatcher. Later in the week, both Bay-breasted and Blackpoll Warblers were found there. Away from the hubbub of Carnival, the first Plumbeous Kite of the season showed over Fishing Pond and a Prothonotary Warbler was picked out amongst a number of Yellow Warblers and American Redstarts feeding in a flowering Silk Cotton tree at Carli Bay. Close by, a particularly confiding Rufous Crab-Hawk looked on. For those birders out in the field in the pre-dawn of Valentine's Day, four Rufous Nightjars were vocalising in the Chaguaramas area, whilst at the opposite end of Trinidad, at Granville, up to four Blue Ground-Doves were seen and heard. Finally, a Brown Violetear was found atop El Tucuche on the 21st and a Caribbean Martin (the first in Trinidad since 2006) was seen to soar over.

The stream of rare birds keeps coming from Bon Accord, Tobago where a birdwatching group who had spent five days at the Centre before crossing over to the sister isle, found an adult Gray Heron. Later that day, a male Masked Duck was seen. Close by, an adult Black-headed Gull was picked out amongst the Laughing Gulls in Milford Bay on February 16th. Even on an island as small as Tobago, birds can go missing for long periods of time. Back in December 2014, an adult Western Reef-Heron was found at Bon Accord. It was seen intermittently up until September 2015 and then we assumed it had left the island. That is until it was spotted on the shoreline at the Magdalena Hotel on February 17th. At the other end of the island, a White-tailed Tropicbird was seen close to Little Tobago on February 5th and there was exciting news on the 14th when two Masked Boobies were found on St. Giles Rocks after an absence of quite a few years.



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The Christmas Bird Count results are in!

By Kimberly Chu Foon

The results of last year's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) have arrived! Readers may recall that the last CBC was a particularly rainy one that resulted in a "do over" for many of the count sites. The final tally was 183 species and 8,127 individuals which is quite good considering that the first day had such poor weather conditions. There were more than 31 participants in the event all from various backgrounds and areas of interest. A few

noteworthy recordings included a Ruddy-breasted Seedeater which was last recorded in 2010, three White-cheeked Pintails which were last recorded in 1989 and an Orange-billed Nightingale Thrush which was spotted in Las Lapas and is a first time record for the CBC. As the 2015 CBC is wrapped up, let's hope that the 2016 count is a bright and sunny one! A special thanks goes out to Vishnu Debie for his efforts in organising the CBC as well as providing the results to the Centre.

Blue-headed Parrot (*Pionus menstruus*)

By Johanne Ryan

On a few occasions in 2016, Blue-headed Parrots were spotted from the AWNC verandah. Blooming mountain immortelle (*Erythrina*) at this time of year, is a preferred choice on their menu. However, the parrots also feed on the fruit and seeds of the sandbox tree (*Hura crepitans*) and teak tree (*Tectona grandis*).

To identify a Blue-headed Parrot, you must of course, look at its head. It boasts a characteristic blue head – the blue plumage stretches from the top of the head to the neck and upper breast. The rest of the body is generally green, except for golden-tinged wing coverts and red undertail coverts. The base of the underside of the tail is also red. The parrot has one pink spot on the upper mandible and a black spot on the ear coverts. The parrot is about 10 – 11 inches in size. Another easy way of distinguishing the Blue-headed parrot from other parrots like the common Orange-winged Parrot, is its voice. Blue-headed parrots are easily recognised by their high-pitched, squeaky vocalisations that tend to be made in groups.

Blue-headed Parrots are resident breeders in Trinidad and in South and Central America – from Costa Rica to Brazil. In Trinidad, breeding has been recorded in March and October. They nest in holes in trees and one bird lays a clutch of four white eggs. So the next time



Photo by Sanjiv Parasram

you hear a squeaky parrot's call, that doesn't quite sound like the ubiquitous Orange-winged parrot, look closer, it just might be a Blue-headed Parrot.

References:

French, R. *A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*. Cornell University Press. 2012.

Hilty, S. *Birds of Venezuela*. Princeton University Press. 2003.