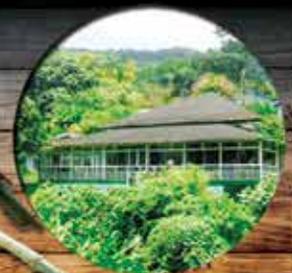




The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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August 2016

The T&T Birding Scene

By Martyn Kenefick

It is quite normal for numbers of those commonly found species at Springhill to reduce during July and August. Indeed, we have been seeing just single figures of our regular hummingbirds, tanagers and honeycreepers. It is also quite normal for there to be nothing "rare" to get the pulses racing, although the sight of a low flying, feeding group of some 18 Swallow-tailed Kites hawking flying insects on July 5th was most pleasing.

However, elsewhere in Trinidad, a number of wanderers from the South American mainland have been found; shorebird migration has begun in earnest and there have been a few surprises along the way.

Without doubt, the star bird of the month was a moulting adult male Amethyst Woodstar found at Yerette in the Maracas, St. Joseph Valley in late July. This species is the most recent addition to the hummingbirds of T&T, following three birds found during the latter half of June 2015. Almost as rare, was a Paint-billed Crake, sadly found dead beside the road, near Palmiste on July 30th. There have only been eight ever found in Trinidad, six of which were during the period June to September. Perhaps more anticipated, but nevertheless most welcome, were two Double-Striped Thick-Knees briefly seen just before dawn at Caroni rice project on July 7th. One at least was still present in the area on August 14th. Other long-staying rarities included four Glossy Ibis



Amethyst Woodstar Photo by Theo Ferguson

and at least one each of White-Faced Whistling-Duck, Snail Kite and American Flamingo still in the Caroni area up until mid-August at least.

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The T&T Birding Scene (continued)

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The status of parakeets in Trinidad is being carefully monitored. There is an established feral population of White-Eyed Parakeets in the St Ann's area of north Port of Spain. Indeed, eight birds were photographed there on August 6th. The same day saw a flock of some 18 Brown-Throated Parakeets flying into roost near Princes Town. There have been a number of widely distributed sightings of both species throughout Trinidad in the last couple of years and it is highly likely that some, if not almost all, involve wandering birds from the mainland.

Some species, whilst resident in Trinidad, are still very infrequently found. Scarce birds of prey sightings included single Crane Hawks at Galera Point on June 26th, Chatham on July 9th and Plum Mitan on July 30th together with an adult Rufous Crab-Hawk at Galeota Point on the 20th of August. We now consider the Variegated Flycatcher as present year round. During the review period, single birds were photographed at both Gran Couva and Chatham. However, the most popular find was a particularly photogenic adult male Blue Ground-Dove present along Caltoo trace, Plum Mitan on July 7th.

It is at this time of year that much attention is given to both the tidal mudflats on the west coast of Trinidad as southbound shorebird migration has begun. A mixed flock of some 1,500 Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers were present as early as the first week of July. This no doubt constituted a combination of adults which had failed to breed in the high arctic and birds which had spent their first year of life on their Trini wintering grounds. Also most notable was an extremely high count of



Blue Ground-Dove Photo by Kamal Mahabir

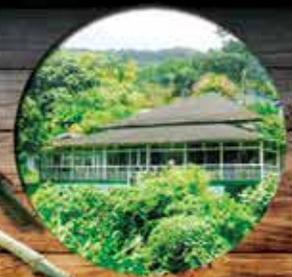
some 246 Short-Billed Dowitchers present at Brickfields on August 18th. Other sandpipers have been slow to arrive with just a handful of Stilt, White-Rumped and Pectoral Sandpipers up until the time of writing. Also of interest, a Parasitic Jaeger, now quite an uncommon sight, was photographed sat on the mud on June 27th. On the east coast, several extremely early returning Sanderlings have been chasing the waves.

Over in Tobago, the two Glossy Ibis have spent their ninth month in the Bon Accord area and a Blue-Chinned Sapphire has been reported from Mason Hall. If accepted by the Rare Birds Committee, this will be the first sighting from Tobago in decades.



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Visiting Tobago?

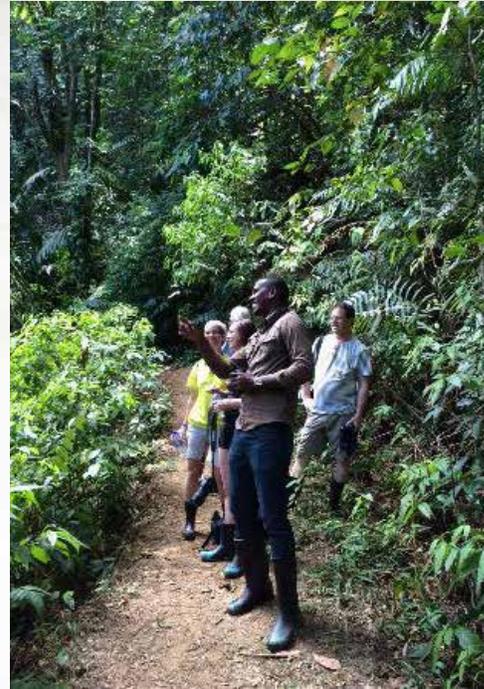
By Jason Radix

You might have already planned where you'll be staying and what you'll be doing. The choices are endless and range from modest to luxury accommodations, and remote to commercial beaches, reefs and waterfalls. The average visitor may not consider the other options which go beyond the sandy shores, coral reefs and sunny weather, yet much more of the island's rich natural wonders exist, waiting to be explored.

Even persons not planning a visit but interested in learning more about the natural attractions that Tobago offers will be happy to know that there are many additional features especially for birders and nature enthusiasts, including the Main Ridge Reserve, Little Tobago (Bird of Paradise) Island and the southern Lowlands. These are the three broad regions which discerning bird watchers and general nature lovers have known of for years, and continue to visit.

The Main Ridge Reserve, positioned near the middle of Tobago, is easily recognised as one of the star natural attractions of the island. The under 4,000-hectare reserve is world famous for its history as the Oldest Protected Rainforest in the Western Hemisphere; established way back in 1776. Pristine and biodiverse, it is a must-see for even the most amateur nature lover wishing to endure a comparatively low impact walk in the jungle. A choice of a half-dozen hiking trails rich with native birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, tropical flora and more can be witnessed throughout the year. Some of these species are best seen within the Reserve, such as the popular Blue-Backed Manakin, the ironically named Trinidad Motmot, the colourful Collared Trogon, the hummingbird-like Rufous-tailed Jacamar and the vivid White-Tail Page or Green-banded Urania (day-flying moth).

Another must visit is the island of Little Tobago, also called Bird of Paradise Island, located off the eastern coast of Speyside in the Atlantic. The one square kilometre island is a haven, particularly for Pelagic Birds commonly seen nesting and



*Leading guests along the Gilpin Trail of the Main Ridge Reserve
Photo courtesy Eureka Natural History Tours*

foraging along the windward cliffs. The island was made famous by the introduction of the Greater Bird of Paradise (*Paradisaea apoda*) by Sir William Ingram back in 1909, in an attempt to rescue the species from extinction caused by over hunting in its native home of Papua New Guinea. This species prospered for decades but declined after Hurricane Flora hit in 1963, toward the final confirmed sighting made in 1981. Now a sanctuary island, other birds have become the features including the glamorous Red-Billed Tropicbird, charming Brown and Red-Footed Boobies, the agile Magnificent Frigatebirds and the reclusive Audubon's Shearwater. Also common are the abundant Green Iguanas, seasonal Hermit Crabs and formidable cacti; just some of the wildlife easily seen on the island.

Back on the mainland's south-western third is a flat region called Lowlands. Unlike the island's

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Visiting Tobago? (continued)

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rural mountainous north-eastern side, Lowlands is more developed, populated and where most of Tobago's commerce occurs. Yet several sites within this region provide a complimentary contrast for birders/wildlife enthusiasts with several scattered shallow rivers, mangrove swamps, lagoons, natural and man-made ponds. Properties like the Tobago Plantations and the Bon Accord Sewage Ponds are great wetland sites for open views of shore birds, waders and more. Common sightings are of the melodic Black-Bellied Whistling Duck, the

flexible Anhinga, the conspicuous Purple Gallinule, and ever abundant Green Heron. In addition, resident Spectacled Caimans are widely seen at estuaries and ponds.

The collective features of each of these sites make Tobago (and Trinidad combined) a prime destination for almost all visitors with even the smallest interest in nature. Trips to anywhere on the island will take no more than an hour and a half with beautiful clean scenery along the way. The first-time visitor to the American Tropics would find a visit to be a very productive introduction

to the diverse flora and fauna and habitats of the island. Guided tours are available and are recommended to ensure the best chance of seeing the most. Looking forward to welcoming you to Tobago!

About the author

Jason Radix is a Former Senior Guide at Asa Wright Nature Centre and is the owner of Tobago-based "Eureka Natural History Tours". Find out more about Eureka Natural History Tours by visiting www.naturetobago.com.

2017 Birds of T&T Calendar Available Now

The Friends of Asa Wright Birds of T&T calendar has been published. The calendar, which features spectacular photographs of Trinidad and Tobago's birds, is a souvenir or gift to suit any occasion. Inside, you can see photos of the Black-Faced Antthrush, Ruby Topaz, Turquoise Tanager and many of T&T's beautiful avifauna. Our calendars are available at the AWNC's Gift Shop and the Paper Based bookstore at the Normandie hotel in Port of Spain. Thank you to all photographers for their images.

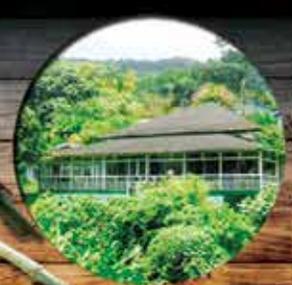


The Bearded Bellbird, the bird depicted on Asa Wright's logo, graces the cover of the 2017 calendar. This photo was taken by Wendell Reyes.



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Vacation Camp Outings to Asa Wright

By Johanne Ryan

This year, Asa Wright Nature Centre again hosted field trips for camps. Children as young as three years old came to AWNC to fully immerse themselves in nature and all it has to offer.

Students toured the Discovery Trail where they saw rainforest creatures, found animal homes and learned about AWNC and the plants and animals on our property. They played games to learn about animal sounds and visited the Richard French Natural History Museum to see skulls and bones, nests and other specimens.

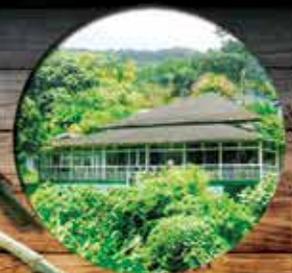
They made their own souvenirs by reusing material to make items like owls and binoculars. Many children returned home with posters, activity booklets and other giveaways. Over 400 children visited AWNC this year and we would like to thank all the camps that visited.



Campers tour our Discovery Trail Photo by Marsha Riley



Campers from 'Just be Active Academy' make binoculars at Asa Wright Photo by Johanne Ryan



Ruschenberger's Tree Boa

(*Corallus ruschenbergerii*)

By Johanne Ryan

Every now and then, we, at Asa Wright, spot a tree boa, usually high up in vegetation near our security booth. Could it also be guarding the area for us? The Ruschenberger's Tree Boa is an arboreal snake usually seen tightly coiled, high in trees during the day. Often it sits in bamboo clumps and bushes or in branches over water. It is commonly seen in the Caroni Swamp. Just take a boat ride in the swamp, to investigate. You may see a yellow-brown snake sitting above the water. That is the Cascabel dormillion or Cascabel for short, as it is locally called.

'Cascabel dormillion' comes from the Spanish name '*cascabela dormillona*' which was used by immigrant Venezuelan cocoa workers. The Spanish name means 'sleeping rattlesnake' and Cascabel dormillion is simply a French patois adaptation of the name. But the Cascabel is not actually a rattlesnake, it belongs to the Boidae family. It will bite and then constrict its prey and it is not venomous.

The Cascabel is mainly nocturnal and can be easily spotted at night by its eyeshine that pierces through trees as it is active – searching for sleeping birds, lizards, rodents and even bats. Night does not hamper its hunting ability. Its labial scales have heat sensors that help it to detect warm-blooded prey.



Photo by Wendell Reyes

While young tree boas are said to prefer amphibians and reptiles, the adults have a taste for larger, warm-blooded animals.

This snake also has some fierce predators. It is said that the ocelot and tayra, for example, may prey on the Cascabel. There has even been a record in T&T of the snake being eaten by another snake, a Black Cribo (*Clelia clelia*). The native range of this snake extends from Costa Rica, to Colombia and northern

Venezuela to Trinidad and Tobago.

References:

Boos, Hans E. A. 2001. *The Snakes of Trinidad & Tobago*. Texas A&M Univ. Press, College Station.

Murphy, John C. 1997. *Amphibians and Reptiles of Trinidad and Tobago*. Krieger Publ. Co., Melbourne, FL.

<http://herpetologytt.blogspot.com>

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.

