



# The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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October 2016

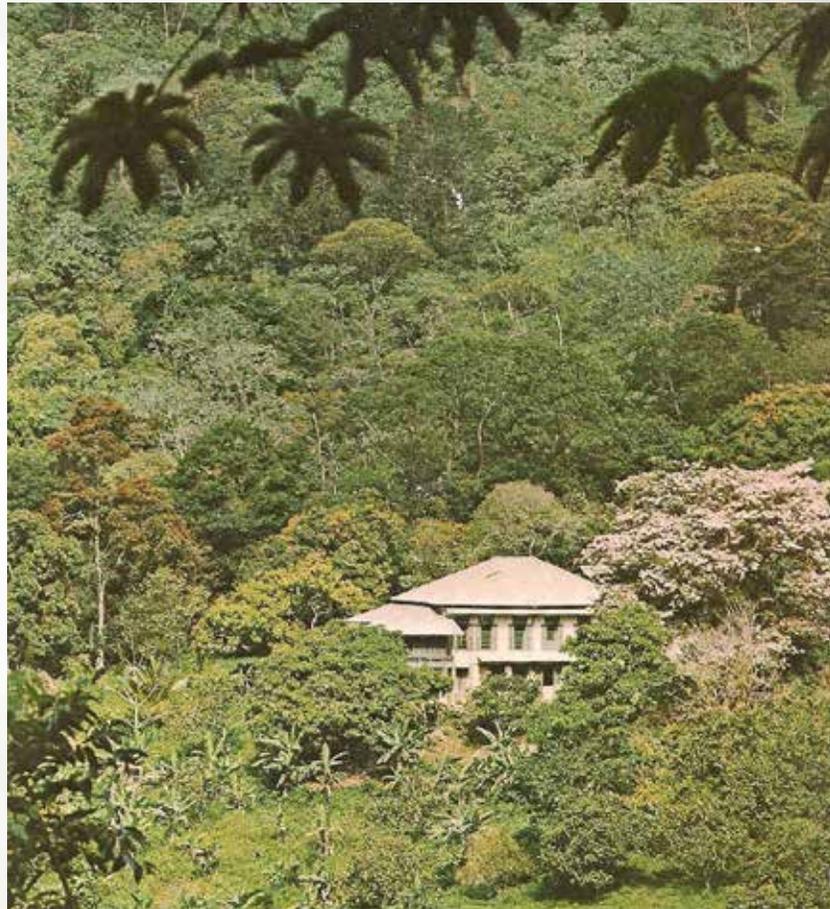
## AWNC celebrates its **49<sup>th</sup>** birthday

By Ian Lambie

In 1946, Springhill Estate, a 173-acre cocoa and coffee plantation, situated in the Arima Valley, 7 ¾ miles north of Arima along the Arima-Blanchisseuse Road, was purchased by Newcome Wright, a retired English attorney and his Icelandic-born wife, Asa. It became their home.

Then in 1950, Dr. William Beebe, the internationally acclaimed explorer, naturalist, ornithologist, marine biologist, entomologist, and author, purchased a parcel of land in the Arima Valley and donated it to his employers, the New York Zoological Society. He named it "Simla," after a place in India which he had previously visited. The area was designated as the Tropical Research Station of the New York Zoological Society and became the residence of Beebe. The facility was used as a residence and laboratory by many scientists studying various aspects of tropical wildlife.

With articles about the rich wildlife of the Arima Valley being written and published by Beebe and his fellow scientists in the *Audubon magazine* and in the scientific journal "Zoologica", the attention of naturalists and birdwatchers was drawn to the area and Beebe persuaded the Wrights to offer accommodation to naturalists and birdwatchers wishing to visit the Arima Valley. Among these early visitors were Americans Don Eckelberry, an internationally acclaimed bird artist, and his wife Virginia, who became frequent visitors to Springhill and a strong relationship developed between them and the Wrights.



Springhill long ago Photo by B. Brower Hall

After Newcome passed in 1955, Asa continued to live on the premises. Advancing age and failing health made friends concerned that with her death, the property might fall into further disrepair since her family members resided in Iceland. Asa shipped her family heirlooms and household effects to Iceland. A porcelain tea set, a gift from a Chinese

Emperor to her uncle, an Icelandic diplomat, which she had inherited, was accepted as an exhibit by the Icelandic Museum.

Don Eckelberry, Russ Mason, Joseph Copeland, and Erma "Jonny" Fisk persuaded Asa to sell Springhill to a group of concerned naturalists to

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## AWNC celebrates its 49th birthday (continued)

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establish a conservation and study area for the protection of the property and for the conservation of its wildlife, in perpetuity. The agreed price of US\$75,000 was raised by public donations in the USA and Trinidad and Tobago. The repository was the Florida Audubon Society of which Russ Mason was the Director. The Deed of Transfer from Asa Wright to the Royal Bank of Canada Trust Company, was signed in October 1967 and the Asa Wright Nature Centre (AWNC) was officially opened by Sir Hugh Wooding, the then Chief Justice of Trinidad and Tobago, on 5th November, 1967. Asa continued to live at the Nature Centre, a condition of the sale, until her death on 6th February, 1971.

There was no mail service, or telephone line and the only communication with the outside world was via the Arima-Blanchisseuse Road. Mail addressed to the AWNC was collected at the post office in Port of Spain, by an employee of Safie Mills in Arima, courtesy Mr. Seymour Auerbach, the Managing Director and friend of Asa. Electricity was supplied by a water generator which was maintained by Mr. "Tommy" Meyer, an engineer and son of the former owner of Springhill, Charles Meyer.

During the early years, the occupancy level of the guest facility, the Nature Centre's only source of income, was very low and the doors were kept open through "interest free loans" from some of the US Board Members. In 1974, with the appointment of Manny Arias and Wonder Bird Tours as Booking Agent for the Nature Centre, guest arrivals increased and



*Asa Wright and Sir Hugh Wooding*

the Nature Centre recorded its first year of operational surplus. In 1984, Caligo Ventures, owned by Philip Schaeffer, a long-standing Audubon employee, and his wife Margaret, replaced Wonder Bird Tours as the Booking Agent. Since then the AWNC has enjoyed a high occupancy level and an international reputation as an ideal destination for bird watchers and naturalists which it has maintained to the present time. It did experience a period of low occupancy after the attack and destruction of the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11th September, 2001 and the significant decline in guest arrivals from the USA.

Any operating surplus is utilised in the purchase of additional forested lands and abandoned cocoa estates for conservation and for its environmental education programmes in keeping with its mandate. The most significant purchase of land being that of the Rapsey family's estate at Aripo in 1999. The Nature Centre also provides the opportunity for its guides/interpreters to obtain working experience at Nature Centres in the USA and training for its cooks, housekeeping staff and its field staff.

The story of the Asa Wright Nature Centre will not be complete without mention of the contributions of its dedicated staff and especially that of Lawrence Calderon and Jogie Ramlal. Lawrence Calderon, a taxi driver resident in the Arima Valley, became the first "birding guide" in Trinidad when he was hired by Asa's guests to take them birdwatching. In time, he developed into a very knowledgeable birding guide. Jogie Ramlal a resident of Temple Village close to Simla, was a trusted employee of Beebe and often assisted Beebe and Jocelyn Crane, another resident scientist, with the collection of specimens for their research. He continued as an employee of Simla until its closure in 1970. He was then hired by the AWNC to take guests on visits to various "birding hotspots" on the island. Both Lawrence and Jogie made significant contributions in developing of the international reputation enjoyed by the AWNC and placed Trinidad and Tobago on the map as a "must visit" destination for birdwatchers.

**Happy 49th birthday to the Asa Wright Nature Centre. May you continue to retain your reputation as an ideal nature lodge and may Trinidad and Tobago continue to be the "best introduction to the South American bird species".**

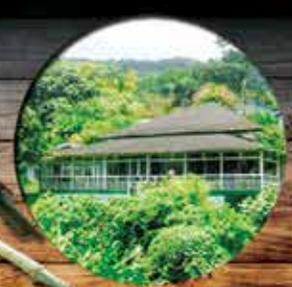
### **About the author:**

Ian Lambie worked at the AWNC for a total of 27 years and was its President and CEO from 1977 to 2001.



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Some of the Big Sit team survey the valley Photo by Johanne Ryan

## The Big Sit 2016

By Martyn Kenefick

I guess the format of this worldwide survey is pretty well known by now. On one designated day every year, you bird-watch from dawn till dusk at one particular site, never straying outside of a five-metre radius, and document the number of species you see or hear. This year, the event took place on the weekend of 8th-9th October. We chose the Saturday.

4:30am – the start of the vigil. The sky, clear, with stars aplenty and not a breath of wind. The day before a Spectacled Owl called repeatedly from in front of the balcony between 5:00 to 5:30 a.m. The noise was like someone wobbling a piece of hardboard. But yesterday doesn't count. It needed to call on Saturday morning... and its silence was deafening! That early alarm call in my room was still welcome though, the

first Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl began its repetitive hooting at 5.15 a.m. and, shortly after, Richard from Houston, Audubon joined me, an Oilbird flew across straight in front of us and disappeared in the direction of Dunston Cave.

Around 5:40 a.m., with more than a hint of light in the sky and as Randall was replenishing the fruit and sugar water feeders, the early bird risers began a breakfast frenzy. By 6:00 a.m., the species tally was already 18. Amongst the seven species of hummingbird on view were both Tufted Coquette and Long-billed Starthroat. In addition, the voices of Little Tinamou, White-bellied Antbird, Trinidad Motmot and Bright-rumped Attila announced their presence for the register.

By 7:00 a.m., with both Ann and Mukesh together with Lynn and Johnnie from Caligo joining the team,

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## The Big Sit 2016 (continued)

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the running species total had reached 44 including Asa Wright favourites such as Bearded Bellbird, Great Antshrike, Squirrel Cuckoo and male Blue Dacnis. Another two hummingbirds, White-necked Jacobin and Little Hermit were also documented as late attendees.

It is obviously impossible to keep this kind of pace going and during the next two hours, despite being joined by Johanne, a Conservation Officer, and guides Elsa, Barry and Caleb, we only amassed a further 17 species including Channel-billed Toucan, Guianan Trogon and Black-faced Antthrush. A calling Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl attracted the attention of both a pair of Black-tailed Tityras and scolding Golden-fronted Greenlets whilst overhead, the warming air allowed both White and Common Black Hawks to stretch their wings together with a whole host of Chestnut-collared, Band-rumped and Gray-rumped Swifts.

Then the fun and drama started. I do not believe that there is anywhere else in Trinidad where, from one position, you can watch both Black and Ornate Hawk-Eagles. At 9:10, an adult Ornate accompanied a thermal of five Turkey Vultures, admittedly always distant, but quite identifiable. Not to be outdone, only 25 minutes later, two adult Black-Hawk-Eagles took to the air much, much closer to the balcony with a third calling bird, possibly a juvenile, calling from dense cover on our eastern ridge. Only four more species were added in the period up until noon. Gray-lined and Zone-tailed Hawks; Short-tailed Swift and a female Green-backed Trogon which came into feed on the ripe jamaon fruiting tree.

Following a rather shy, female Red-legged Honeycreeper feeding in a trema tree, we reached last year's total of 69 species at 12:57 p.m. with a somewhat distant calling Golden-olive Woodpecker. No more than five minutes later, the sound of a Lineated Woodpecker announced the equalling of our current record of 70 species in 2014 and then, almost immediately, the record was smashed when an obliging Forest Elaenia arrived right in front of us.



*A Black Hawk-eagle*

*Photo by Kris Sookdeo*

Everyone who has birded tropical forests knows all too well that species diversity takes a tumble during the afternoon hours. Heavy showers of rain also limit what you can see. So it was that by 2:10 p.m., having added both Lilac-tailed Parrotlet and a soaring Magnificent Frigatebird, we finally amassed a new Asa Wright Big Day record of 73 species. I stuck it out until 5.30 p.m. but other than the Black Hawk-Eagles flying past a few times, there was nothing further to trouble the notebook.

We will do it all again next year – 73 is beatable; and 13 hours watching from within a five-metre circle is even fun. Thank you, Asa Wright for the endless cups of coffee. Postscript – 7.00am the day after, an adult Gray-headed Kite flew down the valley. Why didn't it do that before?



## T&T celebrates its first World Rivers Day



*Nature Seekers in Matura*

By Dr. Sharda Mahabir

World Rivers Day is a celebration of the world's waterways. It highlights the many values of rivers and strives to increase public awareness and encourages the improved stewardship of rivers around the world. Rivers in virtually every country face an array of threats, and only through our active involvement can we ensure their health in the years ahead.

In 2005, the United Nations launched the Water for Life Decade to help create a greater awareness of the need to better care for our water resources. Following this, the establishment of World Rivers Day was in response to a proposal initiated by internationally renowned river advocate, Mark Angelo.

The Water and Sewerage Authority, through the Water Resources Agency, hosted the first World Rivers Day Festival in Trinidad and Tobago. The Authority hopes to make this event a national, annual event. This year represents the first celebration of this kind for the country.

It was commemorated with two main activities.

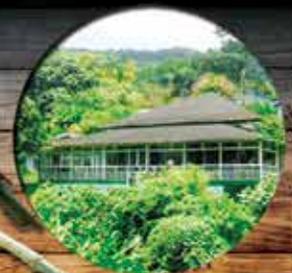
These were:

### **World Rivers Day Training Programme – 18th September**

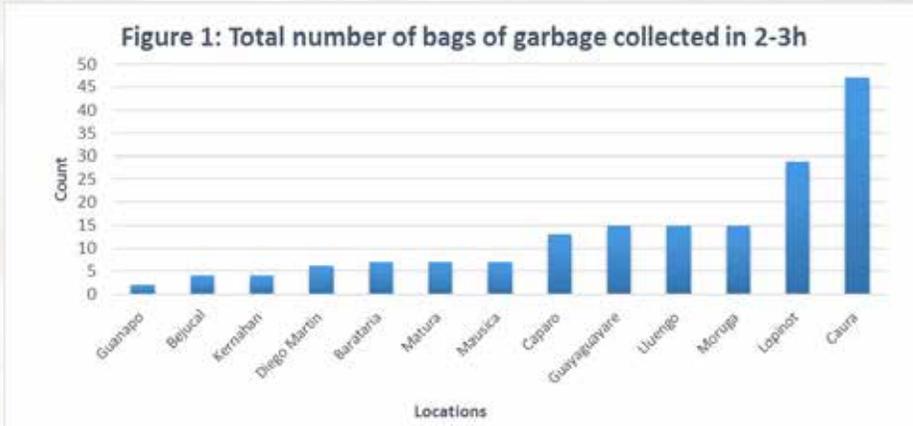
On 18th September, 2016, the Adopt a River Programme Implementation Unit hosted a community training programme in preparation for the World Rivers Day Festival on the 25th September, 2016. Over 60 persons from 13 communities participated in a lively discussion of the importance of water, rivers and water management in Trinidad and Tobago.

The communities represented were:

- Arima
- Barataria
- Caparo
- Caura
- Diego Martin
- Kernahan
- La Savanne, Guayaguayare
- Maracas
- Mausica
- Mayaro
- Moruga
- San Juan
- Santa Cruz



## T&T celebrates its first World Rivers Day (continued)



Photos courtesy Adopt A River Trinidad and Tobago

All of the community groups in attendance identified improper disposal of waste as the major issue in their rivers. As such, many agreed that the World Rivers Day Festival, and the clean-up exercises included as part of the festivities, was an important event for the country.

### World Rivers Day – 25th September

Fifteen communities participated in a national prayer meeting and clean-up exercise held simultaneously across the country. A National River Prayer was written for this day and was read at each location between the hours of 10 and 11a.m.

In total, 478 persons participated in this festival across the country. One hundred and seventy-one (171) bags

were collected from 13 communities in a two to three hour period. On average, only 140 feet of river was cleaned across 13 communities.

For this event, Recycling Waste Logistics Ltd. and Carib Glassworks Ltd. partnered to remove the recyclable waste from each of the 15 locations. In total, 46 per cent of the 171 bags were recyclable and will be processed by these companies (Figure 1). Thirty-two per cent of the total waste was plastics whilst 14 per cent was glass (Figure 1). There was one tree-planting exercise which was conducted in the Arima watershed by the Asa Wright Nature Centre.

### Community Groups participating in the World Rivers Day 2016

- |              |           |              |         |
|--------------|-----------|--------------|---------|
| Arima        | Barataria | Bejucal      | Caparo  |
| Caura        | Cunupia   | Diego Martin | Guanapo |
| Guayaguayare | Kernahan  | Lluengo      | Lopinot |
| Matura       | Mausica   | Moruga       |         |



Members of the Arima Lions Club say the River Prayer in Mausica



Clean-up in Caparo, Central Trinidad by the Cashew Gardens Community Group



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## World Rivers Day at Asa Wright

By Johanne Ryan

At Asa Wright, our staff members, joined by representatives from the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) and the Caribbean Youth Environment Network (CYEN) engaged in a tree-planting exercise in honour of World Rivers Day. We also had Rianna Gonzales of WASA, doing presentations on the Arima Watershed, to sensitise persons of the issues affecting the Arima River. Here are some snippets from the day.



*Pamela and Johanne plant a tree. The group planted a total of 10 trees. Photo by Rianna Gonzales*



*Mukesh is all smiles after planting this tree. Photo by Rianna Gonzales*



*June and Kimberly plant a tree with one of our visitors. Photo by Rianna Gonzales*



*Rianna stands with the winner of the water quiz, displaying his prize. Photo by Darryl Griffith*



*Rianna discusses the Arima Watershed with a group of visitors.*

*Photo by Darryl Griffith*



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## Tayra (*Eira Barbara*)

By Johanne Ryan

Up here, tucked away in the mountainous forest of Springhill Estate, is a wide variety of mammals, one of which is the Tayra. While agouti regularly visit the feeders, other mammals, like the Tayra, are less often seen at the Centre than the birds and insects, for example. Thus, it is always noteworthy when any one of those species makes an appearance. A few months ago, naturalist guide Caleb Walker, and guests were also lucky to see a Tayra on their Oilbird tour. So it is a fitting time for readers of *The Bellbird* to learn more about the 'Chien Bois', as we Trinidadians call the Tayra.

'Chien Bois' translates as 'woods dog' and the Tayra resembles a medium-sized dog. However, it is actually a member of the Mustelidae (Weasels and relatives) family. Still, its gait differs from that which you would expect of a typical weasel – it is erratic. The Tayra moves playfully with its back arched and its long, bushy tail trailing behind it.

Tayra of different geographic ranges have different colours. Generally, the Tayra is dark brown with a head that is slightly lighter in colour. It normally has a pale diamond-shaped patch on the throat. The large claws on its feet serve it well when climbing trees. Active in the day and sometimes at dawn and dusk, the Tayra feasts on a variety of forest goodies – invertebrates, fruit and even mammals. That's right, an agouti for lunch, may not be out of the question.

At night, burrows or hollow trees are shelters for the Tayra. Trees are also safe havens, as these mammals quickly retreat to tree branches when startled on the ground. They also make a barking call when alarmed. Apart from this, they are usually quiet. These 'high woods dogs' travel singly or in pairs and occasionally in groups of three to four. They inhabit a wide geographic range throughout Central America and most of South America.



Tayra seen on 25th September, 2016

Photo by Mukesh Ramdass

Much to our delight at AWCN on the morning of 25th September, 2016, a pair of Tayra was spotted on a small coffee tree by our own Mukesh Ramdass. He got a good look, as his photo can attest.

### References:

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Cuarón, A.D., Reid, F., Helgen, K. & González-Maya, J.F. 2016. *Eira barbara*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2016: e.T41644A45212151. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2016-1.RLTS.T41644A45212151.en>. Downloaded on 24 October 2016.

Schreffler, C. 2003. "Eira barbara" (Online), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed October 24, 2016 at [http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Eira\\_barbara/](http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Eira_barbara/)

## YOUNG ENVIRONMENTALIST OF THE MONTH

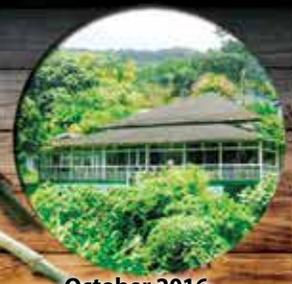
If you think your child, aged 5-16, has done something helpful to preserve the environment, please feel free to share it with us. Either write a short story or send a few pictures to [asawrightconsedu@gmail.com](mailto:asawrightconsedu@gmail.com). He/she may be selected as our Young Environmentalist 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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## T&T birding scene

By Martyn Kenefick

At the Centre, this month, it was all about Warblers. On the one hand, an immature Blackpoll Warbler thrilled those on the balcony, when seen challenging Bananaquits at one of the bench feeders on both the 20th and 21st of October. For intrigue however, there is the report of an adult male Black-throated Blue Warbler seen just by guide Randell feeding in a fruiting tree beside the Oilbird trail on the 15th of October. If accepted by the Rarities Committee, this will constitute just the 3rd record for the country and the first for 25 years.

Continuing the warbler theme, the first reported Prothonotary Warbler of the season occurred in Caroni swamp on October 8th, where there was additionally an exceptionally high count of 73 Spotted Sandpipers, and the first Blackpoll of the season was found near Freeport on the 18th.

Further south, in the mangrove of Godineau swamp, a successful morning's birding on September 24th included sightings of at least five White-winged Becards, a day-roosting Lesser Nighthawk and a juvenile Rufous Crab-Hawk, likely the product of the resident pair.

Much observer time was focused again on the tidal mudflats and inland freshwater marshes seeking migrant shorebirds. Perhaps the highlight was a group of up to four Hudsonian Godwits loyal to a wet field at the eastern end of Caroni Rice Project during the first week of October. Also in the area was a Pied-billed Grebe swimming in less than a foot of water, two long-staying White-faced Whistling-Ducks and a fly past by a pair of Tricoloured Munias, the first time this species has been recorded from the site. On the west coast, there was a re-appearance on October 17th of the putative Curlew Sandpiper, first found on September 18th.



*The Blackpoll Warbler at AWNC's feeders* Photo by Tim Baker



*Hudsonian Godwits*  
Photo by Nigel Lallsingh

This time of year often finds adverse weather conditions in the Atlantic with the possible disruption of seabird passage. In the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, a three-hour sea-watch on the September 29th from Galera Point didn't exactly live up to expectations with just 205 Common Terns, four Least Terns, three Roseate Terns and only eight Brown Noddys to trouble the notebook.

Elsewhere, the Little Egret remained faithful to the Trincity river throughout the period, joined by up to 25 Stilt Sandpipers. And a late Fork-tailed Flycatcher was seen at Woodland on 18th October.