

# Trinidad & Tobago | Trip Report

January 27 - February 4, 2018 | Written by Pat Lueders



**With Guide Pat Lueders, Local Guide Dave Ramlal, and Participants: Jo Etta, Connie, Margy, Dan, Tina, Phil, Lois, Bill**



## **Sat., Jan. 27 Introductory Walks on Discovery & Motmot Trail | Evening Trip to Waller Field**

Our group officially began the tour this morning after arriving at Asa Wright Nature Centre (AWNC) on different days. The Alwood and Terpstra couples had enjoyed their early arrival, spending time on the verandah learning many of the resident species. The remainder of the group worked hard to catch up! The first morning was spent enjoying our introductory walk on the Discovery Trail on the Centre's grounds led by Dave Ramlal, our local guide for the next five days in Trinidad.

Before the walk began, we'd spotted a soaring White Hawk from the verandah, gotten scope looks at a perched Scaled Pigeon, watched Orange-winged Parrots feeding in a close flowering tree, and began to learn the many regular hummingbirds visiting the feeders, including Rufous-breasted Hermit, White-necked Jacobin, Blue-chinned Sapphire, White-chested Emerald, and Copper-rumped Hummingbird. We'd also gotten satisfying looks at the more rare species including Brown Violetear, Tufted Coquette (males and females), and Long-billed Starthroat. What a start to our adventure!



As the hike began, we quickly saw two of the three trogon species, the Green-backed and Guianan. Further down the trail, arguing Plain-brown and Cocoa Woodcreepers ignored our presence. Barred Antshrikes called, hidden from our view, as did the furtive Black-faced Antthrush. We stalked this species quietly until we get good looks at one walking on the dark, muddy ground. Dave heard a vocalizing White-bellied Antbird, and we saw this lovely bird at close range. Flycatchers are busy over our heads, including two Bright-rumped Attilas. Of course, the star of this hike was the Bearded Bellbird, and we found four at the lek, their loud calls revealing their locations.

Golden-headed Manakins had abandoned their lek, but we still found two in the area. On our return, we spotted a White-necked Thrush on the ground, and three Golden-fronted Greenlets were busy, oblivious to our presence. Wow, all of this before lunch!

Our evening was spent at Waller Field, an abandoned air strip surrounded by Moriche Palm trees. Before a delicious picnic dinner, while watching for a nesting pair of Moriche Orioles, we enjoyed our rum punch. A surprise sighting of a pair of Sulphury Flycatchers in the same tree with the Orioles

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delighted the group. After sunset, we drove the runways to find feeding White-tailed Nightjars and isolated one on the ground in the spotlight. Common Pauragues flew across our headlights and perched on the road for great looks. Dave spotted a Common Potoo poised on a stump. We returned to our rooms amazed by what a successful first day we'd enjoyed in Trinidad!



## Sun., Jan. 28 Blanchisseuse Road | Brasso Seco via Morne La Croix

Coffee on the verandah was the perfect way to start the morning at AWCN. Before light, the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls were heard, but seldom seen. The colorful, early birds included Bananaquits, male and female Silver-beaked Tanagers, Bay-headed Tanagers, Turquoise Tanagers spotted by Ann feeding in the trees, Yellow Orioles, Violaceous Euphonias, and the brilliant Green and Purple Honeycreepers. Margy spotted a Golden-Olive Woodpecker in the tree closest to the verandah. Now we were all awake!

After a delicious breakfast, we gathered with Dave to bird the famous Blanchisseuse Road from AWCN to Brasso Seco. Birds that seldom visit feeders can be found in mixed feeding flocks along this route. We stopped to watch a pair of Lineated Woodpeckers searching for a nesting cavity. In an open area, we heard the Rufous-browed Peppershrike's familiar call. While following his call, we saw Rufous-breasted Wrens, Tropical Pewees, a Striped Cuckoo, and a Pygmy Owl being mobbed by many species, including a Grayish Saltator. A diminutive Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet was seen near the road, and Pat finally spotted the Peppershrike high in a tree out in the open.

We enjoyed a delicious "Trini" meal at the Brasso Seco Community Center, hosted by the ladies' group. Our hostess explained that the community continues to grow cocoa and coffee and demonstrated how chocolate was made from the cocoa beans. Coffee and chocolate was available for us to purchase. A short distance from the center, we heard Little Tinamou calling. We could see at least four walking above the ditch under the bushes. What a rare treat! In addition to the tinamou, we heard Great Antshrikes and saw two males and a female. Then, we had a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars sitting on the wires above our heads. Unbelievable stop!

We returned towards the AWCN along the Blanchisseuse Road, turning off to travel to Morne La Croix. We found a large flock of Blue-headed Parrots in town on the wires, as well as Gray-breasted Martins. One tree was home to dozens of Yellow-rumped Cacique nests, and we watched them while enjoying the daily rum punch. Returning to AWCN, Dave spotted a perched Bat Falcon along the road for great scope looks. We stopped to listen for Collared Trogons near a fruiting tree popular with Speckled Tanagers. Our only chance to see this tanager was rewarded with good looks at three of this species

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feeding with other colorful birds. We finally heard the Collared Trogon and saw a male and female. Our very successful day ended back at the Centre where we tallied our checklists and rested comfortably, looking forward to more adventures the next day.



## Mon., Jan. 29 Blanchisseuse Road | Road to Arima | Manzanilla Beach | Nariva Swamp

Before dawn this morning three owl species were vocalizing; Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Mottled Owl, and Spectacled Owl. At sunrise from the verandah, we saw our first Channel-billed Toucans, a pair perched and vocalizing at the top of a tree in the valley. Crested Oropendola traveled loudly through the valley to their nest tree. The area was awake with songs and color. We stopped on our way to Arima at the Motmot Trail to get our first looks at the Trinidad Motmot, a pair preparing to nest. But our biggest surprise followed: the spotting of a perched Ornate Hawk-Eagle across the valley. We found a vantage point to get scope looks at this beautiful species. Wow, what a great start to the day!

Our next stop was outside of Sangre Grande near Manzanilla Beach. The target species were the Black-crested Antshrike, the Streak-headed Woodcreeper, and the Variegated Flycatcher. We saw them all in addition to Yellow-breasted Flycatchers, more Rufous-tailed Jacamars, and a Gray-headed Kite spotted by Pat. We enjoyed our picnic lunch at the Manzanilla State Beach as Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans followed the shoreline.

The road we traveled to Nariva Swamp was lined with Palm Trees that attract Savanna, Gray-lined, and Zone-tailed Hawks and Crested and Yellow-headed Caracaras. We stopped at an inlet to find an American Pygmy Kingfisher and two Bicolored Conebills. With help from some boatmen, they pointed out our first sighting of Red Howler Monkeys and a Rufous Crab Hawk, a life bird for us all!

On the Nariva Swamp road, a perched falcon was identified as a Peregrine, White-headed Marsh-Tyrants and Pied Water-Tyrants stood out against the green reeds, and Yellow-chinned Spinetails were close enough to see their yellow chins. Wading Striated Heron, Wattled Jacana, and Southern Lapwings enjoyed this swamp habitat.

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We viewed the busy city activities of Sangre Grande and Valencia on our return drive to the Centre, arriving in time to enjoy another delicious dinner.



**Tues., Jan. 30**

**Aripo Savannah | Arena Forest | AWNC**

We took a short walk off the road after breakfast and watch a Gray-throated Leaf-tosser carrying food. Good looks at pairs of Rufous-breasted Wrens and White-bearded Manakins confirmed that many of the resident species were preparing to nest. On the way to the Aripo Livestock area, we stopped to enjoy a vocalizing Masked Yellowthroat. At the agricultural habitat, our new species included Smooth-billed Anis, Striped Cuckoo, Blue-and-white Swallows, and Red-breasted Meadowlarks. On a short walk, we got close looks at a Bran-colored Flycatcher and Sooty and Blue-black Grassquits were seen hiding in the tall grass.

We continued towards the Piarco area to visit the Millennium Golf Course that bordered the Arouca River. A nice sighting of a Saffron Finch family atop a light post was a surprise, as were our first Ospreys. We crossed the river's bridge and viewed a wader that at first appeared to be a Little Blue Heron. Upon further investigation, we realized it was a Little Egret, not sighted on Trinidad for at least the last three years! An Anhinga was drying its wings along the river. Shorebirds included Pectorals, Short-billed Dowitchers; Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs were surrounded by many Black-necked Stilts and Southern Lapwings. Both Ringed and Green Kingfishers were seen along the shore. Cattle Egrets followed the tractors cutting the grass in great numbers. What a magical location this was!

**Wed., Jan. 31**

**AWNC Verandah | Orange Grove Road | Caroni Swamp**

We never tired of enjoying our morning coffee with the birds that visit the verandah and the AWNC valley. This morning the Scaled Pigeon was atop his tree, and a soaring Common Black Hawk was spotted by Caleb, our naturalist. A Bat Flacon hunting from a treetop was seen before breakfast. We enjoyed a rare visit to the verandah by a family of Blue-headed Parrots, feeding on the flowering trees. A Bearded Bellbird could be seen vocalizing from the "Bellbird" tree in the valley.

Despite the frequent rain, this was our morning to hike to the Oilbird Cave. The Centre's property is one of the most accessible locations in the world to see this rare species, the only fruit eating nocturnal bird in the world that roosts by day in caves. Because of its sensitive status, the cave is only visited a few times a week with trips led by the Centre's naturalists.

We slowly worked our way over the wet, muddy trail. Caleb alertly stopped us when he spotted a Fer de Lance curled up along the trail. We did not continue until the most poisonous snake in the world moved away. We could see the snake moving slowly near the trail, and it eventually moved down the hill. What a close call!

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The rain had pushed the Oilbirds deep into their cave and the roaring river made it impossible to hear their unusual vocalizations. One was roosting near the opening, and Caleb shined his spotlight on it quickly for each small group to see. We

returned to the Centre very wet, but pleased to have seen this only member of the Oilbird family.

After we dried off and enjoyed lunch, we found a roosting bush of a male Ruby-topaz Hummingbird, a species that doesn't visit the busy verandah feeders. All of us were able to get wonderful photos of this beautiful hummingbird spreading its orange tail.

We left this afternoon for our boat trip at Caroni Swamp. We stopped on the way at some ponds on Orange Grove Road where we found a Pearl Kite sitting on a nest, Wattled Jacana, a Pied Water-Tyrant nest building, and a flock of Yellow-hooded Blackbirds.

We arrived at the boat launch area for our Caroni Swamp cruise, one of the highlights of a visit to Trinidad. As we worked our way through the mangroves, our boat driver spotted a roosting Boat-billed Heron and a Tropical Screech-Owl, a perched Common Black Hawk, and we heard and then saw a Straight-billed Woodcreeper. We emerged from the mangroves into the bay as waves of Scarlet Ibis were flying towards their roost. Then there were waves of low-flying Snowy Egret, followed by waves of Tricolored Heron. The trees on their chosen island became spotted red with an estimated 6,000 Scarlet Ibis. We experienced this memorable moment of nature while enjoying our rum punch.

We returned to the Centre, sadly knowing that tomorrow we had to depart this magical place, but we were excited to continue our journey on Tobago.

## **Thurs., Feb. 1 Tobago's Bon Accord Sewage Treatment Ponds | Magdalena Golf Course & Ponds**

This morning we enjoyed coffee on the AWNC verandah for the final time (until we return again). We were met in Tobago at the airport by Jason Radix, our local guide for the next three days. We took a short drive to visit the sewage treatment ponds, a "don't miss" stop for birders everywhere! We spotted an Eared Dove, which appeared to have a chest injury, but it flew off. Caribbean Martins and White-

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winged Swallows were flying low over the ponds occupied by Anhinga, Purple Gallinule, Wattled Jacana, Tricolored Heron, Little Blue Heron, and other herons and egrets. Two Great Blue Herons flew quickly over us because they were being chased by two Peregrine Falcons! Smooth-billed Ani, Carib Grackle, Gray and Tropical Kingbirds, and Pale-vented Pigeon were seen on the fence lines.

We traveled a short distance to stop at the Magdalena Golf Course for our first looks at Rufous-vented Chachalacas, Neotropic Cormorants, and a roosting Black-crowned Night-Heron. Two Cayman were hiding near the shore, well camouflaged from view.



The drive to Blue Waters Inn along the eastern shore of Tobago was beautiful and we passed through many quaint fishing villages. Upon arrival, we moved into our beachside rooms, enjoyed a delicious dinner, and were later lulled to sleep by the sound of breaking waves.

## **Fri., Feb. 2**

### **Argyle Falls | Main Ridge Forest Reserve**

The loud, distinctive vocalizations of the Rufous-vented Chachalacas were our wake-up call for the next two mornings! Before breakfast, we wandered the grounds spotting a pair of Red-crowned Woodpeckers, Blue-gray Tanagers, Barred Antshrikes, and Bananaquits. Out at sea, Brown Boobies and Brown Pelicans were diving, and Magnificent Frigatebirds dotted the sky.

Our first stop today was at Argyle Falls, where Jason knew of a roosting Common Potoo. We were excited to find our first Trinidad Motmot and then enjoyed close looks at four White-fringed Antwrens. We entered the Main Ridge Forest Reserve to hike the famous Gilpin Trail in this virgin forest. As we left the bus, a Black-throated Mango was seen visiting her nest on the overhead wires to feed her young. Rufous-tailed Jacamars were plentiful in the reserve, and we quickly spotted a pair along the trail. Red-crowned, Red-rumped, and Golden-Olive Woodpeckers joined Olivaceous and Cocoa Woodcreepers on the trees. One of our target birds, the stunning Blue-backed Manakin, was spotted by Jason, providing good looks for all. We stopped at the visitor center and spotted a Broad-winged Hawk, three Great Black Hawks, and Short-tailed Swifts all soaring in the distance. We entered the opposite end of the trail and got exciting views of a pair of Stripe-breasted Spinetail feeding along the creek, a Collared Trogon sitting quietly above us, and a Plain Antvireo high in the canopy.

As we returned to the inn, near the road we spotted the white of the tail of a White-tailed Sabrewing, a species that had alluded us in the forest. Six of these beautiful hummingbirds were interacting, totally ignoring our presence. An additional Black-backed Manakin was with them as were American Redstarts and a Red-legged Honeycreeper. What exciting luck, and we watched them at length!

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## Sat., Feb. 3 Walk at Blue Waters Inn | Boat Trip to Little Tobago Island

This morning we walked the grounds of Blue Waters Inn after watching Trinidad Motmots and Yellow-bellied Elaenias feeding in fruiting trees by our rooms. We found Black-faced Grassquits and Scrub Greenlets in grasses along the road. Pat spotted a Fuscous Flycatcher, and nearby a Ruby-topaz Hummingbird was seen with a juvenile male. We saw more Jacamars, White-fringed Antwrens, and a Crested Oropendola.



After lunch, we boarded Zolani Frank's glass bottom boat to travel to Little Tobago Island. We carefully disembark on the island's pier with Z and his staffs' assistance and walked the well-maintained trails to the vantage point above the sea. We could hear the Red-billed Tropicbirds vocalizing, and we got quick looks at a Brown-crested Flycatcher. At the summit, we looked down on cliffs covered with nesting Red-footed Boobies, Brown Boobies, and Red-billed Tropicbirds. Magnificent Frigatebirds were chasing the tropicbirds, hoping to steal their catches. What a treat to view this seabird spectacle!



## Sun., Feb. 4 Departure for Trinidad & the U.S.

As we enjoyed breakfast on the patio, we saw the resident Blue Waters Inn Ruddy Turnstones on the beach and the Bananaquits in the jam for the last time before we departed for the airport. As we passed through the costal towns, we quietly thought back over the last ten days, remembering what a wonderful journey this trip had been, one that we'll never forget!