
BOOK REVIEWS

Butterfly Trails

H. R. Roegner

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Harry R. Roegner travelled in Asia, Africa and Latin America as an international businessman and dedicated butterfly collector for more than 40 years. In this slim volume he has compiled six vignettes of his experiences in Peru, China, Costa Rica, Liberia, Trinidad and Ivory Coast. Having been to all these places except Liberia, and also having collected in them, at least in passing, I found this an interesting, entertaining and easy read. For those without at least a passing interest in and knowledge of butterflies, there is plenty of human interest – Harry Roegner has taken his chances while collecting.

The vignette of particular interest to this readership is the chapter entitled “Trinidad-Barcant.” Malcolm Barcant is the author of Trinidad’s only butterfly field guide, based on his 50 years collecting here (Barcant 1970). Inspired by Barcant’s book and reports that Barcant had been prohibited from taking his collection with him when he emigrated (leading to its acquisition by Angostura), Roegner made four visits to Trinidad between 1979 and 1984 to try and recreate Barcant’s comprehensive collection outside the island. He achieved 250 out of his target of 400 butterflies other than HesperIIDae; 15 of these illustrate the front of the book’s dust cover. This chapter describes his second visit, made in 1980, the most memorable in terms of species and events.

There are interesting observations on butterflies, including

anecdotal behavioural observations on emperors, cattlehearts, preponas, lady’s slipper, the bee, caligos, etc. During his short visit, Roegner also encountered a Cuban agent, an obeah man, a marijuana field guarded by a trip-wire shotgun, and lobbied a government agent on the need to take steps to preserve the Angostura-Barcant collection from neglect. It seems to be a feature of this book that this sort of thing happens to Harry Roegner on his butterfly collecting travels.

There are a couple of observations worth picking up on. Firstly, Roegner captured the southern cattleheart (*Parides sosostris*) behind Maracas Bay, and suggests that whereas this species had been restricted to the south of Trinidad and prevented from moving north by swamps and plantations, development of swamp areas and closure of some plantations had created avenues for it to spread north. I have not caught the southern cattleheart in the area, but I have caught the rare brown glass-wing (*Ceratinia nise*) behind Las Cuevas Bay. Both these species are associated with lowland forest in Trinidad, predominantly in the south, so that although the Northern Range is not suitable habitat, patches of lowland close to the North Coast are suitable and I suspect may maintain isolated populations.

Particularly in light of a return visit in 2000, Roegner also comments on the impact of slash and burn agriculture destroying forest, especially around Port of Spain and its surrounding sprawl. He goes on to suggest that one reason that he only achieved 250 butterfly species out of Barcant’s 400 total is that habitat destruction has led to extinction of some species on the island. While it is certainly true that there has been significant habitat destruction on the island, I think this destruction has been far less than it might have been, thanks partially to the efforts of groups such as the TTFNC. My personal opinion is that very few, if any, species that were truly indigenous 100 years ago (i.e. excluding vagrants and migrants) have become extinct on the island as yet. I propose to make a more detailed analysis of this question in consultation with local collectors, and hope to be able to present this at a later date.

If you are interested in a snapshot of Trinidad’s social history from a visitor’s perspective in 1980 combined with natural history observations on butterflies, then it is worth reading this chapter. If you would enjoy five similar snapshots then buy the book. Details of the publisher are given above, although I bought my copy from an internet bookseller – for about TT\$120.

REFERENCE

Barcant, M. 1970. The Butterflies of Trinidad and Tobago. London: Collins. 314 p.

Matthew J. W. Cock

CABI Bioscience Switzerland Centre,
Rue des Grillons 1
CH-2800 Delémont
Switzerland.
E-mail: m.cock@cabi.org

