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# Additional notes on the birds of Trinidad and Tobago

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AS I prepare to return to my native land after more than a quarter century in Trinidad, I am pleased to submit to this journal a final update on the status of local birds, based on records over the period 1981 to 1984. I am particularly gratified that I can include a number of observations made by Trinidadian naturalists, as this indicates that local interest in ornithology is developing and will continue to grow.

The following list of twenty-two species includes two new records for Trinidad and four for Tobago (some of which previously required confirmation); also one doubtful breeding record for Tobago is now confirmed.

## THE SPECIES LIST

### LEAST GREBE *Tachybaptus dominicus*

It is now confirmed that this species inhabits Tobago, probably as a resident. Following reports from visiting naturalists, I found at least one pair at Hillsborough Dam in 1983 on 11 April and 23 October. That the species is quick to exploit suitable habitat is shown by the presence in 1984 of several breeding pairs at small artificial ponds in Santa Cruz, Trinidad, not long after their construction.

### LEACH'S STORM-PETREL *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*

Though commonly recorded off Trinidad on migration, there were no Tobago records of this species before 9 April 1983 when I saw four individuals from the ferry-boat a mile or two off Scarborough. There is no reason to believe that its migration past Tobago is anything but a regular annual occurrence at this time.

### RED-BILLED TROPICBIRD *Phaethon aethereus*

The first record of this species in Trinidad offshore waters occurred on 23 April 1983 when I saw a bird settled on the surface of the sea, from which it shortly afterwards flew. I was at the time on the inter-island ferry a mile or two off Trinidad's north coast. Usually the species prefers the clearer waters found off Tobago.

### WHITE-TAILED TROPICBIRD *Phaethon lepturus*

I explained in my book (ffrench 1973) and in an earlier article (ffrench 1961) why I rejected previous reports of this species on Tobago. I still reject those reports. However, on 29 December 1983 Bob Richardson found an adult of this species associating with a number of its congeners at Little Tobago island. Careful documentation and illustrations accompany the record, so I see no reason to doubt it. This seems to be the first

properly documented record of the species from Tobago, and the most southerly record in the West Indies, from which it was previously known south to St Vincent and Curacao.

### SNOW GOOSE *Chen caerulescens*

Previously recorded only on a single occasion in Trinidad when one individual was seen at Caroni (ffrench 1977). Four immature birds of the "blue" phase of this species were seen in the Caroni marshes on 30 December 1984 by a large party of observers, including Winston Nanan, Victor Quesnel, my wife and myself. Some of us approached to within 50 or 60 metres and obtained good views of the birds which were in close proximity to some tree-ducks. A report of four "geese" in the Oropouche Lagoon at about this time may well refer to the same birds. The species, which winters mainly in U.S.A., is extremely rare south of Mexico and Cuba.

### BLUE-WINGED TEAL *Anas discors*

An adult male was seen in the Caroni marshes on 26 June 1983. This common North American duck normally winters here between October and April, earliest records being mid-September and the latest May 10. Presumably this unusual summer record is of a bird that may have been crippled by a hunter.

### GRAY-HEADED KITE *Leptodon cayanensis*

The species should probably be considered an uncommon (rather than rare) resident. It has in recent years been recorded over forest, open woodland and swamp forest in various parts of Trinidad. Victor Quesnel finds it a regular inhabitant of woodland near Talparo; and Tim Manolis found an adult at Carapo carrying probable nest material on 29 April 1981.

### YELLOW-HEADED CARACARA *Milvago chimachima*

Breeding of this species on Trinidad, formerly only suspected, was confirmed when a nest was found in early 1984 on Waller Field by Jogie Ramlal and others. The species continues to spread throughout Trinidad (ffrench 1985).

### COMMON PIPING GUAN *Aburria pipile*

Formerly known as the Trinidad Piping Guan (*Pipile pipile*) or the Blue-throated Piping Guan (*Pipile cumanensis*) this species has recently been reclassified as above (A.O.U. 1983). Recent efforts by members of the Forestry Division to locate remaining populations of the species on Trinidad have succeeded in finding very small numbers in the northeastern forests during the early dry season of 1983. Also two birds were seen by Frank Pitelka

(of California, U.S.A.) and Jogie Ramlal in the Aripo area in December 1982.

#### RUFOUS-NECKED WOOD-RAIL *Aramides axillaris*

There have been no records of this species on the mainland of Trinidad for many years, although it is not uncommon on offshore islands in the northwest. However, Tim Manolis had a good observation of this skulking rail near the Cacandee sluiceway on 24 October 1981. The chestnut-brown head, neck, breast and wings were noted. On the mainland the species has been found only among mangroves.

#### AZURE GALLINULE *Porphyryla flavirostris*

Following a brief note of the first reported occurrence of this species on Trinidad in July 1978 (ffrench 1981), it has been seen by numerous observers in the Nariva Swamp, especially near Bush-Bush, but also in the northern part near Sand Hill and Caltoo. As there is no record of migration in this species, and it seems unlikely that it would have gone unnoticed by trained observers such as Wilbur Downs, Brooke Worth and Fernando Nottebohm, all of whom worked extensively in the Nariva-Bush-Bush area between 1960 and 1970, the new records probably indicate a range extension. In South America the species appears to be locally abundant but spottily distributed, being known from Delta Amacuro in Venezuela, only 80 km distant from Nariva.

#### AMERICAN OYSTERCATCHER *Haematopus palliatus*

Although apparently unrecorded on either island during this century, an individual of this species was found by David Rooks on 31 August 1982 at Arnos Vale, Tobago, following a report from Mr and Mrs John Cartwright of Canada. David had a good view of this distinctive shorebird at close range and heard its characteristic, penetrating call-note. The species is not commonly found in the southern Antilles, but I once saw a vagrant individual on Barbados; it breeds in small numbers on Curacao, Aruba and Bonaire.

#### MARBLED GODWIT *Limosa fedoa*

Following my last record of this rare species (ffrench 1981), I am pleased to report that it has been recorded on three occasions since then; a single bird seen at Carli Bay in September 1981 by T. Manolis, B. Mohan and G. Ramdeen, another seen by myself, Jim and Jane Yarrow at Pointe-a-Pierre on 7 October 1984, and a sizeable flock seen by David Rooks on the Savannah, Port of Spain at about the same time. I would like to think that this handsome large shorebird is becoming more common.

#### DOUBLE-STRIPED THICK-KNEE *Burhinus bistriatus*

Some comment seems necessary on the interesting record of the first occurrence of this species on Trinidad in June 1983 (Rooks 1984). Thick-knees and stone curlews resemble large plovers but form a separate family, represented in the Americas by only two species. This species is found from Mexico south to the Guianas, also on the island of Hispaniola. In Venezuela it occurs in open savannah, where I have seen it near Barinas, and it is also found on Margarita island. As it is not known to migrate, the Trinidad record may represent a post-breeding dispersal. Henceforth it may be worth looking out for it during June and July on the Port of Spain savannah, on golf courses and at Waller Field or Aripo Savannah.

#### POMARINE JAEGER *Stercorarius pomarinus*

This large and powerful seabird has been seen and recognised

more commonly in the Caribbean area during recent years. The only previous records from Trinidad waters made in 1969 (ffrench 1973) and 1982 (ffrench 1984) are now augmented by records made by Bob Richardson, who found seven individuals, two of them in the light phase, just off Forest Point, Toco on 2 January 1983, associating with several other seabird species, including three Parasitic Jaegers, *S. parasiticus*. Another *pomarinus* was seen on 9 January 1983 on the north coast near Yarra. Jaegers, or skuas, normally feed by attacking gulls and terns and forcing them to disgorge their prey; so they can usually be found in proximity to feeding groups of these smaller seabirds.

#### ROYAL TERN *Sterna maxima*

An interesting banding recovery of this species occurred on 19 January 1983 when an oiled bird was brought to me at Pointe-a-Pierre; it bore a band which had been placed on it as a chick at Cape Hatteras, North Caronina on 20 June 1976. This is only the third recovery of a foreign-banded Royal Tern on Trinidad.

#### ROSEATE TERN *Sterna dougallii*

After searching in vain for more than two decades, I was most gratified to locate a small breeding colony of this species on an island off Buccoo Point, Tobago on 22 May 1983. Although a colony of unidentified white terns was found by Dinsmore near Speyside in 1966, and I have several times witnessed copulation and other breeding activity in the species, this is the first indubitable record of nests and unfledged young from Tobago. As I intimated earlier (ffrench 1979), it seems likely that intensive investigation into seabird breeding on Tobago and its offshore islands will also reveal nesting of the Royal Tern, *S. maxima* and the Sandwich Tern, *S. sandvicensis*, so far unrecorded.

#### FORK-TAILED PALM-SWIFT *Reinarda squamata*

Tim Manolis first recognised that this species seems to be much more widespread on Trinidad than hitherto, possibly because it was not always recognised (ffrench & Manolis 1984). In recent years it has been found by several observers, especially David Rooks, not only at the "traditional" sites of Waller Field, Aripo Savannah, Nariva Swamp and the Botanic Gardens, Port of Spain, but also all round the Queen's Park Savannah, nesting in various species of palms, as at Bishop Anstey's School during September 1983 and October 1984.\* Also on the southwestern peninsula near Icacos and in the Santa Cruz Valley. Although moriche palms (*Mauritia*) are favoured as roost and nest sites, clearly the species also utilizes other palm species.

\* Victor Quesnel has records of this species at Woodbrook and Mucurapo dating back to 1954 - Ed.

#### SCALED ANT-PITTA *Grallaria guatemalensis*

It seems somehow fitting that I should leave Trinidad after 27 years without having directly encountered at least one of its resident bird species. This one, represented by an endemic race, has eluded me, except that I strongly suspect it may have been the author of an unfamiliar low hooting call, heard on the slopes of Naranja on the El Tucuche trail on 28 November 1982. Unfortunately I could not locate the bird, and have not heard the call since. However, Peter Hall from U.S.A. had an excellent view of one, well documented and described, at Springhill estate on 4 January 1981. Though uncorroborated by other observers, his sighting was over several minutes at very close quarters in good light conditions, so there seems no reason to doubt it. Clearly the species remains extremely rare on Trinidad.

CRESTED DORADITO *Pseudocolopteryx sclateri*

Graham White has seen an individual twice in the same location near Cacandee, which seems most likely to be this species. The dates, 13 February 1983 and 11 March 1984, seem rather early for what has been hitherto considered a rare migrant from South America. But it is possible that this tiny and inconspicuous flycatcher has been resident here in small numbers all the time. Certainly very little seems to be known about its life history.

BAY-BREASTED WARBLER *Dendroica castanea*

An individual of this species was seen at Grafton, Tobago on 11 November 1980 by Charles E. Keller of U.S.A. This is the first record for Tobago, though four have been reported from Trinidad (ffrench 1973).

DICKCISSEL *Spiza americana*

This migratory finch was conspicuously common in southwestern and eastern Trinidad during the 1960's (ffrench 1967), but numbers dropped in the 1970's and none were recorded during the years 1975-1981. In early 1982 I encountered a single flock of about 50 birds in Nariva, but none in 1983; then in 1984 I found about 100 Dickcissels at Nariva in late March, while flocks of several hundreds had been seen at Oropouche Lagoon since early January. It seems possible that a new cycle of winter invasions by this interesting migrant may be beginning once again.

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