

SOME OUTSTANDING PROBLEMS IN THE ORNITHOLOGY OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Introduction. It is presumptuous to suppose that the ornithology of any area can be completely understood. Nevertheless, for an area as small as Trinidad and Tobago, one which has been fairly well studied over the last 40 years, it may be helpful if from time to time some of the outstanding problems are brought to the attention of the ornithological community, in order that perhaps they may be scrutinized under a more intense focus. To this end I examine here some thirty species, for which we need answers, mainly pertaining to their status in the country.

For several species I draw attention to cases of possible misidentification in the past, sometimes where very similar species are involved, and in other cases where the previous evidence may have been faulty. For instance, the series of generally excellent papers on the nesting of local birds by the late authors, Sir Charles Belcher and G. D. Smooker (1934 - 1937), were later found to have contained a few mistakes. They ascribed nests of the ant-tanager *Habia rubica* to the antbird *Myrmeciza longipes*, and those of the crake *Laterallus exilis* to another, larger rail. Furthermore, in a number of instances they admitted that their identification was based on the word of a third party, often "a hunter", who brought in eggs or a nest that he had found, but may well not have identified the parent bird correctly. Collectors not infrequently employ field assistants to find material, and there is no way of ensuring that all such material is properly named. It is therefore necessary to re-examine some of those records, in order to confirm or reject their authenticity.

For other species I merely remind readers that we require further data to corroborate what has previously been asserted or assumed. Sometimes ecological changes or persecution may have altered the status of species, and only sustained observation and serious effort can show what is now the true picture. It is my hope that the increased number of observers visiting or resident in the country will result in answers being found to many of the following problems.

Rufescent Tiger-Heron *Tigrisoma lineatum* Nowadays rarely seen in marshland (ffrench 1991). Both Leotaud (1866) and Belcher/Smooker considered it a resident species. But the set of eggs cited by the latter (and brought by someone to Smooker) are much too small for this species. Yet the species is not particularly known to migrate. Does it still breed on Trinidad ?

White-cheeked Pintail *Anas bahamensis*. Belcher / Smooker knew this as a resident of Trinidad and recorded

clutches of up to 10 eggs from Caroni Swamp. More recently it has been recorded breeding on Tobago, as well as in captivity at Pointe-a-Pierre. Does it still breed in other parts of Trinidad?

Masked Duck *Nomonyx dominica*. Although it is clear that this species does breed on Trinidad - for groups of immature birds have been found, sometimes accompanied by an adult female - the egg size remains somewhat anomalous. Belcher/Smooker refer to two clutches of buffy white eggs, with granulated shells, 4 averaging 60 x 46 mm. In November 1967 a similar clutch of 4 was brought from Caroni marshes to John Cambridge at Pointe-a-Pierre, who was well experienced with the locally breeding ducks. He put the eggs into an incubator, where three ducklings hatched a day or so later. I saw the remains of the eggshells and verified their approximate size as matching the previous clutches.

Unfortunately the chicks soon died, but although I examined them carefully and preserved the specimens in alcohol for transshipment to an American museum, by some mischance the container was lost. James Bond (1978) challenged the identification of all these clutches on the grounds that they were too large by comparison with others from Cuba. More evidence is needed !

Gray-headed Kite *Leptodon cayanensis*. Although this species is fairly regularly seen over the Northern and Central Ranges, the only actual record of breeding comes from some eggs purportedly collected on Trinidad, which reached a collector in Europe (Schonwetter 1961). As egg-collectors are sometimes found to be unreliable for purposes of scientific authenticity, I feel we need firmer evidence that this species breeds on Trinidad.

Hook-billed Kite *Chondrohierax uncinatus*. After apparently escaping notice on Trinidad for over 75 years, this species again showed up in 1978, and has since been observed on a number of occasions. Sedentary and sluggish, it may well be breeding on Trinidad, but again we need direct evidence of this. Eggs, apparently from Trinidad, were described in the Schonwetter 1961 account, but they are suspiciously large, compared with authentic eggs from Suriname (ffrench 1991).

White-tailed Hawk *Buteo albicaudatus*. This savanna species is very rarely found on Trinidad nowadays, although I believe that some observers have mistakenly confused it

with a somewhat similar species, the far commoner Short-tailed Hawk *Buteo brachyurus*, which mainly frequents forested country. It is interesting that the latter species was never recorded at all by Belcher/Smooker; this makes me wonder about the authenticity of their two nests at Mount Hope, attributed to *albicaudatus*, a species they term "a resident of fairly frequent occurrence".

Broad-winged Hawk *Buteo platypterus*. Another species never recorded by Belcher/Smooker (!), but fairly common today, especially on Tobago. Known definitely as a winter visitor (nominant race) from the north, this species is found on Tobago in all months. Does it nest there, and if so, which subspecies is involved? A male specimen taken on Trinidad, now in the American Museum of Natural History, was identified as from the Antillean race *antillarum*, but this was challenged by James Bond (*in litt.*), who said it was from the nominate northern race. Clearly winter visitors from the north are also regularly seen, often flocking on migration; so it is possible that two separate populations are involved.

Ash-throated Crake *Porzana albicollis*. There are no recent authentic records of this species, which was collected on Trinidad in the 19th century. Belcher/Smooker considered it a rare resident, but the three nests they mention contained eggs that were clearly too small, probably belonging to the tiny crake *Laterallus exilis*. *P. albicollis* much resembles the immature form of the migratory Sora *P. carolina*, and this may have caused confusion. But is it still found on Trinidad?

Azure Gallinule *Porphyryla flavirostris*. This species was not recorded on Trinidad before 1978, and was unknown to field-workers from the Trinidad Regional Virus Laboratory (now the Caribbean Epidemiology Centre), who worked intensively during the 1960s in the area of Bush-Bush Forest in Nariva Swamp, where the species is now apparently resident. However, although it is regularly seen, no direct evidence of breeding is yet forthcoming. Observers should look out for this, especially in the Melon Patch area.

Collared Plover *Charadrius collaris*. This little plover is fairly commonly seen on both islands from May to November, and occasionally in other months. The only breeding records are those of Belcher/Smooker in June and July. Is this species just an off-season visitor from South America, or does it breed here? If the latter, where is it nesting, on beaches, reclaimed land, or possibly savanna edges at Piarco or Waller Field?

Large-billed Tern *Phaetusa simplex*. This strikingly patterned bird is a familiar visitor to western coastal areas of Trinidad, as well as inland marshes and reservoirs. Recorded in almost every month but less common from November to February, when it returns to breed on the continent. One nest was recorded by Belcher/Smooker in May. Is it possible that it still breeds on Trinidad?

Yellow-billed Tern *Sterna superciliaris*. This small river tern is fairly common on Trinidad during the same period of the year as *Phaetusa*, but it was not recorded by Belcher/Smooker, who may possibly have thought it was the migratory Least Tern *S. albifrons*. They considered the latter might have bred in June, and I suspect these observations might well have referred to *S. superciliaris*. It is well worth looking for nests of this species in Caroni marshes.

Lined Quail-Dove *Geotrygon linearis*. This secretive dove, usually found on or near the ground in high forest, has been recorded on Tobago, but to my knowledge there are no records since Hurricane Flora in 1963. Is it still extant on Tobago?

Oilbird *Steatornis caripensis*. One of the most extraordinary records of the past few years was that of a group of these birds at Hillsborough Dam, Tobago in September 1988 (French 1993). Although the species is known to roost in sea-caves on the north coast of Trinidad, and may well commute between Huevos and the mainland, it seems almost incredible that it should fly across 30 miles or more of open sea between Trinidad and Tobago. An alternative theory put forward by Hans Boos, one of the observers at Hillsborough, is that Oilbirds may be resident on Tobago, roosting in so far undiscovered caves on the sea coast or inland, an extremely unlikely hypothesis in my opinion. The small size of the island, coupled with the propensity of this species to attract human predation, and to excite the attention of folk-lorists, seems to me to rule out any possibility that it could have just not been noticed over the years. So pending further observations from Tobago, I have to assume that the 1988 record involved vagrants from Trinidad. Much remains to be discovered about the species' movements outside the breeding season, though it is known to migrate within the continent.

Ringed Kingfisher *Ceryle torquata*. A regular but fairly rare visitor to Trinidad from the mainland. The single breeding record at Caroni of Belcher/Smooker in June involved a single egg, unlikely to have been a full clutch. Similarly the Amazon Kingfisher *Chloroceryle amazona* was also found breeding once by Belcher/Smooker at Madamas in May, although it has hardly been recorded otherwise from Trinidad. Do either of these large kingfishers still breed locally? Or is it that river conditions are very different now from 60 odd years ago?

Flycatchers. There are several problems involving correct identification in this difficult family, for which the best diagnostic feature is often the call-note or song. But often visitors to the islands have insufficient time or opportunity to become acquainted with the calls, and I believe some identifications on the basis of plumage only may have been mistaken.

Among the few species that visit from the south of the continent during the austral winter between April and

September is the Variegated Flycatcher *Empidonomus varius*, which is intermediate in size between two other flycatchers that are heavily streaked below, the Streaked Flycatcher *Myiodynastes maculatus* and the Piratic Flycatcher *Legatus leucophaeus*. To make matters more complicated two different races of *E. varius* may be found on Trinidad, *rufinus* which is resident in north Venezuela, and the southern migrant race, which is slightly larger. Unlike *Myiodynastes* and *Legatus*, *E. varius* is very quiet and its weak, thin *psee* is of little help in identification. Observers should always consider calls if possible when distinguishing between these three species.

Another identification problem involves several members of the genus *Myiarchus*. I am usually a little doubtful when I hear of sight identifications of *M. swainsoni*, *venezuelensis*, *tyrannulus* or even *ferox* being made on the basis of plumage. Matters are complicated by differences in immature plumage. The exhaustive study of this genus by W. E. Lanyon (1963) showed that the birds themselves discriminated between the various sympatric species mainly on the basis of different call-notes. But again this does not help us in the case of *swainsoni*, the southern migrant that has rarely been recorded on Trinidad, since it is very quiet on its northern winter quarters. *M. venezuelensis*, on the other hand, can readily be distinguished on Tobago by its call from *tyrannulus*, but it is probably not safe to identify these two species by plumage, except maybe in the hand. Another possibility that has not yet been explored is that *ferox*, which James Bond and others mistakenly claimed to be locally resident (before Lanyon showed those records to pertain to *venezuelensis* or *swainsoni*), may turn up on the Bocas Islands, since it is known from the Paria peninsula. Observers should listen for its distinctive call-note, a short, rolling *prrrt*.

The other flycatcher problem relates to another difficult genus, *Elaenia*. While the common *flavogaster* presents no difficulty, it is quite difficult to tell apart in the field the smaller species, *chiriquensis* and *parvirostris*. The latter is a southern breeder, migrating mainly north to Amazonia, and very occasionally reaching Trinidad. Although it is somewhat larger than *chiriquensis*, it is probably unsafe to identify it in the field, especially as it is unlikely to call. Observers should look out for nests of *chiriquensis* in areas like Aripo Savanna; but again some members of this species may migrate into Trinidad from the mainland.

Blue-and-white Swallow *Notiochelidon cyanoleuca*. Another southern migrant that is usually found from June to September in suitable habitat in western Trinidad, this species was also found breeding by Belcher/Smooker in late March; this might possibly have referred to the resident nominate race, that ranges from Costa Rica south. It is probably impossible now to prove this, for no other nests have been found locally. Have they been looked for?

Chivi Vireo *Vireo chivi*. In my book (1991) I set out the complex nature of this species' status in Trinidad and

Tobago, with possibly as many as four separate forms resident in or visiting our islands. Once more, it is probably risky to differentiate between these in the field, but in the hand careful measurements and examination may suffice. Call-notes also vary slightly, but the birds are usually silent outside their breeding season. Although some authors merge all forms of chivi with the North American Red-eyed Vireo *olivaceus*, this is a matter of opinion. It would still be good to understand the local position of these vireos more clearly.

Yellow Warbler *Dendroica petechia* This common northern migrant is a familiar winter resident, but in various forms is known also to breed as far south as Peru, Venezuela and its offshore islands, as well as a number of West Indian islands, including Barbados. A few years ago David Rooks (*in litt.*) claimed a possible nest at Grafton, Tobago but adequate evidence was lacking. It is highly unlikely that the migratory form *aestiva* would breed on Tobago, and if the resident form *petechia* were to breed there, it would be sedentary and we should expect other records on Tobago between mid-April and August. It is also likely that males of such a local breeding form would be distinctive in plumage, e.g. with a chestnut cap. It is well worth keeping a look out for such an interesting occurrence. Note. A very recent record of a singing warbler on Tobago in July (Hayes, *in litt.*) may indeed throw more light on this situation.

Purple Honeycreeper *Cyanerpes caeruleus*. Soon after Hurricane Flora in early 1964 I found a few individuals at Pigeon Peak, Tobago, but have never seen them on Tobago since. I understood at the time that the late Mrs Mavis Turpin had kept some in captivity, and that the hurricane damage had released her birds. David Rooks (*in litt.*) has been seeing the species "regularly" in the Main Ridge forest, but I know of no other sightings. Observers should be on the look out for this species, which in good conditions can easily be distinguished from its congener, the resident Red-legged Honeycreeper *C. cyaneus*.

Golden-rumped Euphonia *Euphonia cyanocephala*. Originally known as the Blue-hooded Euphonia, and locally as Tete Bleu, this species is very elusive nowadays, possibly because of the depredations of bird-catchers. Although Belcher/Smooker recorded one nest in July, the irregular sightings on Trinidad point to the likelihood that this species is an off-season visitor from the mainland. All authentic sightings should be recorded.

Sooty Grassquit *Tiaris fuliginosa*. Fairly common on Trinidad nowadays, where it is subject to seasonal migration. Care must be taken not to confuse this species with its congener *T. bicolor*, which is common on Tobago and Chacachacare. No authentic records yet from Tobago, where slight variations in male plumage in *bicolor* may have led to mis-identification. Although *bicolor* is slightly larger than *fuliginosa*, the latter's wing averages 10 mm longer, which

should help identification for birds in the hand.

Orange-fronted Yellow-Finch *Sicalis columbiana*.

Another oddity, in that the only records for Trinidad are those of Smooker, who collected this species near San Juan in September 1926 and recorded nesting at the same time. The species may easily be confused with the Saffron Finch *S. flaveola*, but the latter is noticeably larger. There seems no reason why *columbiana* should not occur on Trinidad, so observers should look out for it in ranch-land and savannas in the west.

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