



THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB
MONTHLY MEETING - July 1978

Dear Member,

You are invited to attend the Monthly Meeting of the Club to be held at the Audio-Visual Room of St. Mary's College on Thursday 13th July, 1978 at 5.30 p.m.

AGENDA.

1. Confirmation of Minutes
2. Business Arising out of Minutes
3. Announcements
4. Lecture " Oil Pollution"
by Mr. Prem Nandlal
5. Exhibits and Miscellaneous Notes
6. Other Business

FIELD EXCURSION

The next Field Excursion will be held on Sunday 30th July from North Post to Macqueripe.

We will be leaving St. Mary's College, Pembroke Street at 7.30 a.m. and members are asked to be punctual.

This is a half-day trip.

87th ANNIVERSARY

The Trinidad Field Naturalists Club was founded on 10th July, 1891. Thus on 10th July, 1978 we will be 87 years old.

To mark the occasion a Bar- B- Q- Party will be held at the Emperor Valley Zoo on Friday 21st July at 7.30 p.m. Bring your chicken or meat and drink. Charcoal Fire and Ice will be provided. During the evening the Photography Group will put on a slide show.

MANATEE AT MANZANILLA

A MANZANILLA ESTATE MANAGER has reported that in mid-APRIL a manatee was washed ashore on Lower MANZANILLA Beach.

It was butchered and the meat sold in Ortoire Village.

ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

Annual Subscriptions (\$10.00) are payable at any Monthly Meeting of the Club, or they may be forwarded to Mr. Amin Mohammed, the Honorary Treasurer, c/o DUVAL ASSOCIATES LTD, 129 Edward Street, P.O.S.

OUR 1977 JOURNAL

Dr. Victor Quesnel, Chairman of our Editorial Committee, wishes to remind all members that material for inclusion in the Club's 1979 Journal should reach him at No. 1 Palm Avenue East, Petit Valley, not later than 30th September, 1978.

Other members of the Editorial Committee are Dr. Peter Bacon and Mr. Richard French.

FIELD TRIP TO THE OROPOUCHE CAVE - 19TH MARCH 1978 (V.C. Quesnel)

As on previous occasions, the trace from the Cumaca Rd to Brothers Estate was a quagmire of mud which we did well to negotiate in one hour. On this trip we were informed by the overseer that the trace is least muddy in May, a fact we should remember in planning future field trips. On this occasion, Ian Lambie left with a small party an hour before the main party and took a leisurely walk to the estate, stopping for bird-watching on the way. The two groups arrived at the same time and we all gathered near the cocoa house for a short talk on oilbirds by Ian. We then split into two groups once more, one group going with Ian into the cave to observe the birds and explore the cave and the second, smaller group coming with me to try to find the Oropouche Sink, a funnel-shaped depression in the terrain about 2 km west of the cave. I was keen to find this because the Ordnance Survey map of 1927 shows a river running into this depression and disappearing; to me, this river seemed a likely source of the water in the cave.

I had brought along everything that we would need to test the theory, maps, compass, dye. We planned to follow a ravine west for about 2 km and then strike due north by compass till we reached the stream that runs into the Oropouche Sink. Having found this we would follow it to the point of its disappearance, place some dye in the water and look for the dye again in the water coming out of the cave. That was the plan. Unfortunately, events turned out otherwise.

Having placed an old handkerchief in the water at the cave's mouth to absorb the dye, we found what we thought was the ravine we wanted and followed it for at least 1 km. Although some of us had doubts very early on that it was the right ravine we persevered with it because it ran more or less in the right direction. Also, at one place water ran along its bed and disappeared through crevices in the limestone which was interesting. However, having finally decided that we were in the wrong ravine we crossed over a ridge into another for the way back rather than retrace our steps over familiar ground. Having reached the cave again it became clear that the second ravine joined the one we originally intended to take and the reason for the mistake was the small scale of the map which did not show the ravines exactly as they were. It was now too late for the original programme to be carried out but I was determined to return because everything we had seen convinced me that the original plan was feasible.

Ian's party did not attempt a census of the nests. A count on our previous visit in March 1976 had given 254 and 247 nests but reports of nest-robbing have recently reached me and another count should definitely be made on our next trip to the cave.

THE SEARCH FOR THE OROPOUCHE SINK ON 21ST MAY 1978 - (V.C. Quesnel)

A group of 10 members of the club returned to Brothers Estate on 21st May eager to continue the search for the Oropouche Sink and the elusive river flowing into it. We were at the cave at 10 a.m. after an early start and this time had no difficulty in finding the right ravine. We followed it for about 1 km before coming to a steep cliff where another ravine joined the one we were in. We took the right hand ravine and found ourselves in very rugged country with huge limestone outcrops, deep crevasses and thick vegetation everywhere. Cutting a route through was tedious work. After a good deal of wandering around we eventually came upon the left hand ravine that we had ignored further back. The going became much easier and when I judged we had gone far enough west we struck out north and soon found ourselves climbing a hill. Part way up this we could see other peaks and after taking compass bearings and consulting our maps decided that we must actually have crossed the ravine where the river we were seeking should have been but there was no water. It was time to turn back. We retraced our steps making a careful search for water in the gully at the foot of the hill but found none. We returned easily by the main ravine.

What conclusions can we draw? We cannot have been far from the point we were trying to reach yet we saw no water. The most reasonable conclusions are that the river shown on the 1927 map as a permanent river is now a seasonal river and, bearing in mind our discoveries on the previous attempt as well as this, that water seeps through crevices in the limestone over a wide area, runs underground through many channels and eventually into the tunnel which becomes the Oropouche Cave. One more expedition will be needed to settle the matter but it will now have to wait until next year.

FIELD TRIP TO THE ARIPO CAVE ON 30TH APRIL 1978 - (V.C. Quesnel)

This must surely have been the most popular of all the club's field trips. Ninety-one persons participated, 38 of them members and the remainder guests. Hans Boos has already circulated to members his account of the trip so I will make my report brief.

I tried to plot our route on the map as we walked but without too much success. At the cave we tried to do three things 1) determine the length of the cave, 2) map another section after the initial section that had been done in Feb. 1975, and 3) determine the number of oilbird nests. The exploring party attached a cotton thread to the knotted rope they used to clamber down the second precipice, unreeled it as they went and broke it at the entrance to a large chamber deep in the cave. They brought back 150 ft of the original 1500 ft. Only a tentative exploration beyond the chamber was made but the cave is known to extend beyond the chamber as a narrow tunnel for quite some distance.

The mapping party measured and took compass bearings on 441 ft beginning at the first precipice where the mapping had been discontinued on the previous occasion. I hope to publish a drawing in this bulletin at a later date when more mapping has been done but we now know that the entrance chamber is 250 ft long and tapers off gradually over the next 290 ft to the first precipice which is 27 ft. Ninety-one feet later there is a second precipice of 17 ft. From this to the second large chamber is 1350 ft.

Richard French was in charge of the nest count and his report follows.

"I counted approximately 100 occupied nests in the cave. This number compares unfavourably with 200 nests recorded by David Snow in 1960. Indications in the cave are that poaching still occurs occasionally, as also at Oropouche".

ARIPO SAVANNAH NEWS - (V.C. Quesnel)

The Secretary of the club's Conservation Committee arranged a meeting of the committee with representatives of the Town and Country Planning Division to enable the club to put its case for greater protection of the Aripo Savannahs. The meeting took place at the Forestry Office and was attended by representatives of the Forestry Division and the Trinidad and Tobago Tourist Board in addition to those from the club and the Planning Division. At Dr. Kenny's invitation I gave a short talk on the ecological aspects of the savannah highlighting the large number of endemic and unusual species living there. The ensuing discussion showed clearly how many and serious were the threats to the existence of the savannahs from activities related to forestry, agriculture, mining and urbanization. The representatives of the Planning Division declared themselves in favour of greater protection and promised to take action in preparing plans for the area. Our conservation committee is to keep in touch with them and present specific proposals at a later date. It was agreed that in the meantime greater protection could be achieved by enforcing existing legislation.

The meeting was very successful and augurs well for the safety of the savannahs.

The Botany Group continues its study of Cyrtopodium Broadwayi in the north savannah. Over 100 plants have now been labelled and observations are being made on all of them. The flowering period is now over for the time being. Although many plants flowered only nine produced fruit and all nine only one fruit each. Thus, there seems to be a dearth of pollinators and, as yet, we do not know what the pollinator is.

A full report will be prepared after our first year of study.

Although now under water, the savannahs are looking very beautiful with Byrsonima crassifolia in full flower and several other plants in flower too - an unidentified orchid which we had not noticed before, the tiny rubiaceous plant Perama hirsuta and the grass Paspalum pulchellum. Besides plants, other interesting things turn up eg. the nest of what must be the goldenthrout humming bird (Polytmus guainumbi) first recorded on 11th June and the nest with two eggs of the Pauraque or White-naped Nightjar (Nictidromus albicollis). Both of these records are important because very little is known about the greeding of these birds in Trinidad.

LIVING WORLD

Members who have not received a copy of the Club's 1977 / 1978 Journal "Living World" may collect their copy at the Monthly Meeting.

TURTLE TAGGING PROJECT

Although regular patrols have been made on the Matura Beach and one patrol at Tacarib during the months of April, May and June, it now appears that 1978 has been a poor year for turtles. Less than twenty nesting females have been seen. Patrols continue to be made in the hope of encountering other species, other than the leatherback, which nest later in the year.

MEMBERSHIP

Interest in the Club and in its activities continues to grow. We are now mailing 365 circulars monthly.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Lambie
Honorary Secretary

30th June, 1978

FORESTS - LAND - WATER

A brief talk delivered by Ian Lambie, Honorary
Secretary of the Trinidad and Tobago Field
Naturalists' Club at the Rotary Luncheon on
Tuesday 23rd May, 1978.

During the first half of May 1978, much attention was focussed on the destruction of our forests by fires which occurs during the annual DRY SEASON. Now in the latter half of the same month, the rains have arrived, and the fires are all but forgotten. Flooding is now in the headlines.

Our very complacent population has become accustomed to flooding in low lying areas during the annual RAINY SEASON. We have become accustomed to loss of crops and livestock, damage to property and occasional loss of human life caused by these floods.

In some areas there is a threat of typhoid and residents have to be inoculated.

Should we continue to tolerate this annual wastage and expenditure? The answer must be an unequivocal NO.

Let us examine the causes of this flooding and what steps could be taken to relieve this undesirable situation.

Simply put, flooding is caused by the inadequacy of the present drainage system to contain the volume of run-off during heavy rains. But there is much more to this problem than DRAINAGE, and today gentlemen, I am pleased to have the opportunity to pass on to you the opinions of the TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB on this urgent NATIONAL matter.

The Club is of the opinion that Trinidad and Tobago is the victim of a WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PROBLEM. It is not that today our COUNTRY is experiencing a heavier rainfall than 25 or 50 years ago. On the contrary, it has been experiencing a diminishing annual rainfall.

But our WATERSHED AREAS and especially our once forested hillsides have now been denuded by bulldozers, chainsaws and by the torch, for various reasons.

the rapid run-off during the RAINY SEASON, loss of valuable top soil and flooding in low lying areas, as previously mentioned.

But this rapid run-off also reduces percolation through the soil to replenish underground reservoirs, resulting in low production from wells and springs, as can be confirmed by W.A.S.A. It also causes our rivers to be seasonal rather than perennial, as they were in the past, and silting of our dams and reservoirs.

LAND - A VALUABLE NATURAL RESOURCE

Trinidad and Tobago is a small Country with a large, growing population. There are ever increasing demands for the available land space, for housing, industry, agriculture and recreation.

It is necessary that the LAND must not be seen as a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder but as a valuable and limited NATURAL RESOURCE to be utilised for the greatest NATIONAL benefit.

How best can this be achieved?

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Club recommends, in the interest of our Country and in the interest of its citizens, the adoption of a NATIONAL LAND USE PLAN. Based on LAND Capability and other available relevant information with a continuing monitoring system and the scientific acquisition of relevant data.

Such PLAN should provide for the retention of FOREST RESERVES, the management of WATERSHEDS, the exclusion of squatters from such areas and the control of agricultural fires which in the Club's opinion is a major contributor to the destruction of our forests.

I trust that the Rotary Club and other responsible organisations will join with the Field Naturalists' Club in advocating the wise use of our NATURAL RESOURCES for the common good and for the enhancement of our well being.

I thank you.