

THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

MONTHLY MEETING - OCTOBER 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 12th October, 1978 at 5. 30 p.m.

A G E N D A

1. CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES.
2. BUSINESS ARISING OUT OF MINUTES.
3. ANNOUNCEMENTS.
4. LECTURE " TRINIDAD SCORPIONS "
by Mr. Julius Boos.
5. EXHIBITS AND MISCELLANEOUS NOTES.
6. OTHER BUSINESS.

FIELD EXCURSION

On Sunday 29th October, the Club will be visiting the Canari Bay area at Moruga.

We will be leaving the St. Mary's College, Pembroke Street at 7.00 a.m. Short stops will be made on the Princess Margaret Highway, outside the National Brewing Company at 7.20 a.m. and at the junction of the San Fernando Bye- Pass and the Naparima - Mayaro Road at 8.15 a.m.

This is a whole day trip.

1979 JOURNAL

Once again, I am to remind members who wish to submit material for inclusion in the Club's 1979 Journal to send such material to Dr. Victor Quesnel at No. 1 Palm Road East, Petit Valley without further delay.

1979 PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES

Members are invited to submit suggestions for Lectures and Field Trips for possible inclusion in our 1979 Programme. Such suggestions may be sent to the Honorary Secretary, at 64 Roberts Street, Woodbrook, before 31st October.

Report on Field Trip to Tobago

Friday 16th - Monday 19th June, 1978

Our motor cars having been delivered to the Port Authority for transportation to Tobago by 2.00 p.m. on Friday 16th, twenty six members travelled to Tobago by the 6.00 p.m. flight from Piarce. On arrival they were met by Charles Williams and Bertha Estrada who had travelled earlier by an earlier flight and the Honorary Secretary, Ian Lambie, who had travelled the day before.

Transportation to our camp at Grafton Estate, was provided by Mrs. Alefounder, her brother Bobby Smith, Jairam Maharaj one of our Tobago members, Ian Lambie and a taxi. After everyone was settled in at Grafton and dinner taken, the President David Rooks called a "getting to know you" meeting at which members were introduced to each other.

After breakfast on Saturday morning members were transported in Ian's car and Mrs. Alefounder's Land Rover to Buccoo village, for the trip to the Reef. As on previous visits, Edgar and Codrington Johnson were our boatmen, and what a trip it was lasting for approximately 3 1/2 hours, with visits to the Reef, the Marine Gardens and the nylon pool.

After lunch at Grafton, some members took a walk up to Pillar Hill, the highest point on the Estate, overlooking Mount Irvine Bay and the Hotel with a beautiful view of the Buccoo Reef.

With the knowledge that the Coastal vessels were leaving Trinidad at 10 a.m. that day we were hopeful of a 5.00 p.m. arrival of our cars. This was not to be, and although we spent about 1 hour at the Fort King George in Scarborough, the wait was a long one, the boat docking at 7.00 p.m.

By 9.00 p.m. with all "freight charges" paid the cars were on their way to Grafton and everyone breathed a sigh of relief, except Ian whose car refused to start due to a weak battery.

Later some members drove the 17 miles to Englishman's Bay in search of turtles, some went to a nearby Disco while others slept early.

On Sunday morning, before departure for the trip up the Windward Coast, Eugene Fehr one of the party, and a Minister of Religion said some short but appropriate prayers.

The party left Grafton at 8.30 a.m. and after a long wait for gasoline, which was in short supply due to an "electrical outage" the previous day, and the resulting delay in the filling of tankers from the bulk storage facilities, we left Scarborough, at 9.45 p.m. We visited Kings Bay Waterfall, Jim Davies at Speyside who gave us a brief account of a pair of nesting Black throated mango hummingbirds, and arrived at Charlotteville at 1.00 p.m. Lunch was taken in the very convenient facilities provided for visitors.

Members snorkled around the patch reef just off shore, and observed thousands of small dead crustaceans on the beach and in the water.

The opinion was expressed that these were young lobsters but unfortunately, none were collected for identification.

Leaving Charlotteville, we travelled up the narrow roadway to the beacon erected on the highest point east of Charlotteville.

From this vantage point we were able to see the St. Giles Island Wildlife Sanctuary.

These islands are the nesting sites for many species of sea birds including the Magnificent Frigatebird, Boobies, Noddies, and Tropic birds to name a few species, and were donated to the Government by Mr. Charles Turpin, the owner of Charlotteville Estate. Time did not permit a visit to Bloody Bay.

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EXCURSION TO ST. ANNS PEAK - 27th August 1978 - VIVIEN NATHAN

We were up bright and early on the morning of the 27th to be greeted by grey skies and a drizzly rain. Disappointed, but knowing that nothing short of a hurricane would keep the Field Naturalists at bay, we proceeded to St. Mary's College, the usual meeting place for such trips.

The time was 7.30 am and the old familiar faces were there, but did I detect a slight uneasiness, a little indecision? It soon became apparent that the guide had not turned up and could not be contacted and nobody present was sure of the route to the peak. The most recent trip by any of the assembled members was 30 years ago! With baited breath we awaited the arrival of Neville Acham, for it was hoped he would have a map. No such luck, he did not. Oh well, on to Luciano's car park to meet the rest of the group. One of them might have an idea of the route. At the car park we joined forces with more prospective hikers but still the route remained a mystery.

By this time the sun was shining and nobody seemed anxious to make a move, content just to savour the peace and tranquility of the morning. The constant whirring of the insects and chattering of the birds enhanced the picturesque setting chosen as our meeting place.

An hour had passed since leaving Pembroke Street when we were instructed to pile into as few cars as possible and reassemble on Fondes Amandes Road, just above the St. Anns Reservoir. About fifty people, attired in the most amazing array of walking gear (nobody was more amazed than a rather bemused goat who observed the party with a look of utter disbelief), gathered expectantly to hear David Rooks give a brief introductory chat ".....St. Anns Peak, nearly 2000 ft high, is a relatively unspoilt area of natural beauty, easily accessible from Port of Spain and is particularly renowned for the wide variety of butterflies, including many rare species which can be seen during the wet season." A pleasant two hour walk would see us to the top and we would be back around lunchtime. A quick reconnoitre by Victor Quesnel informed us that we should cross the river seven times and on reaching the old cocoa we should keep straight on; rather vague but the day was young and so far the sun was shining. With a final word to keep together we proceeded into the unknown only to go 10 yards and meet a fork in the road. "Which way Victor?" "Take a right". So we did, and crossed the river for the first time, or was it the second?

Thanks to Dr. Julian Duncan and his talk in May on "Some unusual plants" someone spotted an Aristolochia grandiflora high up on the trunk of a tree - an attractive-looking flower evolved to look like rotting flesh to attract saprophagous flies.

Our cheerful group pressed on along a very wide, attractive pathway fringed with bamboo. The air was filled with a sweet perfume which we attributed to a large white flower, Hedychium coronarium, a member of the ginger family. The walking was easy and each individual was able to indulge in their particular interest be it birdwatching, collecting butterflies, identifying insects or plants. Just the sheer pleasure of striding along in the open air, savouring the fresh earthy smells of the damp vegetation was a welcome contrast to the heat, noise and bustle of Port of Spain.

After 30 minutes the road forked again. Half the group gathered in a state of indecision as it was not immediately apparent which path to take, so we waited for the botanists to catch up. All around us was evidence of a once productive estate. Avocados, guavas, coffee, cocoa, breadfruit and bananas were in abundance, but very overgrown and unkempt. After some time the Wyeomia mosquitoes (which breed in rainwater in the axils of bromeliads and the bracts of heliconias) encouraged a small group of us to move on. We chose the left fork and clambered up a steep track. Upon reaching the top the heavens opened and drenched us in seconds. This had the predictable effect of making a few return to the main group at the fork. However, the intrepid explorers continued up a steep overgrown path and then downhill and across the river for the 'n'th time. The rain was unrelenting and we looked a sorry bunch of adventurers, floppy hats looking decidedly soggy and footwear squelching unrecognisably in the thick mud. On and up until the track came to an abrupt halt in a small cultivation. So we turned about and slithered and slid down the sodden track back to the fork. The rest of the group had moved on. Before joining them we concealed a breadfruit under a bush, to collect on our return journey.

We had only gone a short distance when to our surprise we met the familiar person of David Rooks, brandishing his cutlass and also looking a little bedraggled. He was retracing his steps looking for a well-defined path to the right. Having crossed the river seven times we had reached the cocoa shed and lost the path! Far from being dispirited by the rain, which by now had stopped, and being to all intents and purposes lost, the group, minus one or two who had returned to base, were as cheerful and talka-

tive as could be. Frankie Farrel was pointing out the vine of the wild yam suggesting we dig it up, but a voice from the group protested that the wild yam has no flavour.

No path was obvious, so 40 or more people launched undaunted into the bush, those with cutlasses clearing the track ahead. Thick mud and wet leaves made progress difficult and precarious so we proceeded cautiously and exceedingly slowly in single file up the slippery track cut by the trail blazers.

Some thirty minutes later we assembled in a pleasant clearing to reassess the situation. The path was non-existent but nobody mentioned the possibility of turning back. Onwards and upwards seemed to be the cry, we must surely reach the top - whether it would be the top of St. Anns Peak didn't really matter, the company was good and it was still early, 11.30 in fact. After readjusting our packs we set off again with enthusiasm. Upon crossing a dry gorge we were confronted with a near vertical face. What happened to the easy ~~to come to the top of the mountain~~ had anticipated? ~~The gap~~ diminished further and prepared for the rigorous mountaineering feat. Those at the rear hoped fervently that the ones ahead of them would not lose their footing and come tumbling down. Hauling ourselves up, ~~testing~~ each hand and foothold as we went we gradually ascended the steep incline. Looking back through the trees and down the valley we could see Port of Spain in the distance. Our intimacy with the peaty soil grew with each step and conversation gradually dwindled as each of us thought his own thoughts, occasionally interrupted by a yelp of pain as someone inadvertently grasped hold of a spiky palm trunk.

We decided to continue until noon in the hope that we would reach our goal. Now there was dissent amongst the ranks but the optimists insisted that the sky was getting closer. The pessimists anticipated a night on the hillside clinging to a tree trunk for safety. The prospect of returning the way we had come gave us the incentive to continue - there must surely be an easier way down. Then suddenly above us, there was the path, up the last few yards to the top of St. Anns Peak. We must surely have reached the top by the shortest route possible! In case we were in any doubt about this being the right peak, there was a sign post pointing back down the track, Fondes Amandes Road. We must follow it back down again one day to find where we took the wrong fork.

At the top there was a cool breeze and the sun was shining. There were magnificent views on three sides. To the northeast, along the Northern Range, El Tucuche was clearly visible. Looking south we could see the Central Range and Caroni Swamp. The lepidopterist disappeared into the bush shortly to reappear with a Queen Cracker, Hamadryas arethusa, a beautiful specimen with iridescent blue spots on velvety black wings.

Food and drink was consumed with gusto and we all relaxed and enjoyed the camaraderie of fellow Naturalists. About 33 of the 50 starters made it to the top.

It started to rain again so the early arrivals began to make tracks for home. Ignoring the Fondes Amandes sign we took the main path down, stepping out in high spirits. We emerged into what for all the world looked like a Scottish moorland scene. Bracken and pine trees, and below us swirling mists hanging over the valley. It was a beautiful sight, as once again the sun appeared overhead. We looked down into the valley to the west and could see the cocoa shed where we had obviously taken a wrong turning. Looking east we could see below us Belle Vue Estate, a very orderly looking farm. "Shangri La" somebody whispered.

From here it was an easy descent down a metalled road which turned out to be private, as we observed on the sign at the bottom, Cashew Hill. Rotting mangoes by the roadside attracted a plethora of exquisite butterflies, Crackers (Hamadryas feronia), Bamboo Page (Metamorpha stelenes), Blue-tinted Handkerchief (Dynamine theseus), Donkey's Eye (Precis lavinia zonatis), Coolie (Anartia amathea), Red Rim (Biblis hyperia), Biscuit (Anartia jatrophe), all very common and familiar species but how many people who enjoy their beauty know their names?

A Pale Breasted Spinetail was spotted in the undergrowth. A donkey on the roadside lazily swished the flies away with his tail. We offered him a mango but he refused it. Perhaps he would have preferred a Julie? Newcomers to Trinidad tasted the tart sweetness of hogplums for the first time and suggested it would make a good preserve. We discussed how to cook shatine and admired more butterflies and before we knew it we were back at the car park at Luciano's.

Whatever your interest, be it birds, trees, flowers, butterflies, real adventure in a tropical rainforest, or just meeting a friendly group of people with a common interest, why not join us on the next Field Naturalists Club outing. We won't promise we'll know the way but we'll guarantee an outing you won't forget! Oh, I've

just remembered, we didn't collect the breadfruit from under the bush. Anyone know the way up to St. Anns Peak?

Ed. Note. On 25th Sept. 4 members of the club returned to the TV screens via Cashew Hill and proved to their satisfaction that this spot was not St Ann's Peak as we had thought on the previous trip but another, unnamed peak. More about this in the next bulletin.

BIRD NEWS

from RICHARD FFRENCH

Although the Club's birdwatching activities seem to remain confined to a few enthusiasts, interesting bird records continue to come in. The first seems to me a model of the kind of useful contribution to the country's ornithology that may be made by observers who take an interest in birds without claiming to be specialists (surely quite a large category).

In early April a Club member, Mary Hahn, wrote to me that she had recently observed in her garden at Valsayn two birds of prey that appeared (from the illustration in my book) to be Hook-billed Kites. On checking the text she was somewhat perplexed to find that the species had not been authentically recorded in Trinidad during the last hundred years. However she felt that the birds fitted the descriptions given in the book. Now I must admit that I receive from time to time reports of unusual birds from observers of varying reliability, and my normal reaction is therefore cautious. So I replied, suggesting that Mrs Hahn continue her observations, at the same time making careful field notes on all aspects. (It is always important to make one's notes before checking guide-books, to avoid confusing one's impressions). In due course I received another letter enclosing admirably clear notes made on ten separate occasions. Everything seemed to point to the likelihood that she was seeing a pair of Hook-billed Kites.

Since it is always best to have observations of rare birds corroborated by other people, I visited Mrs Hahn's home in company with an experienced English ornithologist, John Beazley, who happened to be staying in Trinidad just then, and in a short while we were lucky enough to see the pair of kites, with a particularly fine view of the female at close quarters! All of us confirmed the record.

The Hook-billed Kite (Chondrohierax uncinatus) is a sedentary inhabitant of swampy forests in tropical America, perching mainly in the middle and upper branches of trees. There have been no records of the species in Trinidad since the days of Antoine Leotaud, who mentioned in his book published in 1866 that he had collected it. The occurrence of this kite in the suburban district of Valsayn is therefore most remarkable. Possibly there may be in the area an abundance just now of land snails, which constitute the main food of Hook-billed Kites.

I should add to the text of my book (p.100) that the female is strongly barred below in cream and cinnamon brown, and that there is a prominent yellow patch, bare of feathers, in front of the eye, along with a pale, bare eye-ring. The head and bill pattern is indeed most distinctive.

Other recent records include that of a male Scarlet Tanager (Piranga olivacea) seen in the grounds of Crown Point Hotel, Tobago between April 20 and 22 1978. This beautiful and spectacular species, brilliant scarlet all over except for black wings, tail and loreal streak, has never been recorded before in Trinidad or Tobago. However, as a North American breeder, wintering south as far as Bolivia and known as an occasional visitor to Barbados, it was to be expected to occur here sooner or later. Several people, including myself, my wife and daughter, saw the bird in Tobago, where it fed most commonly on the berries of the Naked Indian tree (Bursera simaruba).

Finally, in my own garden at Pointe-a-Pierre, bordering one of Texaco's large reservoirs, I have been seeing regularly since May 7 two Black-headed Gulls (Larus ridibundus), visitors from Europe, feeding over the water and settling with the crown of Black Skimmers and Large-billed Terns. This species has only recently been recognised to occur in Trinidad, probably owing to its similarity to our common native Laughing Gull. I also received a few weeks ago news of a Black-headed Gull seen by several people at Turtle Beach, Tobago on January 28.

Postscript On the Club's recent field trip to the large Aripo Cave I counted approximately 100 occupied nests of Oilbirds in the cave. This number compares unfavourably with 200 nests recorded by David Snow in 1960. Indications in the cave are that poaching still takes place occasionally, as also at Oropouche. We must not let up our efforts to preserve this extraordinary bird for posterity.

(Report on the Tobago Trip continued)

Monday was to be a very short day, with our ~~departure~~ ^{departure} time advanced from 4.45 p.m. to 4.15 p.m. and having to deliver our cars to the Port Authority at Scarborough at 2.30 p.m. for the return trip.

The visit to Castara and Englishman's Bay was cancelled and after taking pictures of the birds at Grafton and of a magnificent specimen of iguana we visited Plymouth. Unfortunately, the owner of the property on which the mystery tombstone is located denied us permission to enter. We visited Fort James and the recently erected Couronian Monument, nearby.

Arrangements having been made for a visit to Arnos Vale, members enjoyed the hospitality of the Management and a group spent much time viewing the many species of reef fishes, including the beautiful Queen Angel, corals and sponges.

Members were transported to Crown Point early thus giving an opportunity to visit the Angostura Butterfly Exhibition at the Crown Reef Hotel, or to take a last dip at Store Bay.

Ian Lambie

Honorary Secretary.

2nd October, 1978