

THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

QUARTERLY BULLETIN - APRIL 1979

Dear Member,

The second Thursday of the month being Holy Thursday, the Monthly Meeting for April will now be held on Thursday 19th April at the Audio-visual Room of the St. Mary's College, beginning at 5.30 p.m.

AGENDA

1. Confirmation of Minutes.
2. Business arising out of the Minutes.
3. Announcements.
4. LECTURE " Frogs, Islands and Evolution " by Mr. David Hardy.
5. Exhibits and Miscellaneous Notes.
6. Other Business.

FIELD EXCURSION

The Club will be camping on the Tacarib Beach on the night of Saturday 28th April. We will be leaving the junction of the North Coast Road and the Saddle Road at 7.00 a.m. on Saturday 28th to arrive at Blanchisseuse by 8.00 a.m. The group will then split into two, those hiking and those travelling by boat. Remember that it is a six hour hike to Tacarib. (Minimum time). Participants are reminded to bring along their food, water, camping equipment, flashlights, insect repellent, change of clothes etc. We should leave Tacarib on the return trip by 10.00 a.m. on Sunday.

TRIP TO TOBAGO

This year the Club will be visiting Tobago during the Whit-weekend, 1st to 4th June. We propose to leave Piarco by the 5.30 p.m. flight on Friday 1st and to return on Monday 4th by the 4.30 p.m. flight. Camp will be made at the Grafton Estate. As in the past we will ship our motor cars to Tobago and in order for the necessary bookings to be made early members wishing to participate should notify me of their intention and submit the Registration Number of their vehicles and Make by Thursday 19th April (Monthly Meeting) The Subscription will be \$60.00 to cover return Air Fare, transportation to Grafton, freight on motor cars, gas, ice, soft drinks etc., but participants must bring along their food and bed-roll. Kitchen facilities will be available at Grafton.

SPECIAL NOTICE TO MEMBERS IN ARREARS

Members in arrears for 1978 and 1979 (two years) will not receive any further Circulars.

Lady Chancellor Rd near the old Belvedere Restaurant was the meeting place for the field trip of 25th January 1979. From there a trace climbs gently upward to the ridge at the head of the Fondes Amandes valley and continues along the ridge to St. Ann's Peak. The more active members of the party set off to reach the ridge while I brought up the rear with a small group of bonatists, intent only on studying the vegetation without any thought to distance travelled. In the early years of Port of Spain, the lower slopes of the surrounding hills were clothed in deciduous seasonal forests which gradually gave way to lower montane forest over the 300 m level but fires have so ravaged them over the past fifty years that we expected to find only traces of the original vegetation. It was a pleasant surprise, therefore, to return with a list of about 50 plants seen and identified and some records too of birds and other animals.

According to Beard, the lower slopes were once dominated by poui and incense trees. We are still fortunate to have many of the poui trees and they annually perform their miracle of spectacular flowering. But the incense tree, Protium guianense, seems to have all but disappeared. We were on our way back after noon when I found a single small representative of this species. When the bark is cut a thin fragrant oily resin exudes and eventually solidifies. It can then be burned like incense and is what gives the tree its common name.

Beard lists 63 other trees that should be found in deciduous seasonal forest. Although our exploration hardly went beyond the edge of the trace, we were surprised to find twelve of these. I will mention all of them. Early in the walk, we came across several naked indians (not people, but the tree Bursera simaruba) easily recognisable by the copper-coloured, papery bark that peels off in sheets to expose the dark green underbark, the character that has obviously given the tree its common name. They were bare of leaves and covered in buds about to burst into bloom. A fine young silk cotton (Ceiba pentandra) fooled us for a while into thinking it was something else because of the prickles on the trunk. A little way up the hillside all alone in the grass which the repeated fires have encouraged, was a handsome locust tree (Hymenaea courbaril) in fruit. The more common name of this tree, stinking toe, is entirely apt and derives from the odour of the pulp surrounding the seed. The tree can be recognised by the smooth grey bark, the compound leaves with only two leaflets and the fat brown pods 10 - 12 cm (4 - 5") long. Cypre, cedar and hogplum were relatively common. The cypre was in bloom, the masses of white flowers beginning to turn brown. Cedar and hogplum were both losing their leaves. Cedar (Cedrela mexicana) is well known but it is surprising how easily it can be confused with hogplum (Spondias mombin). Even foresters need to take a good look for Marshall says in his book on the trees of Trinidad and Tobago: "At a glance hogplum can easily be mistaken for cedar".

About halfway to the ridge, we came upon a tree with a strange fruit like a sea urchin. Others on the trip had seen it too and remarked on the fruit. It was easily identified later as Tobago sandbox or mahoe chardon (Apeiba schumburghii). The common trees chaconia (Warszewiczia coccinea), bois tatoo (Rudgea freemani), cooperhoop (Brownea latifolia), and white olivier (Terminalia amazonia) were all present in some numbers and there was one specimen of wild orange (Swartzia simplex). Bois tatoo is also known locally as cacapoule (Marshall primly writes Kakapol instead), but why on earth should an attractive little tree with shiny leaves, white flowers and red berries acquire such a name? It no more resembles cacapoule than any other tree I know.

We saw several other trees that are not on Beard's list only one of which I shall mention. This is Petrea arborea a well known garden ornamental which, though native, is seldom seen in the wild. There were lots of vines and scrambling shrubs including the Easter flower (Securidaca diversifolia) and Combretum fruticosum. The former was already in fruit, long before Easter and at the time of writing (mid February) others are in flower everywhere. It is a highly ornamental plant with its masses of purple, pealike flowers. Combretum, too, is highly ornamental both in flower and fruit and the yellow-orange "bottle brush" flowers are very attractive to humming birds.

The zoologists in the party were looking for a special purple-finned leaping guabine supposed to inhabit these streams but they were unsuccessful. However, they did report the presence of the common leaping guabine, Rivulus hartii. We saw other animal life too: stingless bees of the genus Trigona constructing a hive in the mud near a stream, three humming birds, the green hermit, the balisier and the starthroat, and the little frog Phylllobates trinitatis in which the male carries the tadpoles on his back for some time.

This species is restricted to the Northern Range and the Mt Tamana region of the Central Range. It was a bit of a surprise to see it in the Lady Chancellor Hills and a surprise, too, to see water in some of the ravines. When the ravines finally dry up the frog will disappear. How long will this take? Or, can we ensure that the streams never dry up?

Field trip to El Tucuche

(V.C. Quesnel)

Hurricane Alma which struck Trinidad on 14th August 1974 left the Tucuche trail a shambles. Well over a hundred trees were blown down across it between the summit and the col where the trail from Ortinola joins the main trail from Caura. Over the years, saplings grew up around the fallen trunks and detours had to be made around many so that what was once a pleasant gently sloping, mountain trail took on the appearance of an obstacle course. Most of the trees on the north face of Naranjo had been cleared by foresters in 1977 but bandits had interrupted the work and it remained unfinished. Because of the continuing deterioration, the management committee of the Club decided that an attempt should be made by members to remove the obstacles and restore the trail to its former state. The week-end of March 3 - 4 was set aside for this. The plan was that a party armed with power saws and cutlasses would proceed to Tucuche on 3rd March and camp there overnight while a second party would come up on the following day on the club's regular monthly trip.

Two weeks beforehand a scouting party had reassessed the task and chosen a possible camp site on the north face of Naranjo. Bob Bower of Esperanza Estate had promised to take the advance party by jeep to the Caura - Tucuche trail from which point walking would be easy and we hoped to have a donkey or two to carry the equipment. We were sure the weather would be fine and everything would go according to plan. Little did we know.

The morning of 3rd March was overcast and rainy as we assembled at Esperanza Estate at about 7 a.m. - a bad omen. Things had gone wrong even before that. We had managed to get only one power saw and that one had refused to start. We tried again that morning to get it working but after a few coughs it gave up and remained silent despite all our coaxing. We were all discouraged. Now we would have only cutlasses for the job and we could all see that we were in for a wet week-end. In fact rain seemed imminent. We considered calling off the trip. But suddenly the mood changed. We decided we should make the effort despite the disappointments and piling into the two land rovers provided by the Bowers, we headed up the steep hill. There was now no need for the donkey for we left power saw and fuel behind. Bob dropped us off at the agreed point about 1500 ft (460 m) above sea level. We shouldered our packs and trudged off into the gathering gloom.

There were fourteen of us: David Rooks our president with three of his children, Ronald, Courtney and Jacqueline, Neville Acham, Frankie Farrell, Brian Cooper, Make Nathan, Luisa Zuniaga, Cheryl Castang, Jai Ramkisson, Dave Ramnarine, Selwyn Ramjohn and myself. Before long the rain came down to soak those of us who had neglected to bring plastic raincoats and it stayed with us for most of the walk. By 11 a.m. two hours after leaving the land rovers, we found ourselves at the rest house at the junction of our trail with the trail to Las Cuevas. It was time for a rest and consultation. The weather was still bad with showers coming on and off and clouds billowing up the mountain sides. There seemed no prospect of sunshine and water was running off the trail in rivulets. Our nice dry camp site of two weeks previously, at least 3 km further on, would now be unusable, so we decided to camp at the rest house despite the leaky roof and its distance from the scene of operations. We cleared a fallen tree from the site and repaired the roof as best we could and I set up a maximum and minimum thermometer at a convenient location. Then about noon the nine members of the cutlass brigade set off to begin their task while the others remained behind to clean out the house and get it ready for the night.

Our cutlassers worked in groups of two or three tackling the fallen trees as we met them and as each group finished clearing one site it passed the other working groups and went on to the next site. The rain had stopped and the cool weather was pleasant so we worked like this for 3½ hrs cutting away the smaller trees and clearing away the saplings growing around the larger trees that we could not cut. The trail began to brighten up and that evening we returned to camp along sections of the old trail that had not been used for years so overgrown had they become.

Back at camp we ate dinner in the misty twilight and settled down to enjoy the flood of tall tales with which we felt sure David Rooks would regale

us. But David had hurt himself while clambering over a fallen tree and his mood was subdued. He was soon asleep. Frankie Farrell slung his hammock in the open annex at the western end of the hut and climbed in. Conversation gradually petered out as the rest of us squeezed into the one room, all too much like sardines in a can. Despite that delicious tiredness that comes with hard physical work I could not sleep and others, like me, lay there with eyes closed, resting but awake. But David and his children and Neville all slept soundly as they loudly proclaimed to the rest of us. Well after midnight a heavy, persistent shower clattered on to the roof and we soon knew that our repairs had not been good enough. The sardines became even more squashed together as they tried to avoid the drips, but no-one complained. The rain eventually stopped. The sleepers went back to sleep; the others waited for the dawn.

When the dawn did come it brought more rain with it. Our planned early start was increasingly delayed as we shirked the unpleasant task of putting on wet shoes and socks. We wondered if those that were to come on the Sunday would bother to make the trip. They were to come by the usual route through Ortinola Estate. Our camp site was a couple of kilometres east of the col where they would join our trail. By 9 a.m. we were ready and moved off in a slight drizzle. By 9.20 a.m. we reached the col at exactly the time that the first of the seventeen, hardy, Sunday hikers reached it. There were greetings and mutual congratulations as we continued together. The cutlassers resumed their work while others headed for the summit hoping for a break in the clouds and a chance to savour that wonderful view from the top. They were lucky; the clouds did clear.

When we judged it was time to return Frankie and I were glad to sheath our cutlasses and collect plants on the way back to camp. There our cleaning up was speedily completed and a couple of hours later we were all back at Esperanza.

The trip must be counted a great success. Although there are still at least seventy trees across the trail not all of them are obstructions. The trail is now more like its old self and a pleasure to walk along. All those who took part deserve great credit. Our max' thermometer registered a minimum of 63F (17C) and a maximum of 75F (24C). We recorded such rarities as the Orange-billed Nightingale Thrush (Catharus aurantiprostris) and the "luminous" lizard Proctoporus shrevei. Two weeks previously we had found a dead quenk (Dicotyles tocaju) so we know that they are in the area. But, there were no red howlers. So far as I know no-one has ever seen or heard red howlers there. Why aren't they there?

3rd April, 1979

ere!

Ian Lambie
Honorary Secretary

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K. M. R.