

# THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALIST CLUB

## MEETINGS - 3RD QUARTER 1984

You are invited to attend the monthly meetings of the Club to be held in the Audio-Visual Room of St. Mary's College on July 12th, August 9th and September 13th 1984 at 5.30 p.m.

### A G E N D A

1. Confirmation of Minutes
2. Business arising out of the Minutes
3. Lecture
4. Announcements
5. Exhibits and Miscellaneous Notes
6. Other Business

### L E C T U R E S

- July 12th - Carangids (Jacks) and Scombrids (Mackerels) of Trinidad by Dr. Maxwell Sturm  
Aug. 9th - Members Evening  
Sept. 13th - The Trinidad Forests by Frankie Farrell

### F I E L D T R I P S

- July 29th - Morne Diablo Wildlife Sanctuary and Mud Volcano  
Aug. 26th - Mount St. Benedict  
Sept. 30th - Morne Bleu

### Field Trip to Tacarib Bay on 28th and 29th of April 1984 (Frankie Farrell)

From the naturalist's point of view nothing unusual was seen or discovered on this excursion. Twenty seven people in all went on this trip, ten by boat and seventeen on foot. Five of the walkers approached Tacarib from the eastern or Matelot side but continued on to Blanchisseuse on the return journey. Their knowledge of the bridle path between Matelot and Tacarib will stand us in good stead in the future if an excursion between these two points is programmed. On a previous occasion when this was tried the objective was not reached as, through lack of knowledge, wrong pathways were taken.

Some of the walkers had an unfortunate experience. They lost track of the path at a point where there had been a fire. Deciding therefore to travel along the coast they had a harrowing time clambering over rocks. At one point there was a drop of some 5 metres but luckily one of them had a rope by means of which they climbed down. The journey took them some seven hours but at least one of them said he enjoyed the experience.

The trips back and forth by boat were uneventful. The weather was calm both ways and there was no rain. The number of poui trees in flower on the mountains was smaller than was seen last year. The most outstanding thing was the exorbitant price of \$400 per boat charged for the return trip. There is a feeling that the Blanchisseuse boatmen have priced themselves out of the business and that our club will not be inclined to organize a boat trip to Tacarib next year.

Two turtles were seen. One was followed through the whole process of laying its eggs and was extensively photographed. Possibly because of the numerous flash bulbs that were fired off the turtle may have got confused and took an inordinately long time in covering up the hole after laying its eggs. Two very enthralled persons were Angela and Stan Ferbrache, two visitors from Guernsey, Channel Islands. Tracks of four other turtles were seen on the Sunday morning.

A few trips were made to Madamas Bay by some members of the group.

As I went by boat I did very little plant collecting. The usual beach vegetation needs no mention as I have described this in a previous occasion, but I did observe a species of *DUGGENA* (Coffee family) on the beach which I think is unusual. Also observed was a species of *DALBERGIA* (Pea family) which is quite common on the Tacarib



beach. This plant is a shrub but many Dalbergias are lianas in the forest. Other Dalbergias yield valuable wood such as rosewood and blackwood, but our shrub over here cannot qualify for such economic importance.

#### Field Trip to El Tucuche on May 27, 1984 (V. Quesnel)

It was with some misgiving that I proposed May as the month for this year's field trip to Tucuche for, as a rule, the last Sunday in May is extremely wet. However, the committee accepted my suggestion because we had never been there before in May and once again (as had happened with our first trip in September) the event proved the wisdom of visiting Tucuche at different times of the year. This year the rainy season was delayed and Sunday 27th May was a fine day. The usual large crowd assembled at Ortinola Estate and was addressed by Frankie Farrell who was unable to participate but came to launch us as it were. The first part of the trip through the cocoa estate was uneventful and brought nothing new. However, one past the col and on the Caura-Tucuche trail I was rewarded for my willingness to risk a field trip in pouring rain for a little shrubby melastome that I had seen on every previous trip to Tucuche but never in flower was now flowering and could at last be identified. Specimens were taken and preserved but have not yet been taken to the herbarium. I kept a sharp look-out for another plant I badly wanted to collect - a Rondolatia I know is there but have never seen - but was disappointed once again.

There were compensations, however, Graham White pointed out a Brown Violetear Hummingbird high in a tree and, though I could not see the violet tuft of feathers at the ear, I had no doubt about its identity because its song and behaviour were exactly as described by French. (This leaves only the Green-throated Mango and the Rufous-shafted Woodstar of the Trinidad hummingbirds for me to see.) A little later I had my first sight of the beautiful Speckled Tanager (Tangara guttata). Both of these birds are normally seen only in montane forests and not in the lowlands.

I and the small group with me spent so much time looking for interesting things that we never reached the summit. As we sat having lunch the advance party passed us on its way back down and we followed in due course. There were two minor accidents. One of the visitors slipped while trying to collect water from a waterfall and sustained a cut lip while one member sprained an ankle and had to be assisted down.

#### Reappearance of the American Oystercatcher in Trinidad (V. Quesnel)

On 20th June 1984 as I was driving along the Caroni South Bank Road near its junction with the old Southern Main Road a most spectacular bird that I had never seen before flew across the road and landed in a recently ploughed camfield. I had two very short glimpses of it, one as it crossed the road directly in front of me and the other as it landed in the field. It was a large bird, about the size of a Cattle Egret, but with a shorter neck. The upper parts were greyish or brownish, the distal halves of the wings and the tail were black and there were conspicuous white bands on the rump and across the wings about half way between base and tip. I had no time to see the other features but the pattern was so striking that I felt sure I would be able to identify the bird.

No picture in French's book remotely resembles the bird I saw but a not-very-good black and white drawing in Bond's Birds of the West Indies seemed to fit. This was of the Common Oystercatcher (Haematopus ostralegus). The American Oystercatcher (Haematopus palliatus) listed in French is the same bird despite its different scientific name and the description in French fits the bird I saw. French gives the additional information that this bird has not been seen in Trinidad since the last century though David Rooks saw it in Tobago two years ago (see following article).

#### The American Oystercatcher in Tobago (D. Rooks)

On Sunday the 30th August 1982 a Canadian, John Cartwright and his wife Barbara, spending time at Arnos Vale Hotel, Tobago on a birdwatching vacation, reported to me that they had seen an American Oystercatcher (Haematopus palliatus) on the rock shelf on the East side of the bay. They noted that it was last reported in this area in the nineteenth century.

I looked up the bird in French and in the Birds of North America and Monday at dawn I went in search of it.

At low tide quite a large area of relatively flat rock becomes exposed on this point. Between the rocks there are many tidal pools which are quite rich in sea life; shell fish, sea eggs, sea urchins, algae, fish, etc. I have seen a variety of birds feeding there, sandpipers, ruddy turnstones, semipalmated plover are common at this time of the year. However because of the rough nature of the rocks and the natural camouflage of the birds they are sometimes fairly hard to see until you are



right on top of them.

With this in mind I had walked slowly and with caution. I had gone almost to the very end of the rock promontory and had given up seeing the bird. I had had my camera at the ready all the while but now I relaxed not expecting to see anything, allowed my camera to swing to the side and walked unguarded the last few metres. Little did I know that there was still one more pool hidden by a slight rise in the rock.

As I stepped forward there was a loud "kleep", sounding rather like a sandpiper with its volume turned up to full blast and the bird flew out not five metres in front of me.

This bird is relatively large compared to other shorebirds with distinct black and white plumage and a white wing stripes seen clearly as it flies; its beak is straight and red.

Naturally, by the time I raised my camera, the bird was well out of range.

In search of the manatee - May 13, 1984 (V. Quesnel)

At the invitation of Nelson Andalcio and Arnand, David Rooks, Frankie Farrell and I went up the Nariva River in Nelson's boat to try to see manatee and supplement John Bindernagel's observations. The trip deserves a longer report than I can give now for we saw several interesting animals including Red Howlers, the Silvered Antbird, Pigmy Kingfishers and two small colonies of tiny bats that remain unidentified, and we did see the manatee. We first saw manatee at the end of the straight part of the Nariva River where it turns sharply west 4½ to 5 km upstream from the bridge. Here we saw only snouts above water but Nelson and Arnand walking upstream from here were able to see two under water and estimated their length at 2 m. Later on the return trip one swam at full speed in its whalelike fashion directly in front of the boat for several metres so we can confirm the presence of a small population of this interesting and secretive mammal at Nariva.

L. Zuniaga  
Honorary Secretary

June 29, 1984.