

# THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALIST CLUB

## MEETINGS - 2ND QUARTER 1985

You are invited to attend the monthly meetings of the club to be held on Thursdays April 11th, May 9th and June 13th 1985 at 5.30 p.m. at the Audio-Visual Room of St. Mary's College.

### A G E N D A

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

### PROPOSED LECTURES

- April 11th - LEATHERBACK TURTLES by Ian Lambie  
May 9th - MAPPING by Glen Wilkes  
June 13th - CONSERVATION AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT -  
Conflicting Concepts? by Carol James

### PROPOSED FIELD TRIPS

- April 28th - CUMACA CAVES (Near Valencia in the Northern Range, round trip approximately 4 hours walk depending on route taken and pace. Comparatively low lying land but very muddy and slushy.  
May 26th - MARACAS BAY/STA. CRUZ (Approximately five miles: first three hilly and then a descent.  
June 29/30th-TOBAGO (Leave Friday by 4.p.m. boat)  
This will be a camp - no details yet.  
(Members ONLY)

Please Note: Children allowed only if accompanied by their parents who would be responsible for them.

HUNDRETH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS: Volunteers are needed for the committee so that plans could be started early. Please contact the Hon. Secretary, Luisa Zuniaga at 624-3321 (h).

### PEREGRINE FALCON BANDED IN TRINIDAD (Richard French)

It seems somehow fitting that I should finish my banding activities in Trinidad with a spectacular species. On February 22, 1985 I was just putting the finishing touches to my letter to the U.S. migratory bird banding authorities in Maryland, when I got a call from Hans Boos to say that a Peregrine Falcon had been brought in to the Zoo. As he thought it should probably be released he wondered whether I would like to see it first. Would I!!!

It proved to be a magnificent adult female in full plumage and in wonderful condition. Apparently it had flown into the Financial Complex building site, where it may have been hunting pigeons and have become confused by all that glass! Anyway it was not badly hurt and by the time I saw it seemed quite fit for release. As the species is on the endangered list, owing to the depredations of falconers and, earlier, chemical pesticides, it certainly seemed right to release it. So

after a few photographs it was banded with one of my remaining U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service bands and released. As it flew strongly away through the Zoo gardens many of the birds on display panicked at the sight of their hereditary enemy and dived for cover. Slowly circling it made height and disappeared over the hill.

Though I cannot confirm this, I strongly suspect that this may have been the first Peregrine Falcon to have been banded in the New World outside the North American region. Birds of that size don't often get into the hands of banders. As for me, what a way to go! I couldn't have asked for a better lagniappe.

#### REAPPEARANCE OF DICKCISSELS IN SOUTH TRINIDAD (from Richard ffrench)

Older members of the Club may remember a field trip made in 1960 to the Oropouche Lagoon where I took the Club to a canefield where the North American migrant finch, the Dickcissel (Spiza americana) was roosting. We trapped and banded a number of the birds on that day. This was part of an 8-year study of the bird that my wife and I conducted from late 1958 to 1966.

During that period Dickcissels spent December to April each year in Trinidad, feeding in savannahs on grass-seeds and rice gleanings and roosting in canefields in enormous flocks. The evening flight from the feeding areas to the roost-site was something to behold, often reminding observers of locust swarms. But as the '70s began, the Dickcissels came in far fewer numbers, until there were years with not a single bird recorded. No adequate explanation has yet been put forward for this phenomenon.

However, in early 1982 I recorded an isolated flock of about 50 Dickcissels on the edge of Nariva Swamp. Recently, on 21 January '84, we again found them, this time in Oropouche Lagoon, when several hundreds were seen, between 5.10 and 5.30 p.m. moving towards La Fortune Village, clearly making for their roost-site. It will be most interesting to see whether we are in for another Dickcissel "cycle" over the next few years.

#### MAKING SENSE OF BIRD SIGHT-RECORDS (from Richard ffrench)

The science of ornithology includes a proper understanding of the distribution and status of birds in different geographical areas. This involves not only the indigenous resident species, but also migrants and wanderers from distant countries. Every bird-watcher likes to encounter rare species, both because it adds to her/his experience and also because the very rarity makes the observation seem more important and worthwhile. For this reason serious ornithologists have to be very wary about accepting as valid any bird records which are not backed up by adequate evidence. Otherwise the accumulated data on the distribution of bird species in a given area is likely to include not only perfectly sound and valid records but also highly questionable, even flippant inaccuracies.

I want to make a suggestion that, as the foremost natural history association in the country, the Club should now move to establish a proper procedure for the documentation of bird records. Over the last quarter century I have tended to collect most of such records, and the results have been published in my book on local birds, and more recently in the Club's Journal. But it should not be left to one person. I therefore propose the formation of a Bird Records Committee, to monitor and document records of rare birds. In due course bird-watchers will submit their records to this Committee, and all acceptable records will be published.

The best evidence is tangible, in the form of a specimen, alive or dead, a photograph or taperecording. Failing this, an observer should supply a written description, to follow a prescribed pattern. This should include details of the bird's size, plumage, bill, legs, general shape, whether it was flying, perching, feeding, etc; any call note heard; similarity to any other known species and diagnostic features to show the difference. The conditions under which the observation was made, e.g. light, distance, with or without binoculars, habitat and area where the bird was found, how often, date and time of day; whether the observer

is familiar with this or similar species. And, most important, whether any other person can give independent corroboration of the record.

Now all this may seem unnecessarily fussy to some people. But I submit that if stringent standards are not kept in such matters, chaos can result from the inclusion of inadequate, unverified reports. Once such reports are documented, we run the risk of giving them the same credibility as the other, properly verified records, thus making it impossible for future workers to distinguish between the genuine and the spurious.

FIELD TRIP TO BALATA BAY ON OCTOBER 25TH 1984 (Frankie Farrell and (Paul Christopher)

The trail started at the lookout on the North Coast Road near to Maracas Bay. Approximately 45 persons took part. As our trail explorers had had some difficulty in finding a suitable end-point for the excursion we obtained the services of a guide.

A paved road led downhill from the lookout which we followed for a short while. This was the road leading to "Timberline", an entertainment centre and restaurant. As we had anticipated that the proprietor of "Timberline" would not have allowed us to pass through his property without payment of a fee we asked our guide to skirt the area. As a result we were led along a steep rocky pathway branching off from the road which could very well have been a watercourse. The vegetation around was obviously secondary vegetation, no doubt as a result of forest fires. The steep rocky path eventually merged into a path of easier gradient through the bush. Fairly common at the side of the pathway was a member of the Coffee Family (Rubiaceae), *Chiococca Alba*. Some of the trees seen were Crappo (*Carapa Guianensis*, Aubl), Wild Cashima (*Rollinia* Spp), Jereton (*Didymopanax Morototoni*, Dene & Pl) Pois Doux (*Inga* Spp) and (*Trema* Spp).

The bushy vegetation yielded to a small area of what appeared to be untouched forest. It was difficult to determine what kind of forest this was. The presence of *Inga* (mentioned above), Bois Riviere (*Chimarris Cymosa*, Jacq) and Toporite (*Hernandia Sonora*, I) might have seemed to indicate that it was montane rain forest, but the absence of the more characteristic trees and the low level of the area would seem to deny this. Other trees seen were Bois charbon (*Diospyros Ierensis* Britton), Blackheart (*Clathrotropis Brachypetala* (Tul) Klein), Cooperhoop or Mountain Rose (*Brownea Latifolia*, Jacq) and Cocoa Mangue (*Marila Grandiflora*, Gr.). Underfoot was that member of the Marantaceae, so common on the forest floor, *Monotagma* Spp.

While I (Frankie) was looking at the plants, Paul Christopher and Graham White were looking mainly at the birds. Graham caught a live locust and showed it around. I am indebted to Paul for the names of the butterflies and birds that he saw. Among the butterflies were the Flambeau (*Colaenis Iulia* (Fabricius)) and the Scarce Bamboo Page (*Philaethria Dido* (Clerck)).

Two hawks were seen: the Short Tailed Hawk (*Buteo brachyurus*) and the Gray Hawk (*Buteo nitidus*). Also two Tanagers; the Blue Gray Tanager (*Thraupis episcopus*) and the Turquoise Tanager (*Tangara mexicana*). Then there were the Purple Honeycreeper (*Cyanerpes caeruleus*) and the very common Tropical Mockingbird (*Mimus gilvus*). Circling up above were the Corbeau or Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) and the Turkey Vulture (*Cathartes aura*). Down on the trees were the Plain-Brown Woodcreeper (*Dendrocicla fuliginosa*), the Bananaquit (*Coereba flaveola*) and the White-bearded Manakin (*Manacus manacus*).

As we got down to sea-level our trail ended at a small cove with a small sandy beach forming part of Balata Bay. Bathing was possible but there were many rocks. The usual plant life was evident, such as *Pitcairnia integrifolia* growing on the rocks, the Seaside Grape (*Coccoloba uvifera*) and the Almond (*Terminalia catappa*) growing the rocky soil. Out at sea there was of course the Brown Pelican (*Pelecanus occidentalis*).

Our guide took us on the return journey along a different path which eventually led us into the "Timberline" area. Somewhat to our surprise the proprietor seemed quite glad to see us and showed us around his establishment. He did not charge us a fee and even offered membership of "Timberline" to our club members until the end of the year.

FIELD TRIP ABOVE MARACAS WATERFALL ON 27th JAN. 1985 (V.C. Quesnel)

This was the second trip that the club has made to the river that becomes the Maracas Waterfall and as with the first some years ago it proved very popular. The trail we had to follow was well marked by Glen Wilkes and Dave Ramnarine. The first part of it passed through an old cacao estate but later on through forest. There was much of interest for botanists and ornithologists and for me in particular because a lot of Rubiaceae were fruiting. Part way up a rather slippery hill there was a patch of several dozen Cephaelis pubescens, a striking plant with bright blue fruit in compact heads subtended by dark purplish bracts. This is not a common plant though plentiful at this spot. I have seen it in only three other localities: a forest in Longdenville, a forest near the Erin Savanna and the trail above Mt. St. Benedict Monastery. There was, too, a spiny palm that was probably a species of Bactris but this one grew as single trunks not as multiple stems as in the more common species.

The ornithologists had a good day too. The highlights for me were a pair of Grey-headed Kites circling overhead as we got to the ridge and a lek where the Green Hermit was displaying. Earlier on we had seen a Brown Violet-ear Hummingbird calling insistently from an exposed branch and a black hawk, fairly common it is true but nice to see anyhow.

After a leisurely lunch by the river most returned fairly promptly but Glen Wilkes took off up the ridge to reappear 1½ hr. later saying he had been all the way to the summit of Tucuche. Perhaps this is a route to the top that the club could try some day.

APLONADO FALCON SIGHTED (V.C. Quesnel)

On the Botany Group's visit to the Aripo Savanna on 13th January 1985 the four members of the party watched a falcon for many minutes. It was first seen flying from the ground to a small tree in one of the tree islands. There it perched eating something that was held in its feet. We got as close as we dared hoping not to disturb it but eventually it flew off. The bird had a distinctive black face pattern, a broad tawny band across lower breast and belly but pale throat and upper breast. The tail was banded and the upper parts grey-brown. I drew a picture of it for Richard French and he agrees that it was an Aplomado Falcon, Falco femoralis, a bird he describes in his book as "a rare visitor to Trinidad savannas". We were lucky to see it.

L. Zuniaga  
Honorary Secretary  
March 24th 1985.