

THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALIST CLUB

MEETINGS - 4TH QUARTER 1985

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 October 10th and November 14th 1985 at 5.30 P.M.

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

L E C T U R E S

- Oct. 10th - POLLUTION IN OUR COASTAL WATERS - Sewerage
as a Case Study by Peter Norman
- Nov. 14th - INDIGENOUS MEDICINE by K. Best

F I E L D T R I P S

- Oct. 27th - LA LAJA WATERFALLS - Should not be too difficult a walk - we understand that the first falls are between 45 minutes to one hour's walk and the bigger one between 1½-2 hours.
- Nov. 24th - OROPOUCHE LAGOON - You drive right on to it.

DECEMBER 1985 - Christmas Party - Are we having one AND
Are You Prepared to Help - Come with your ideas.

HUNDRETH ANNIVERSARY - We are still looking for volunteers and ideas.

ECOLOGY OF THE ARIPO SAVANNAS

For the next 12-15 months Sharon Schwab will be studying the ecology of the Aripo Savannas for a Master's degree. She needs some help as detailed in the letter following:-

"Dear Field Naturalist

The University of Wisconsin - Stercus Point in collaboration with the National Parks Department, Forestry Division, POS, is compiling a floral and faunal list of species for the proposed Aripo Savannas Scientific Reserve. Any information you have collected recently or long ago, however incidental or obscure, can be used as further justification to protect this unique ecosystem. Kindly send information to:

Ms. Sharon Schwab
College of Natural Resources
University of Wisconsin-Stercus Point
Stercus Point, WI 54481, USA

Or Victor Quesnel
P.O. Box 47
Port of Spain

Or Frankie Farrell
52 Agra Street
St. James

All contributions will be acknowledged for their information. Thank you. Sincerely

Sharon Schwab"

One way to deal with a pest (V. Quesnel)

Early in the wet season swarms of winged ants fly to lights on certain rainy evenings. Out in the country near Talparo they are so numerous it is impossible to do any writing at night when this happens for the ants descend in hundreds on the illuminated sheet of paper. It is best to pack up and listen to music instead. After this had happened three times this year I was annoyed enough to sear "the next time this happens I'll eat the little beasts". The next two times it happened I was out and arrived back too late to be bothered much but on 23rd July they invaded early once more in their disgusting numbers. True to my threat I got out my little ceramic frying pan melted some butter in it and held it under my desk lamp until about 40 had fallen in. Then I gently fried them for a few minutes and gingerly tasted them. Verdict: delicious. They were crisp with a nut-like flavour all their own. I consumed the teaspoonful my 40 ants provided and might have eaten many more had I not known what I was eating. However, in spite of the delicious taste I still had a squeamish feeling about it, so I stopped at the one teaspoonful. There were no ill effects.

Of course, I am not the only human insect eater. South American Indians eat winged bachacs and some African tribes eat, or used to eat, locusts and beetle grubs. But think what Sylvia Hunt would do with this new resource. Four and twenty thousand brown ants baked in a pie? Or does Bufo marinus have the right approach? Eat them raw.

(Sorry, I can't give you the scientific name of the ant yet but I can give you a brand new nursery rhyme suggested by the above:

Sing a song of six cents, a pocket full of rye
Twenty thousand brown ants baked in a pie
When the pie was opened the ants began to sting
Who would serve a dish like that to Georgie and his ring?)

FIELD TRIP TO EL TUCUCHE ON 28TH JULY 1985 (V. Quesnel)

Last year our field trip to El Tucuche was in May. This departure from the tradition of dry season visits was entirely justified by the fact that the day was fine and it provided me with a specimen of a melastome (still unidentified) that I had seen on every previous trip to Tucuche but never until then in flower. This year our trip was in July, the only month in which we had never been there and once again our boldness in ignoring the probability of heavy rain paid off. We had almost no rain and I found what I was looking for.

There were about forty of us and as I wanted to be back as early as possible I planned to do no collecting until I reached Naranja. There I would look for a specimen of Rondoletia that Yasmin Baksh and Dennis Adams had found some years ago. I knew that the explanation for my missing it before must have been that it had never been in flower on my previous visits. And so it turned out. I got my specimens because this species flowers only about July when the rainy season has already settled in. In addition, I got last year's melastome in fruit this time. This shows that the plants I had seen all the time were mature, as I suspected, and not young ones.

Having got my specimens I "raced" for the top at my racing speed which is a lot slower than the normal speed of the younger members and got there at noon, well ahead of my usual 2 p.m. There, with Graham White and the other ornithologists, I watched a large flock of feeding swifts. All the Trinidad species seemed to be represented except the rare Chapman's Swift. On this occasion there was no mapipire balsin basking in the sun and no Northern White Page (Graphium protesilaus) flitting around the trees. However, there were three species of tree in flower at the summit: Clusia aripoensis, guatecare (Eschweilera subglandulosa) and one that could not be identified because all the flowers were out of reach. Guatecare was not confined to the summit. On the contrary, its fallen flowers were present all along the trail in great abundance showing just how common a tree it is though inconspicuous and easily missed when not in bloom.

Frankie Farrell had an off day. Normally well able to walk with the rest of us, on this occasion he struggled up to the top looking much more tired than usual. However, a meal and a rest got him back in shape for the return trip which he did easily. He promised us that he would still be able to conquer Tucuche at age eighty.

THE CAMP AT CONSTANCE ESTATE, ICACOS ON 24/25TH AUGUST 1985 - (V. Queenel)

Icacos is so far away from Port of Spain that previous one day visits have been unsatisfactory. This year we decided that we should camp overnight and we arranged this with the management of Constance Estate to whom we are grateful for their cooperation. Only ten people turned up on the Saturday morning. Graham White did not stay the night and John Seyjagat with two other keepers from the zoo joined us at about 4 p.m. They, however, brought no tents and spent the entire evening and night collecting before returning to town in the early morning in time for work at 6 a.m. on Sunday.

Some car problems delayed our arrival till about noon. The heat was oppressive with almost no ameliorating breeze, which according to David Rocks is the usual state of affairs at Icacos. We were comfortably accommodated in the yard of Dennis Murray's home with access to bath and toilet and after settling in and having lunch went out to visit a nearby swamp. There, in addition to the usual marsh birds such as the Purple Gallinule, the Yellow-hooded Blackbird, the Pied Water Tyrant and the Striated Heron there were Greater Anis, Pale-vented Pigeons and our first real prize of the trip a Spotted Tody-flycatcher (Todirostrum maculatum). It first called attention to itself with a penetrating "peep, peep" with a timbre reminiscent of a sandpiper. Then the bird was seen by the whole group, a tiny fellow with a short tail and dark streaks on its breast. This bird has not been seen since 1957 when it was first recorded by R. Orpin in May and by G. Herklots in June of that year in a Cedros swamp.

After dinner in the evening we went out again, first to a pool on the estate where we saw several caiman in the light of our torches and heard the calls of three common species of frog. Nearer camp, John and his group caught a turtle (Kinosternon scorpioides) and the frog Leptodactylus macrosternum. Up at the swamp again we recorded the presence of the paradox frog (Pseudis paradoxus) and four others including L. macrosternum. Here the campers parted company from John and his group and returned to the camp site.

Early the next morning we visited the cattle pens where, we had been told, a strange bird had taken up residence about three weeks before. The bird was easily located. It was relatively tame and showed no inclination to leave the pen where it was hunting insects in the dung. David recognised it immediately as a Sun Bittern, (Eurypyga helias) never previously recorded in the wild in Trinidad though David had seen a captive bird in his youth. The bird was moulting and was also missing two toes from its right foot. I reckon I could recognise it again. This was our second big find and David took innumerable photos.

In uncovered cattle pens were four species of sandpiper. Among other birds in the area were Palm Swifts which we found surprising because we saw none of the sorts of palm in which they commonly nest. A trip to the same pool we had visited the night before produced sightings of a pair of Gray Hawks and a pair and then another single bird of the Spotted Tody-Flycatcher. Many Pale-vented Pigeons flew by and there were other common birds. The overseer said that Blue and Yellow Macaws sometimes flew in from Venezuela.

There was nothing remarkable in the weedy vegetation below the coconuts and a quick survey of the beach revealed nothing special there either. There were no sea totoos (Emerita portoricensis) on the beach.

By about 10 a.m. most of us headed back home though a few stayed for a swim in the relatively clear water. It is obvious that Icacos is well worth visiting repeatedly at various times of the year because of the rarities from Venezuela that may be seen and the club's Management Committee will no doubt give some attention to this.

SOME INTERESTING BIRD OBSERVATIONS (Glen and Cathy Powell)

Blue-black grassquit (Volatinia jacarina) 15th June 1985

During June we have been observing blue-black grassquits "landing" for insects in the garden.

(I have seen this too on 11th June 1985 and also Tiaris fuliginosa and Coereba flaveola doing the same - V. Quesnel)

Motmot: (Momotus momota) 24th June 1985

Observing motmots at Charlotteville breeding pairs and young families were found. On one occasion a family of four were found together, following one another through the trees.

We wish to make an observation on the racquet-tail: two immatures were watched seemingly without a racquet-tail - on closer inspection it was evident that the two uppermost feathers on the tail were in fact racquetted, but had not yet grown beyond the extent of the other tail feathers. It would appear from this observation that these feathers are racquetted from growth, not from the feather barbs being worn away.

Voice: A breeding pair of motmots was found calling to one another by a low purring bubbling sound, almost inaudible, similar to the call of the young from their nest chamber. During this call the motmot would wave his/her tail from side to side - possibly as a courtship gesture.

Nesting: The young in the nest chamber were only 12-13" from the entrance to the tunnel, not 5-14ft. as described by ffrench. The hole was 4' in diameter, 2'6" up from track level.

Jacamar (Galbula ruficauda) 23/24th June 1985

Several pairs of Jacamar were located in the same woods as the motmots, territories seemingly 25 m centres. On one occasion the male was seen to be feeding the female while she sat placidly on a branch. One of the calls of the Jacamar was found to be a very high pitched rapid warbling, not previously noted by ffrench.

Kingfisher: (Chloroceryle americana) 9th March 1985

We watched a pair of Kingfishers near the Hillsborough Dam for several hours. The male fished in the stream, whilst the female hid close by. As the male caught a fish (1-2") the female flew up to be fed, then she flew downstream to enjoy the meal. Shortly she returned to hide again, obviously not even waiting to catch her own meal. Was this a courtship action? As the time was early March it was assumed that she did not have young to feed - and no nest was found downstream.

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L. Zuniaga
Honorary Secretary
September 23, 1985.