

THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALIST CLUB

FOURTH QUARTER 1991

C E N T E N A R Y Y E A R

Dear Member

You are invited to attend the monthly meetings of the club to be held on Thursdays October 10, 1991 and November 14th 1991 at the Audio-Visual Room of St. Mary's College, Port of Spain, at 5.30 p.m. You are also invited to attend the field trips listed hereunder.

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 - THE ENDANGERED PAWI IN TRINIDAD by Dr. Carol James
Nov. 14th - PESTS OF SUGAR-CANE by Dr. W.G. Des Vignes

F I E L D T R I P S

October 27th - MORNE LA CROIX (leave 7.00 a.m.)
November 24th - NAVET DAM " " "

C E N T E N A R Y C E L E B R A T I O N S

The week of celebrations is over and thank God everything went off reasonably well. Our thanks to all helpers and those who attended the functions. However, the work of the Committee is not yet over. The following are still outstanding:-

- (1) Our Trail Guide
- (2) Guide to the Botanic Gardens
- (3) Launching of the Commemorative stamps which is now expected to be out in mid November 1991.

We are still in the Centenary Year and we hope that members will continue to support our efforts. Firstly we hope that each member would make sure that he/she purchases at least two copies of the Trail Guide when available (one could be given as a gift). Secondly we appeal to those who have not yet bought a Centenary "T" Shirt to please do so and possibly purchase an extra one as a gift. We have not yet paid for the shirts and can only do so if they are sold. You may send your cheque and order to the Secretary and make arrangements by telephone to collect. After hours 624-3321 (Sec.) and 624-2709 (Asst. Sec.) Price \$30 each - Any Size (Medium, Large and Extra Large)

CHRISTMAS PARTY

Do you want a Christmas Party this year - And if so are there any suggestions about venues and type of gathering. Please think about it and come prepared.

At the request of Dr. Quesnel we attach copy of notes from Prof. J. Kenny in reply to Dr. Quesnel's enquiry regarding concessions being enjoyed by the Taiwanese fishermen here in T & T.

Between the Heights of Aripo and Platanal in Trinidad's Northern Range there are many caves in the limestone bedrock that have been formed over the millennia by nature's creative hand. A few of these caves are well known and frequently visited while others are more obscure and some have yet to be explored. Soho Cave is a good example of one of nature's hidden treasures recently brought to light.

In an attempt to document these caves, Johanna Darlington is currently compiling a list of all known publications on the caves in Trinidad and Tobago. Others like John and Katherine Warren are actively exploring the caves themselves. Through the efforts of people like these we are getting to know more about an important aspect of our natural environment. It is hoped that the knowledge gained will contribute to the conservation effort.

Recently, I had the opportunity to participate in this continuing exploration. A trip was organized for Easter Sunday (31 March 1991) with the purpose of examining some of the cave holes encountered along the trail to Soho. Those joining the field trip included John and Katherine, as well as Graham White, Bill Bailey and his girlfriend Sherrie. Bill, an American doing some work for the oil companies in Trinidad, is a keen spelunker.

The group assembled at Ben Millette's house at 6:00am and started our trek into the mountains 10 minutes later. The day was overcast, the early morning air pleasantly cool for hiking. We made rapid progress and were soon wending our way along the route to Soho. Within an hour we were in the vicinity of the cave holes to be explored. The focus of our attention was a circular opening in the ground about 2m in diameter with a drop of about 15m to the cave floor below. The only way to reach bottom was by abseiling, so the uninitiated were put in harness by those who knew what a karabiner was, and over the edge I went. I must say that the abseil was a pleasant experience as you can control the rate of descent. As the cavern opened up once you were through the hole in the roof, it was fun being suspended in mid-air. Katherine was the first to reach bottom and watched me as I descended the rope.

When everyone reached bottom, the exception being Sherrie who decided to remain above ground, we started to investigate all the nooks and crannies that the cave had to offer. The cavern was large with a gradual descent towards the south where it tapered to a narrow vertical tunnel which Graham and John proceeded to explore. While they were doing this I had a look around other parts. There was little sign of life, no Oil Birds, the occasional bat. In the southwestern corner of the cavern, a crevice led to several smaller chambers. Here I slipped on the floor and my hard hat saved me from a skull fracture. When the others had finished checking the southern end of the cave, we all proceeded northward into a lateral chamber where there are nice stalactites above and a splendid dome-shaped stalagmite below, rising about a metre above the floor with the same diameter at its base. The top of this dome-shaped stalagmite flattens with a cup-size depression in the middle which contained clear water dripping from above. It reminded me of a baptismal font set in the alcove of a cathedral.

From here we squeezed through a narrow passage and scrambled down into another entrance of this cave which proved to be an easier way out, on foot rather than by rope, although Katherine did choose to exit the way she came in via the hole in the roof of the large cavern.

The group then decided to break up and explore the surrounding region for other cave openings. I went with John and Katherine, while Graham, Bill and Sherrie formed the other party. After exploring for half an hour, our group came up with nothing so we decided to rejoin the others who had moved further down the trail. It was Sherrie whom we spotted first and she alerted us that Graham had discovered another cave. Guided by Sherrie's directions we proceeded off the trail and soon descended into a large gully that sloped towards a big cave entrance. This one had an Oil Bird population along with bats. We caught up with Graham and Bill at the bottom of a long descending boulder strewn slope. Working our way back to the entrance, we found a lateral passage which led immediately to a precipitous drop. This feature gave us the clue as to which cave we may have found. In Carriker's 1931 paper on "The Cave Birds of Trinidad" he describes one of the caves as having a "small grotto" on the left side of the cave entrance. He then goes on to relate how he narrowly escaped a fatal accident while he was attempting to catch a bat in this grotto. He found himself teetering on the edge of a well hole of undetermined depth just inside the grotto. His description of the cave's features certainly fits what we saw.

John, Graham and Bill then proceeded to explore this well hole of unknown depth. While preparing for their descent we noticed groove marks on the lip of the hole indicating that someone using a rope or cable ladder had been down before us. According to Graham, the well hole has an initial drop of about 20m or so into a 20m long horn-shaped chamber. From here, two additional drops of 3 and 4m respectively brought them into another smaller chamber where water was flowing. From this latter chamber, John and Bill squeezed through a crack in the floor and crawled along a muddy horizontal tunnel for about 30m.

While these intrepid explorers were underground, I did some investigating at the surface and discovered that one of the deep stream gullies, that the trail crosses on the way to Soho Cave, leads (downstream) to the top of this large cave. After the others had spent a couple hours down the well hole, they returned to the surface tired and muddy but pleased with their progress.

One of the attractive features about this rediscovered cave is that it only takes an hour to reach from Millette's house, whereas Soho Cave requires at least an hour and 45 minutes hiking time from where you park the vehicles. The latter cave, however, still ranks in my mind as being the more spectacular and worth the extra time to reach.


Honorary Secretary

October 1, 1991