THE FIELD NATURALIST

Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

July – September 2014 **Issue No: 3/2014**

Field Trip Report, 30th - 31st August, 2014

OVERNIGHT TRIP TO GRAND TACARIBE

by Kris Sookdeo

It has by now become a firm tradition for the Club to overnight at Grand Tacaribe (GT) every year. This has its roots in the initiation of the Club's turtle research project in 1963 (for details see page 15 of this issue) and, while the tagging project ended in 1981, the visits to GT have continued ever since.

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An impressive view of Grand Tacaribe Bay from a high point of its western edge.
Photo: Kris Sookdeo

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Editor's note :
Many thanks to all who contributed and assisted with articles and photographs.

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July - September 2014

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OVERNIGHT TRIP TO GRAND TACARIBE

(Continued from page 1)

On 30th August 2014, 11 members of the Club made the journey to the Blanchisseuse Fishing Depot from where we would be transported by boat to GT. After parking our vehicles next to the police station we headed down to the jetty, only to realize that our boatman, Cleave, had just left with another load of passengers. As a result, we had little choice but to sit and wait for about 1.5 hours for him to return. Even then, the boat could only accommodate 7 persons, so some of us (including myself) stayed on the jetty even longer, awaiting the second trip. While there, the conversation ranged from ideas for the Club's development, to reminiscing about the days when Club members would hike to GT instead of taking a boat.

Our boat finally came and the trip to GT was uneventful. Landing at the sheltered cove at the far end of the beach, we gathered our respective loads and toiled across the blazing hot sands to the camp site. By then it was mid-day and the rest of the group had already setup camp so I quickly followed with my tent.

One of my objectives for overnighting at GT was to run a light trap that night for moths and in this regard I was joined by David Lawrie - one of the newer members to the Club, who happens to be a top-notch lepidoptera enthusiast. David and I decided to scout about for potential trap sites (we both came with a trap) and started up the western side of the beach. This area was not particularly suitable as it is dominated by coconut trees. We did, however, notice several *Telchin licus* (diurnal moths of the Castniidae family), one of which was clearly laying its eggs on the younger sprouted coconut seedlings. Also of note were several pools of standing water on the beach which contained many tadpoles of the crapaud, *Rhinella marina*. One successful turtle nest site was found; the small tracks and hole in the sand indicated that the hatchlings had recently made their way out.

Dan Jaggernauth and Graham White joined up with us and, at Dan's urging, we climbed up both of the tall rock outcrops that flank the sheltered boat landing. Of note here was a small cluster of sea grape, *Coccoloba uvifera* which seemed to have bright orange lichen growing on it. The view from up here is stunning. The base of the outcrop, along the waterline, was home to many mussels, chitons and other forms of sea life. Also on the outcrop was a wasp nest.

After a bit of rest back at camp, we headed along the eastern side of the beach. Along the shore there was an unusual print which appeared to be an animal track. It was vaguely reminiscent of a dog or ocelot's but it was the only print to be found.

For my light trap, I settled for an abandoned campsite just in from the beach which had a nice unobstructed view of the forest (but with the beach immediately to my back). David, in his wisdom, really wanted to setup along the forest trail to Madamas so we continued eastwards, hauling the heavy battery all the way. A group of fishermen were camping at the far eastern side of the beach, complete with a bubbling pot and electric lights. Out of courtesy, Dan let them know that 'scientists have the devil in them and would be roaming up and down the beach that night' and that they need not be worried by our activity.

After a short walk up the Madamas trail we settled on the trail junction (one branch to Madamas and the other to the wooden house). Here David would have a lovely 360 degree view of good forest habitat.

We headed back, passing through the small garden and by the wooden house. We took note of the various plants growing here. Back at camp, the light was fading so I had a quick sea bath to cool down and a hurried dinner. Onshore, the culinary master Veynu had dished out his homemade rum punch. Nearby, a bat falcon appeared on a dead tree and made several sorties in search of prey.

Also searching was Ray Martinez, accompanied by his son Robert, who had setup light traps of his own around the camp in order to survey mosquitoes (Ray's list of arthropods of significance to human health is attached).

As the sun disappeared, the lights were turned on at both traps. David was using a mercury vapour lamp and I used a combination of ordinary blacklights and a white fluorescent bulb. Dan, David and I spent the majority of the night at David's MV trap which, with its substantial ultraviolet light output and well vegetated location, kept us busy with a non

-stop stream of insect arrivals. Moths were photographed by me while David captured a few specimens that we felt would be difficult to identify. Down at the beach, my trap attracted fewer moths but, interestingly, included several species we did not get uphill. Eventually David's battery was drained so we packed up and headed back to camp. As it drew less power, my trap was still running but I was too tired from the day's activities to continue for much longer so I turned mine off as well at 10:00 pm. In all, I photographed about 55 species of moth but there were several more species that I did not record, so a conservative estimate of the total number of species that night is likely to be closer to 70. In terms of butterflies, David and I recorded 36 species overall.

***Automeris liberia*. One of the many moths seen at the light traps at Grand Tacaribe.**

Back at camp the night was quiet except for the endless sound of crashing waves. A brief shower fell at about 2:00 am but that soon cleared up and paved the way for a lovely clear morning.

As the sun rose, members who had woken up walked about the beach looking for anything of interest. Two turtles had come ashore that night as evidenced by their tracks. Both had turned around and aborted their laying. This, we suspected, could be because some parts of the beach were rather waterlogged. Other discoveries that morning included an unidentified centipede, a saturnid moth caterpillar, an adult *Brassolis sophorae* butterfly and a beautiful *Tropidacris cristata* grasshopper. Perhaps most surprising was Kay's discovery of a scorpion on her tent! Ray identified this as *Tityus tenuicauda.*

A grasshopper, *Tropidacris cristata*, with its wing held open by Ray Martinez
(was released unharmed)

Graham left early that morning for Madamas in the hope of seeing any river otters that might still inhabit the Madamas River. Dan, David and I followed sometime afterwards.

Along the trail we passed a small fer de lance, *Bothrops cf. asper* that Dan and I had unknowingly passed when David spotted it. Along the trail we ate freshly fallen mangoes, encountered a small hiking group led by Emile Serette and also saw Kay and Clayton who had also left earlier for Madamas and were now on their way back.

Down at the beach we found Graham pursuing a small green iguana with his camera. In its attempt to escape, the iguana took to the river and Graham followed. Hopefully he eventually got a good picture. No otters unfortunately – neither individuals nor their scat. There was a lone pigeon on the beach, however.

After resting and bathing a while, the four of us headed back. On the way we encountered a lovely helicopter-winged damselfly and, oddly, a scorpion *Tityus trinitatis* frozen on the edge of a leaf. It was speculated that it could have been the victim of a *Cordyceps* fungus.

We returned to find that everyone else had left. Apparently Cleave was in the area and they decided to head back. Unfortunately, back at the Blanchis-

seuse parking lot, all the other vehicles were locked in by Dan so they had to wait. The beach had now gotten a lot busier. The fishermen from the day before had left but a new group had moved in with a young lady reeling in a nice cavalli, *Caranx hippos* as we passed. There was a second new group that setup near our camping spot.

We proceeded to pack up and made sure nothing was left behind. I stepped behind some bushes to change my clothes and it was here I noticed something quite unusual. On the sandy floor there was a small pile of green objects that appeared to be either very young sea almond seeds or, perhaps, the shoot of some plant. I called Graham over to have a look and we counted maybe four more of these strange mounds nearby. We could not figure out what the nature of this deliberate collection was but I suspect that crabs or rats might have been responsible for their presence.

We had a long wait at the pickup site as Cleave was late having picked up several other persons along the way. Along the shore, at the tideline, we saw two dead leatherback turtle hatchlings.

The trip back was uneventful except that as we began to turn into the cove at Blanchisseuse the boat ran out of fuel. With no remaining fuel on board, the boat handlers and the others who were in the boat (not Club members) jumped into the water and, believe it or not, began to push the boat towards shore as one would push a stalled automobile on land. Their precision was quite remarkable as they steered into the mouth of the cove. At some point an alarm had been raised onshore and a fellow fisherman was coming to our rescue with a tow line, so ending our little drama.

While the distressing events surrounding the boat trip (on both days) will no doubt have implications for future GT trips, the trip as a whole was a success with lots of good observations being made. I hope to see you there next year!

Arthropods of significance to human health — Collected at Grand Tacaribe by Ray Martinez: *

Mosquitoes:

1. *Aedes taeniorhynchus*
2. *Anopheles bellator*
3. *Anopheles homunculus*
4. *Haemagogus janthinomys*
5. *Phoniomyia splendida*

Sandflies:

1. *Culicoides sp.*

Blackflies:

1. *Simulium sp.*

Horseflies:

1. *Tabanus lineola*

Scorpions:

1. *Tityus tenuicauda* (resting on Kay's tent)
2. *Tityus trinitatis* (resting on vegetation)

*with the assistance of Graham White and Robert Martinez

Dan Jaggernauth points to a 'DO NOT LITTER' sign he made and put up on a 1998 fieldtrip.

30th August – 2nd September 2014

IN SEARCH OF SALTO ANGEL

A VENEZUELAN ADVENTURE

Report by John Lum Young

Thirteen adventurers led by Ivan Charles of Iere Nature Adventures set off for Salto Angel, which at 979 metres is the highest waterfall in the world (higher than Trinidad's Northern Range). Our local guide was Hairim Garcia Arraiz of Kamadac Tours and Expeditions, a German-Pemon agency which specialises in nature tours in La Gran Sabana. The Pemon are the indigenous people of La Gran Sabana and they are involved in all aspects of the local tourism industry.

Day 1

Ciudad Bolivar, the capital of Bolivar State, is one of the gateways to the south east interior of Venezuela bordering Guyana and Brazil. The old quarter of the city sits on a huge granite promontory on the south bank of the Orinoco River. The river flows in an easterly direction and from the highest point of the town one has a commanding view of the Orinoco to the east, west and north. Here, the river narrows to 1.6 kilometres and in bygone times this made it easy to defend the town and control river commerce.

Incidentally, the previous name of this city was Angostura (founded in 1595 as Santo Tomé de Guayana de Angostura del Orinoco; in English, St Thomas of Guiana at the Orinoco Narrows and shortened to Angostura [Narrows] in 1746 as the full name was quite a mouthful). One hundred years later the name was changed to Ciudad Bolivar.

Yes, this Angostura was the original home of the world famous Angostura Bitters but political instability resulted in the 1875 relocation of the company to Trinidad and Tobago and, as they say, the rest is history.

To the east is Angostura Bridge, a suspension bridge which for 39 years until 2006 was the only bridge across the Orinoco.

The old quarter contained buildings and façades of colonial times. Impressive, picturesque designs from centuries past included Ciudad Bolivar Cathedral, House of the Angostura Congress and Plaza Bolivar.

Paseo Orinoco is a popular liming spot. On the riverside, fishermen catch and sell fish from their boats. The pavement is about 2.5 m higher than the river: one leans over the railing and shouts down requests, drops the money and up comes the fish. On the promenade the walkway is lined with food vendors, bingo and other games and vendors. There is music, traffic and crowds.

We took a boat upriver to explore the fauna. Familiar birds include wattled jacana, *Jacana jacana* pied water-tyrant, *Fluvicola pica* and anhinga, *Anhinga anhinga*. The anhinga frequently perches with its wings spread. It depends on the sun and breeze to dry its feathers; unlike other water birds it does not have oil glands to waterproof its feathers. Also seen were the ringed kingfisher, *Ceryle torquata* and osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*. The boat pulled out of the main river into the backwater away from the strong currents. After a while our patience was rewarded as a pair of grey river dolphin, *Sotalia fluviatilis* broke the surface of the water in smooth unison. Though few studies have been undertaken of this dolphin, it must be under threat as the Orinoco becomes increasingly more polluted with the clearing of forest for open pit mining, agriculture and cattle grazing.

Day 2

We boarded 5 seat Cessnas and flew south over La Gran Sabana to Canaima Lagoon. La Gran Sabana is 10,820 square kilometres in area and forms part of Canaima National Park, the sixth largest reserve in the world. Canaima National Park has an area of 30,000 sq. km and is almost the size of the Czech Republic (30,450 sq. km) but bigger than Panama (29,119 sq. km) and the Dominican Republic (18,792 sq. km). It is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

From the air one saw shrubs and trees growing along streams and intermittent watercourses. These suggest that there is a hardpan on the open savannah and the sparse soil mainly facilitates grasses.

Continued on page 8

The top of Salto Angel as seen from the airplane

IN SEARCH OF SALTO ANGEL

(Continued from page 6)

Along the watercourses the moriche palm, *Mauritia flexuosa* was prevalent.

The plane landed smoothly on the compact gravel strip. The adjacent paved strip was for the heavier 19 seat propeller aircraft.

We headed across Canaima Lagoon by canoe (with outboard engine) to Isla Anatoliy. Along the way we got a close up view of the raging waterfalls which emptied into the lagoon: the twin falls of Saltos Ucaima, Saltos Golondrina and Saltos Wadaimö and Salto Hacha. The power of the water was impressive.

As we walked uphill away from the shore the thick vegetation gave way to grass and sedge. Charred stumps indicated that bush fires occurred. The dominant shrub in the savannah was savanna serrette, *Byrsonima crassifolia*. Mounds of the ground termite, *Nasutitermes sp.* dotted the landscape.

From the top of the escarpment we could see a tepuy to the west. Tepuy is the Pemon word for an isolated table-top mountain. In Canaima National Park there are 115 of these sandstone mesas which rise steeply above the surrounding landscape. We got to Salto Sapito and took a trail down the left bank to get off the escarpment.

We came to the powerful Salto Sapo and continued behind the curtain of water that was Sapo Falls and made our way back to the beach. This lower trail skirted the savannah we passed on the uphill trek. There were more trees here. One of the plants in the undergrowth was the aptly named hot lips, *Cephaelis tomentosa*.

We also walked behind Salto Hacha. A waterfall massage was in order before re-crossing the lagoon.

Day 3

This was a long upriver trip that required our sitting tightly in a canoe on the Rio Carrao. Rio Carrao is a black water river because of the decaying vegetation along its course. The Rio Carrao empties into the Rio Caroni which is a tributary of the Orinoco. Near the confluence of the Caroni and Orinoco is the second bridge across the Orinoco that was opened in 2006.

Generally, trees and shrubbery were thick along the river banks but gave way to grass and scattered shrubs further inland. We passed Pemon villages. Some of the grasslands seemed to have been subjected to periodic bush fires. A lone bois canot, *Cecropia sp.* stood out on a recovering slope.

Further upstream grasslands gave way to impenetrable forest. It seemed like the only way to penetrate the dense forest was on the river. The outboard engine shrank distances and must have revolutionised the Pemon way of life.

Some trees and shrubs along the river were familiar but many others were new to us. Moriche was still the dominant palm but manac palm, *Euterpe precatoria* was observed. Also noted were jereton, *Didymopanax morototoni* and the small flowering evergreen tree niauré, *Calliandra guildingii.* The numerous long stamens of the niauré flower, white at the base and crimson towards the tip, give the flower its soft effect and the name "powder puff flower".

The small white flowers of the bois mulatre, *Pentaclethra macroloba* had dropped off and only the long brown stalk remained, hence the name "monkey tail".

After 39 km we turned right into Rio Chirrun. Immediately we noticed that grass grew on the rocks in the Chirrun. It seemed like sand washing down from the tepuy was able to cling to the rocks enabling grass to get a foothold.

Although the Chirrun is another black river the pink sand gave the water the rich colour of merlot wine.

After another 34 km we arrived at base camp (a very decent shed with bathrooms and hammocks) on Isla Raton.

We set off on a long climb through virgin forest to a vantage point for Salto Angel. Trees were tall and straight, stretching towards the sunlight, forming a dense canopy. The understorey growth was sparse but tirite, *Ischnosiphon sp.* was seen. By far the dominant growth on the forest floor was *Anthurium* sp. In Trinidad *Anthurium* spp. tend to be epiphytes but will grow on the ground if they fall off the tree.

Eventually we got to a lookout to see the falls in all its glory. Fortunately there were no clouds to obscure the view. The waterfall was named after Jimmie Angel, a legendary bush pilot who introduced the falls to the world.

Day 4

A night of heavy rainfall resulted in the Chirrun rising about 2 metres, allowing us to easily navigate some of the rapids encountered on the way in. Interestingly, the flood waters were black and not brown with mud. This clearly highlights the importance of trees in the management of water run-off. The boat made good time as we moved away from Auyantepuy. Three scarlet macaws, *Ara macao* were seen.

The remoteness of Salto Angel was quickly apparent from the air: the dense impenetrable forest, the size of Auyantepuy. This mesa is by no means flat but cut by deep gorges and crevasses. The Cessna flew close enough to and swung up the cliff face to allow us to fully admire the waterfall.

On the return trip to Ciudad Bolivar we flew over the Orinoco for a while. The Orinoco is mighty indeed. This river is 2,740 km long; it starts in the Guiana Highlands, one of the oldest land formations on earth, and flows west, north and east to the Atlantic Ocean in a "C" shape. Part of the river looked like the sea, even from the air. This may be the 22 km wide section of the Orinoco.

The touring team returned safely. Congratulations to Ivan Charles and Hairim Garcia Arraiz on a well organised and executed outing.

Rio Chirrun flowing through dense jungle; in flood it was still a black water river

(Right)

Salto Hacha

(Below)

Top of Auyantepuy from which Salto Angel flows; at 700 sq. km it is the largest tepuy in Canaima National Park

Art Group Report, Sunday 22nd June, 2014

PAINTING AT POINTE-A-PIERRE

by Amy Deacon

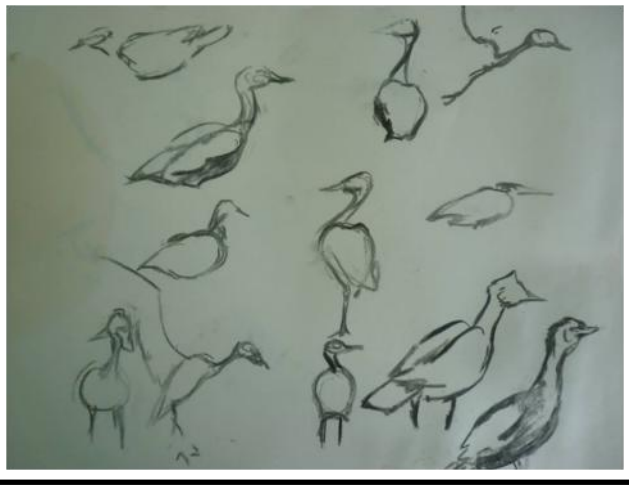
On Sunday 22nd June, 16 keen art group members made the journey to Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust. When we arrived at 10am, a large tour group from Port of Spain was being shown around, which gave us a chance to get our materials together, explore the visitor centre and warm up by sketching the regal peacocks patrolling the garden in front of the lake.

Two collages inspired by the field trip: 'Sitting Peacock' (above) and 'White Peacock' (below). Both by Rachael Frank.

As the tour group dispersed, so did we, venturing further around the main lake alone or in small groups. Some chose the serene lake vista as a subject, while others focused on the waddling Muscovy ducks, *Cairina moschata* and charismatic black-bellied whistling ducks, *Dendrocygna autumnalis discolor,* as excellent models for practising quick, loose sketches. The latter are threatened in the wild—thanks to overhunting—and the centre provides both a refuge and a breeding programme for them. Indeed, nearly 1,500 have been reintroduced to the

Lakeside watercolour by Ayodhya Ouditt

Duck sketches by Richard Acosta



wild by Pointe-a-Pierre over the past 4 decades.

Some artists grabbed the opportunity to draw and photograph other species that are almost impossible to see close at hand in the wild—such as the iconic scarlet ibis, which is also bred in large enclosures at the centre for reintroduction purposes. Usually only visible as bright red dots on green mangrove islands in the Caroni swamp, these spectacular birds are no less impressive when seen up close.

Scarlet ibis
(watercolour and chalk pastel)
by Amy Deacon

At 1pm we reconvened at the centre where our guide, Simone Ho, led us on a tour. Here we learned about the many species that live in and around the lake, most of which we enjoyed excellent sightings of, including the symbolic lotus flower, the wattled jacana, *Jacana jacana* the Neotropic cormorant, *Phalacrocorax brasilianus* and the elegant snake bird, *Anhinga anhinga.* Much of the tour was focused on conservation and local ecology – which are central to the objectives of the Trust. Some members continued to speed-sketch or take artistic shots with their cameras while others just enjoyed the stroll.

As a lapsed TTFNC member, Simone was sympathetic to our thirst for information on natural history and on our desire to explore some of the less-used hiking trails that branch away from the main path. We had only ventured a few metres along these trails when we spotted an unmistakable spider: the Trinidad dwarf tarantula, *Cyriocosmus elegans*—tiny, yet by its movements so clearly a tarantula. As we continued, we collected several "devil's ear" or "monkey ear" seedpods, *Enterolobium cyclocarpum,* and even caught a glimpse of a spectacled

Trinidad dwarf tarantula,
Cyriocosmus elegans
spotted on the lake-side path.

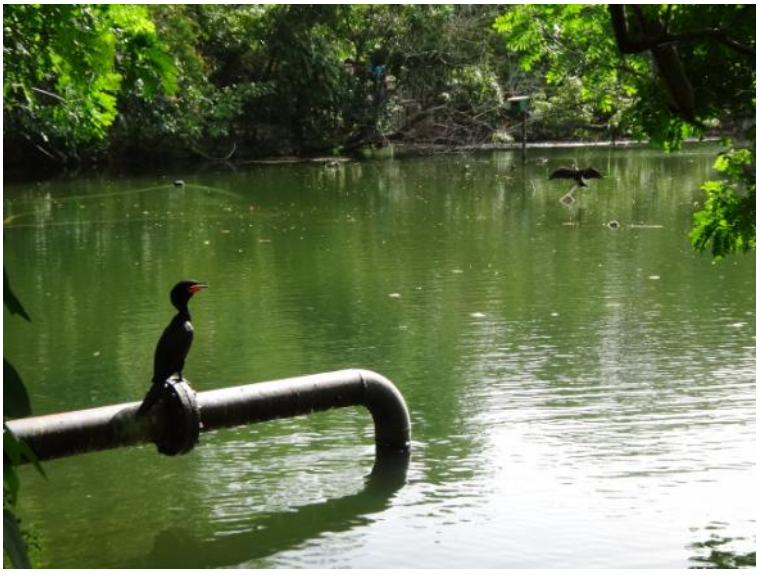
caiman, *Caiman crocodilus,* in the shallows.

We headed home with tired legs, full sketch books and plenty of new facts, and look forward to revisiting the wildfowl trust in the future. Indeed, the extended guided tour would have equally suited a birding, botanical, bug or herpetology group trip — and I'm sure all of the art group attendees would recommend it highly.

Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust is open to visitors between 9-5pm on weekdays, and 10-5pm at weekends. Visitors should call ahead to make a reservation (see www.papwildfowltrust.org for details). Entrance is $15 which includes a guided tour of the lake. Anyone interested in joining the art group mailing list can email Amy at aed32@st-andrews.ac.uk. No experience necessary, just an appreciation for the beauty of the natural world.

Above: **Simone Ho takes the Art Group on a guided tour around the main lake at the Pointe-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust.**
(L-R) Richard Acosta, Erik Blair, Fernando Valdez, Aimee Ghent, Shereen Ali, Yolande Mungal, Kamal , Ayodhya Ouditt, Nalini Ouditt, Roma Wong Sang, Jeffrey Wong Sang, Simone Ho.

Right:
Several Neotropic cormorants (foreground)
and anhingas (background)
were seen during the trip.



Field Trip Report, Sunday 27th April, 2014

ESCONDIDA BAY, POINT GOURDE

by Avinash Gajadhar

The field trip on the 27th of April, 2014 was to Escondida Bay at Point Gourde. Escondida is a derivative of the Spanish word 'escondido' which means 'hidden'. Fifteen club members were present for the hike which was considered a decent turnout.

The trek started at Anchorage and took the party uphill until a fork in the road was encountered marked by a concrete barrel placed at the centre point of the divide. The party then proceeded on the path to the right and ventured further uphill past a pair of rubbish-filled bunkers until a tree marked with red dye was encountered. This tree signalled the turnoff from the main trail into the forest. The trek continued downhill following a series of trees painted with red dye. The path became increasingly difficult the further down the party travelled due to an abrupt change in terrain from a leaf-littered path to a more rugged, rock-strewn one. After a while, the trail opened up to reveal a road running alongside the ocean where several ships and small boats could be seen. The road eventually led to the 1st Trinidad Sea Scout campsite at Escondida Bay.

Several different species of flora and fauna were seen along the way. The following list of birds was compiled by Kamal Mahabir and Kris Sookdeo:

Magnificent frigatebird, *Fregata magnificens*
Brown pelican, *Pelecanus occidentalis*
Black vulture, *Coragyps atratus*
Turkey vulture, *Cathartes aura*
White hawk, *Pseudastur albicollis*
Laughing gull, *Leucophaeus atricilla*
Feral pigeons, *Columba livia*
Ruddy ground dove, *Columbina talpacoti*
Swift, *Apodidae spp.*
Cocoa woodcreeper, *Xiphorhynchus susurrans*
Brown-crested flycatcher, *Myiarchus tyrannulus*
Great kiskadee, *Pitangus sulphuratus*
Grey-breasted martin, *Progne chalybea*
Southern rough-winged swallow, *Stelgidopteryx ruficollis*
Tropical mockingbird, *Mimus gilvus*
Palm tanager, *Thraupis palmarum*
Blue-grey tanager, *Thraupis episcopus*
White-tipped dove, *Leptotila verreauxi*
Red-eyed vireo, *Vireo olivaceus*
Yellow-headed caracara, *Milvago chimachima*
Short-tailed hawk, *Buteo brachyurus*
Tropical parula, *Setophaga pitiayumi*
Violaceous euphonia, *Euphonia violacea*

Four different species of insect were seen: the blue emperor butterfly (*Morpho peleides);* the postman butterfly *(Heliconius melpomene);* a member of the *Synoeca spp* more commonly known as the 7 or 11 mile wasp; and, a member of the *Trigona spp,* also known as the stingless bee.

In addition, a species of new world monkey was seen, the tufted capuchin, *Cebus apella.* Dan Jaggernauth commented that this species of capuchin was introduced into the area and was noted to be more aggressive than their white-fronted capuchin cousins.

The following is a list of plants encountered on the journey, compiled by Stephan Gajadhar:

Bois d'orme, *Guazuma ulmifolia*
Silk cotton, *Ceiba pentandra*
Bois flot, *Ochroma pyramidale*
Naked Indian/tourist tree, *Bursera simaruba*
Philodendron spp
Hog plum, *Spondias monbin*
Sapodilla, *Morisonia americana*
Marsdenia spp
Chenet, *Melicocca bijuga*
Catasetum maculatum
Bois canot, *Cecropia peltata*
Carat palm, *Sabal mauritiiformis*
Mountain rose, *Brownea latifolia*
Bloodwood, *Croton gossypifolius*
Stavewood/cuchape, *Coccoloba latifolia*

THE PIONEERS OF TURTLE CONSERVATION IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Report by Ian Lambie
Honorary Secretary
The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club
from 1961 to 1980

The Environment Management Authority has deemed October 2014 to be "National Sea Turtle Awareness Month" in Trinidad and Tobago. Sea turtle conservation has indeed come a long way since 1963 when the TTFNC first investigated reports, and confirmed that a large number of leatherback turtles were being killed on the Matura beach. Beach patrols continued at Matura during 1964 and in 1965, Peter Bacon, the Vice President of the Club, was appointed co-ordinator of the Club's Turtle Project . The Club commenced a programme of regular patrols on the beaches beaches at Matura, Fishing Pond, Big Bay, Toco, Grand Riviere, Maracas and Las Cuevas. It was soon determined that the peak of the annual turtle nesting season was during the months of May and June.

Leatherback turtle at Grande Riviere
Photo: Amy Deacon

Information on the turtles encountered was recorded on a data sheet designed by Bacon. Recorded was the length and width of the turtle carapace, the time spent in digging the nest chamber, number of eggs deposited, the time spent by the turtle on the beach, the moon phase, and the state of the tide. Meanwhile, the Club had made contact with Dr John Hendrickson, professor of zoology at the University of Malaya, who had been conducting research on the nesting behaviour of leatherback and other turtle species on Trengganu and on other beaches in Malaya (later Malaysia). It was reported that at that time there were as many as 20,000 leatherback nestings being recorded annually at Trengganu. The Government of Malaya (later Malaysia) also maintained a turtle hatchery where eggs were relocated to an enclosed area for protection from predators and carefully monitored. Dr. Hendrickson sent the Club brochures and literature containing information on turtle conservation methods in Malaysia. It should be mentioned that during the 1980s and 1990s, there was a steady decline in the leatherback population in the Indo-Pacific region and in 1993 only two leatherback turtles were reported from Trengganu.

In 1970, the Club began a Turtle Tagging Project using equipment supplied by the University of Florida at Gainsville. During the next eleven nesting seasons 333 leatherbacks were tagged. Also tagged was one olive ridley, one loggerhead and one hawksbill turtle. One leatherback was tagged on Grafton beach in Tobago. In 1981, after eighteen years of beach patrols compiling information and turtle tagging, the Club's Turtle Project was terminated.

In May 1973, based on its many years of observation and information gathering, the Club submitted a report prepared by Dr. Bacon to the Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries entitled "The status of sea turtles in Trinidad and Tobago". In subsequent meetings with the Club's representatives, Mr. G. E. L. Laforest, the President, Mr. Ian Lambie, the Honorary Secretary and Dr. Peter Ba-

con the Turtle Project co-ordinator, the Minister agreed to propose an amendment to the existing "Protection of Turtle and Turtle Eggs Regulations of 1952", which was replaced by Act No.23 of 1975, issued as Government Notice No.119 of the 8th September, 1975, "The Turtle and Turtle Eggs Regulations". Today, with additional information obtained over the past 40 years, many conservationists consider that it was time for appropriate amendments to be made to Act No.23 of 1975. In October 2011, the Turtle and Turtle eggs (amendment) Regulations 2011, which prohibited the hunting and killing of all species of sea turtles was approved by the Parliament. In addition, by Legal Notice No.88 of 2014, sea turtles were declared to be an environmentally sensitive species under Section 41 of the Environmental Management Act.

Beginning in 1975, the late David Rooks with family members and friends spent many week-ends during the turtle nesting season on the Grand Tacaribe beach tagging turtles. On one occasion 18 nesting leatherback turtles were tagged during one night. At that time this was a Club record. The Club was also engaged in an Education Lecture Programme, whereby members visited Secondary Schools, including North-east College in Sangre Grande, in an effort to stimulate interest among the teachers and students in the need to protect and conserve our nesting leatherback turtles. Reports of the Club's turtle conservation activities were published in international magazines including the Marine Turtle Newsletter, in the Club's journal and in the local news media.

Among the junior members of the Club at that time were students of the Bishop Anstey High School who, accompanied by their Biology teacher, participated in the Club's Turtle Patrols. One of these junior members was Carol James who had her introduction to nesting leatherback turtles during one of these patrols at Matura. Many years later, in 1990, as the Head of the Wildlife Section of the Forestry Division, Dr. Carol James was the catalyst in the formation of the community group "Nature Seekers" at Matura, which was established to protect the nesting turtles from poachers. She was assisted by Mr. Kenneth Fournillier a member of her staff. Thanks to the foresight of Dr. James and to the dedication of the members of Nature Seekers this organisation now receives international recognition for its work in turtle conservation. The Government has declared the beaches at Matura, Fishing Pond and at Grand Riviere to be prohibited areas during the turtle nesting season, March to August. A permit is necessary for any person to enter the prohibited area, and poachers are no longer active on these beaches.

The success of Nature Seekers has led to the formation of the Fishing Pond Turtle Conservation Group, Grand Riviere Environmental Awareness Trust, Grand Riviere Tour Guides Association, the Matura to Matelot Network, the Manatee Conservation Trust at Manzanilla and Save Our Sea Turtles in Tobago. Most important the movement has attracted corporate sponsorship from companies such as BHP Billiton and Atlantic LNG resulting in the establishment of the Turtle Village Trust in 2008. In 2012, 4130 leatherback nests were recorded at Matura while 2829 nests were recorded at Fishing Pond. In 2013 there were 8256 confirmed nestings by 5140 turtles, and during the peak of the nesting season of 2013, approximately 500 leatherbacks nested at Grand Riviere nightly. Meanwhile in Tobago SOS reports that during the nesting season of 2013 there were 742 nesting events recorded, 559 leatherback and 72 hawksbill nests were constructed. Seventy-two percent of leatherback nests were constructed at Turtle Beach, 16 percent at Back Bay - Mt. Irvine and 12 percent at Stone Haven Bay. A total of 5532 persons viewed nesting events at Turtle Beach, Stone Haven Bay, Lambeau, and at Back Bay, Mt. Irvine, and there were 950 persons viewing the emergence of hatchlings. The thousands of visitors to Matura, Fishing Pond and Grand Riviere, during the annual turtle nesting season has created the opportunity for employment of residents as guides, and as workers in the small hotels and guest houses which have been established mainly at Grand Riviere. Some villagers have also been offering accommodation at their respective homes for over-nighting guests. The turtle population and the turtle conservation activities of Nature Seekers and other groups have provided the villagers of Matura, Fishing Pond and Grand Riviere with an improved standard of living and substantially enhanced their quality of life.

This all began in 1963 through the initiative of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club.

NORTHERN RANGE CROSSING, 2001

by Reginald Potter - Part 2 of 2 (Part 1 in QB1/2014)

Before dawn the next morning I remember being awakened by a loud call from a bird or monkey somewhere up overhead. It was a strange repetitive call that I had not heard before or since. Breakfast included pan bakes with some extras to carry for lunch. Not being anything of a cook I had taken some advice from 'Richard' at Maracas on pan bakes. We loaded up and set off. It must be stated here that carrying food and water for 3 days, plus pots, etc. is about the maximum that can be carried without resorting to special 'army' rations. We had also brought a supply of boiled sweets that we sucked continuously, thus keeping up our supply of energy. Eventually, we arrived at the top—the Main Ridge as it is known—and turned east to walk along it to the point where we would branch off towards the 'Santa Cruz' trail. The schedule was that we should be on that branch and heading for Santa Cruz before nightfall as the taxi was due to collect us the next day in Matelot.

The Main Ridge was reasonably easy with only a couple of places where it descended steeply and rose again along the way. In one of these 'dips' it descended to a ravine flowing parallel to the ridge before cutting through and dipping off to the north. It struck me as strange to see a deep ravine at the top of a ridge! There was even water collected in pools and what appeared to be a mud wallow used by wild hogs. It was easy to lose direction here and to determine which way the main ridge continued, but we managed to keep on course and ascend the other side. There, continuing over rises and descents, we started looking for signs of the turn off ridge to Santa Cruz. This was more difficult than anticipated. We picked a few 'wrong' ridges seemingly turning off the Main ridge, only to find the direction wrong and having to retrace our steps. The GPS had great difficulty picking up satellites and it was taking too much of our limited time to keep fixing our position.

Eventually we came to a branch spur heading north and being finally convinced this was the one we followed it. The spur descended more and more and soon we deduced we had been wrong again as the ridge intended should have maintained altitude as it headed to the Santa Cruz. Nevertheless we decided to continue as it would surely descend to the Matelot river and we could use that as the route out. Furthermore we figured it was too late to turn back now and still meet the taxi at the appointed time tomorrow. The Matelot river from the map appeared to be straight forward to follow out. Down and down we went until finally we encountered the stream at the base. This seemed pleasant enough and we rather liked the alternative route that now presented itself. Following it down through shallow pools and little cataracts, Mike remarked how it would be great for a beer advert he had seen of young hikers quenching their thirst on that special brew in the outdoors.

But soon the cataracts became larger involving climbing down. Then the downstream pools began to get bigger. At one point the pool was so large that a difficult traverse around the almost vertical side was necessary to get to the other end and keep our packs dry. Then the rain came down and we huddled under an overhanging cliff while we ate some unappetizing, dry, stale bake and sardines for a late lunch.

Continuing downstream we all agreed that we had to keep this route due to time constraints alone. The afternoon was drawing on and we hoped to find some easier ground in the valley where the pace could be increased before we camped for the night. But no, the waterfalls and pools grew bigger. Finally we came to a stretch of deep river where we would have to swim down for lack of an alternative. Mike and John had brought fancy plastic 'raincoats' for their haversacks, so when turned over they could float and keep dry. I had to make do with a plastic rubbish bag for my collection of tied together packs and float this. We walked head deep and swam to the downstream end of this pool to be greeted by the roar of a significant waterfall at the other end, with spray mist rising. The river, quite large now, was actually joined by another stream at this point and the combined flow disappeared into a

deep canyon. It was not feasible to progress past this point. We were beaten!

It's amazing how a situation changes from there being only one way to go, to another, totally unplanned, alternative. We had only one option now and that was retreat. It would be crazy to try to retrace our steps as the river section we had descended was just too long and slow. And we were pretty tired at this point. The other option would be to climb out of that ravine and try to make enough height to where the hill slope was gentle enough to spend the night. It was clear we had to go back to the starting point at Platanal. The only thing unclear was whether we could get there before search parties were sent out looking for us.

Climbing out was not easy. I climbed ahead and sent down a rope for the others, hauling up the packs first then sending the rope back for the man, then repeating the whole thing until we could stand and climb up, ever up. This was the north side of the valley we had been descending. Eventually the ground showed some decrease in slope and we made camp for the night. We must have gained considerable height because we were able to get cell phone contact with taxi man Bennett and cancel the pick up for the next day.

Next morning we started early as two day's distance had now to be fitted into a one day hike. Back on the Main Ridge we were lucky to get my wife on the phone and alert her to the possibility that we would not be back that day. It was really a hard slog. Up to the Main Ridge, along that ridge to the ravine, find the descent point, clamber down the spur. Ropes again on the cliff, into the stream and up the other side, and across the watershed into the Platanal valley. But we made it. We arrived at the Oropouche in the evening, stripped off our clothes and just lay in the water in blissful rest for the first time that day.

In cleaner clothes from the car, we returned to Port of Spain vowing to never again attempt that Northern Range crossing. Whatever happened to my idea about "having no time constraint" about "enjoying the jungle?" This was clearly impossible, so never again.

But in the succeeding year we often talked about it, and it was definitely still a nagging challenge. If we had only chosen the right spur we would have made it. And we didn't want to leave it as a "failure." These thoughts continued nagging us. I visited the Lands and Surveys Office and obtained some large scale maps for better use with the GPS. Surely if we started instead from Matelot, there would be no risk of mistaking the correct ridge and spur onto the Main Ridge, and surely it would be easy to know when we had arrived on the Main Ridge. Another trip was soon in our minds.

Our second attempt at crossing the Northern Range started on 12th July 2002. In the first episode which started at Platanal with the intention of arriving at Matelot after 3 days, I described how we took an incorrect turning onto a spur leaving the Main Ridge and ending in the Matelot river which, with its impassable waterfalls, proved to be too much for us. This time we would allow 4 days and start from Matelot in the north.

For this occasion Charles DeGannes joined us, so the team was Charles, John Chambers, Mike Starcher and I. This was quite brave of Charles since he had some doubts about how his feet would hold up, due to a previous abnormal growth. Mike had become a father since the last trip and John's two young daughters had adopted the phrase "doing a Reg" everytime he planned something a bit out of the ordinary. Again we contacted Mr. Doyle Bennet in Cumana for the taxi component of the trip, and he duly met us at the Cumaca road junction near Valencia. We had made no attempt to contact 'Norbert' after he disappointed us last time.

We did the long drive into Platanal, deposited our vehicle there and got into Doyle's maxi for the long winding drive back down to the Valencia bypass and on to Toco and Matelot, arriving there at 12:15 pm. There we said goodbye to Doyle and started up the 'Santa Cruz' trail which winds upward for about 5 miles generally southward. At the head of the trail on the map, it meanders on down to the northwest ending in Shark River, but we saw no sign of this and used topographical features and the GPS to determine where the ridge southward was.

I had discussed this trail with a well-known hunter in Matelot and he described how he had shot and carried out several wild hogs in a single hunt. Now anyone who has hunted deer along the Santa Cruz trail and has experienced the difficulty in carrying out a

single animal may wonder how this hunter managed to do this! He also told us that he had already been on the route we proposed and had got so close to Platanal that he could 'hear the traffic on the road below'. That too I wondered about since the one thing the Patanal does not have is much traffic!

That first day we started along the ridge in fairly clear and tall beautiful forest. There was some rain but by nightfall it had cleared and we spent a dry night up on the gentle ridge. A couple of empty cartridge shells indicated that we were certainly not the first to be here. A route along the tops of ridges normally can be expected to be quite dry, so when we heard a gurgling stream below we were grateful and resolved to fill water bottles first thing in the morning. This we did when two of us descended to the Tiberone river that proved to be a delightful stream. Bottles filled we returned to the ridge and resumed our trek south at 09:10 laden with the heavy water bottles. The forest was beautiful and reasonably easy walking. At one point the ridge became steep sided and again we could hear water flowing below, this time on the western side, but did not descend to check it out. We continued on with John doing the navigation by GPS.

By evening we were on a knoll near the Main Ridge where we camped for the night. It was a wet windy night and, at about 2000 ft elevation, quite cold. The Hennesy hammock roofs are fairly minimal and I had to rig plastic rubbish bags to keep dry (or rather less wet).

In the morning (Day 3) we packed up our wet clothes and hammocks and got started by 07:30. Our GPS navigation indicated that we were properly on the Main Ridge by 10:00 and we continued heading west. Along the ridge we passed a clearing that appeared to be for a helicopter drop by cable, but now completely overgrown with secondary bush. This we assumed was from a training session for the regiment. Still further we surprised a deer, presumably sleeping off last night's foraging and only detectable by the crashing in the bush and its hasty departure. At one stage we seemed to be at that fateful turning to the Matelot river we had strayed onto during the last attempt, and later we accidently diverted on another spur and had to retrace back to Main Ridge which is often not an obvious feature, in some places gently rounded, and in others fairly sharp. Then, later, we found ourselves on another spur and had to descend a steep SW face then contour around to find the Main Ridge heading west. We crossed that curious dip in the ridge with the stream and pig wallow seen on the first attempt. The Main Ridge was again difficult to resume but our experience from last time helped. The stop for lunch at 14:00 was at the junction with the spur we had ascended from Platanal on the first attempt. I recall John recognized this and had he not, I would have continued west, to exactly where I don't know.

Down the spur, down the cliff where ropes help, past the area with manicou crabs and into the valley of the Matura river we went and found a place to set up camp for the 3rd night. We had passed a well built camp we assumed was Norbert's, but later learned was used by the Abrahams. Here we made camp for the last night, in the valley. That evening standing in the Matura river we noticed the many crayfish in the shallow water. Throwing bits of ham and sausage brought them out from under rocks to forage around our toes.

In the morning of day 4 we got moving about 7:30, crossed the stream and started ascending the south side of the valley. Again we found no trail in this area although reason should have dictated that a trail must exist from the hunters' camp into the Platanal valley. We toiled to the top of the spur, crossed it a bit too low to meet the trail, but eventually came on to an overgrown path taking us into the Platanal valley. We were soon on the forest reserve trail out and joined that familiar trail that took us all the way back to the bridge over the Oropouche river at the end of the Platanal road. We had made it!

Again, as on the last occasion, we collapsed in the river, soaked and relaxed, washing off the accumulated mud and grime from the last 4 days. The crossing of the Northern Range had been achieved. It was a very pleasant feeling, and we had enjoyed the unspoiled forest and the remoteness. But as for that initial objective of wandering slowly through forest without the pressure of time—well maybe I'll experience that one day. This journey, seemingly like all forest hikes, was more like travelling as fast as we could through terrain that required a lot of exertion!

ENCOUNTERS WITH BOTHROPS.

by Hans Boos

Part 2 of 5 (Part 1 in QB1/2014)

In 1968, when my planned trip to visit the Galapagos Islands fell through, I decided to go to British Guiana and attempt to follow the footsteps of Gerald Durrell as he had written about his adventures in that country in his book "Two Tickets to Adventure."

My friend Elliot Olton and I embarked on one of the most exciting adventures of my young life. (see Photograph No. 1): hunting snakes in the hinterland of that immense country. We only had about two weeks to try to see and collect as much as possible and, frankly, that was not nearly enough time to take in the great distances and the time it took to traverse them by whatever transport was available.

Photograph No. 1:
Elliot Olton and me (Hans Boos), Bartica 1967

But, though we were hoping to collect any snakes that were new to us and not found on Trinidad or Tobago, I was hoping to see and collect that, so far, elusive gem, a bushmaster, a mapepire zanana, *Lachesis muta* or as it is known in British Guiana (Guyana nowadays) "Cunucushe."

Needless to say, as anyone who has read my former account "My First Mapepire Zanana" (Boos 2009) will know, we were unsuccessful in that quest and the amusing anecdote is told in my book, (Boos 2001), of us discovering a specimen of *Bothrops atrox* just feet from the naked legs of a woman tending her garden, and who told us that in that she was a God-fearing woman, no snakes would come near to her.

Note that this specimen from Guyana is quite distinctly and differently coloured from the ones found on Trinidad, though the distinctive patterning along the body is within the variations found within the species (see Photograph No. 2). This species, one that has one of the widest ranges in South and Central America, is very plastic in its colour range, differing from area to area and from the juveniles to the adults.

Photograph No. 2:
Mapepire balsain, *B. atrox*
Guyana

For some years, this was the last *Bothrops* I encountered, for soon after, in mid 1968, I quit my job at ESSO and sailed for Australia with my family. Or so I thought.

My fortune was to land a job in the foremost Zoo in Australia, and there I worked for the next four and a half years, and though I did not see any more of South American *Bothrops atrox*, about a year after getting the job in the reptile house of Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney, we received a ship-

ment of snakes to augment the collection and to make it more international.

To my delight there were three specimens of the tree vipers from Costa Rica, once known as *Bothrops schlegelii (*changed to *Bothriechis schlegelii* in 1985). This species is known as the "Eyelash Palm-Pit viper," and the photograph (one of many of the three distinctly coloured specimens we received) clearly shows the eyelash-like supraocular scales that give this little viper its name. One specimen was a mossy mottled green, the other a speckled grey and the third (see Photograph No. 3) was gold over its entire body.

Photograph No. 3:
Eye-lash palm pit viper,
***Bothriechis schlegelii,* Costa Rica**

Soon after I returned to Trinidad in 1973, I published (Boos 1974) one of my first papers on these three little snakes in Wildlife Magazine, called aptly "Jungle Puzzle."

I had written up this following encounter in a report to the Field Naturalists' Club several years ago, but it is worth recounting here in the hindsight of many years.

I believe it was my first hike with the Club to the fabled Aripo Caves to see the oil birds (*Steatornis caripensis*) that nest in a huge colony there. Our guide, an elderly, experienced member of the inhabitants of the Heights of Aripo, led us, a motley group, up the steep and slippery paths that would eventually take us to the yawning mouth of this fabled cave (Boos 1978).

I remember clearly the late Colin Agostini saying to me that he wanted to walk close to me, as he reckoned I would see and clear away any snakes that we encountered, as these Heights were reputed to be literally swarming with snakes. As usual, in my inexperience, I tended to brush off these stories as the collective compressing of memories of encounters of many a lifetime, and that they had little grounding in fact.

I had been trekking through a lot of bush in the preceding years and snakes were notably absent during my searching. I found that the only snake I could with certainty go to look for, and to find, was the tree boa, *Corallus rauchenbergeri*, (more familiarly known as Cook's tree boa due to its previous scientific name *Corallus enydris cooki,* see Photograph No. 4) coiled in the overhanging branches of trees surrounding the Hollis reservoir, or perhaps as evidenced by my first capture in about 1963, in the *Clusia* trees overhanging the cliffs of the north coast.

Photograph No. 4:
Cook's tree boa,
Corallus rauchenbergeri

As we approached a ridge of sandstone rock, our guide stepping up the foot-high rise, I distinctly heard a sound that was not in tune with the whirring of cicadas, the calls of birds, or the rustle of the Club members behind me. I froze so suddenly that Colin bumped into me and I called to our guide, whispering loudly, "Snake! Snake! I hear a snake!"

He turned, one foot on the higher step, and with a glance that told me that I was imagining

things, that no one could hear a snake, stepped up to the top of the ridge.

This time the clicking sound, like the accelerated loud ticking of an old alarm clock came clearly to me, and I spotted a mapepire balsain, about four feet long, stretched along the top of the *Selaginella*, in the exact place over which our guide had stepped to gain the top of the rise.

It was lying on top of the fern-like leaves, in perfect confidence, its tail shaking like a crazy metronome, and it seemed to look back at us over its non- existent shoulder (see Photograph No. 5).

"I told you I heard a snake," I said, pointing with the tongs. I asked the guide to clear a space on top of the ridge to give me room to safely immobilize the snake, and when he was finished slashing away about a square meter of undergrowth, I carefully grasped the snake at mid body and carrying it suspended between the jaws of the tongs, stepped up the rise and lowered it to the cleared space.

Once on the ground it tried to slither away, as is the first reaction of most snakes, but I once more grasped it at mid body and brought it back into the cleared space. It immediately went into its characteristic coil, the so called "catah" and looking directly at me, sounded its tail-clicking warning. Not feeling the confidence I had to show outwardly, as I was being closely watched by several Club members, opening the tongs, I grasped the snake closely behind its triangular head, intending to immobilize it so that I could grab it and safely place it into a snake bag I had laid on the ground nearby. But as I closed the tongs' jaws on its slim neck, it suddenly shot forward and my immediate reaction was to grab it harder and closed the tongs quite firmly, but this time about six inches behind the head. The snake immediately whipped its head around and bit at the shank of the tongs and I could hear the distinct click as the fangs made contact with the aluminum shaft. I loosened my hold and the snake withdrew its head a little until I had it directly behind the head and was able to reach down and grab it firmly with the fingers of my left hand as I reached for the bag with my right. As I lifted it up I saw clearly one of its fangs hanging out the side of its mouth. It had broken it off when it bit into the metal of the tongs. But I knew that a new fang would soon grow back to replace the broken-off one, as was the way with these pit vipers. Bagging the writhing and bad tempered snake, I felt quite elated to have gained this experience in the field with no mishap, except for the snake's broken tooth. It would seem that a couple more captures of mapepire balsains would involve the Field Naturalists' Club.

The next one was when we were hiking into the Guanapo Gorge. Our party had hiked over the Lalaja road and down into the Guanapo Valley where the river cuts through a narrow gorge and then runs south out of the valley. It had been a hot and wearying walk and we were glad to cool our feet in the icy cold river. As we sat around on the grassy banks we could see a small tributary that flowed out of the eastern bank of the river. The river runs quite swiftly at this point and as we looked at the opposite bank, suddenly we saw a rather good sized mapepire balsain drop out of the tall grasses that grew at the very edge of the river and fall into the running water. Peter Dickson saw it almost immediately as I did and he started across the river where the snake was valiantly trying to swim against the current. I threw him my tongs and he was upon the snake before it could be swept down river and grabbing it between the jaws of the tongs brought it to our side of the riverbank where after an inspection by other members of the club, I once more immobilized it and bagged it.

To be continued….

Photograph No. 5: ***B. atrox***
Hollis Reservoir,
Trinidad

From the Archives:
CHACACHACARE OVERNIGHT CAMP 1997

by Dan L. Jaggernauth - First published in QB1 1998

Pleasant faces and cheerful people greeted us at the Island Property Owners Association, Chaguaramas, the meeting point for the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club's overnight camp to Chacachacare. The security officer on duty, Lennox Fraser, indicated it was $15.00 per vehicle for overnight parking and $8.00 entry fee per person. Our boatman, Gary, charged us $30.00 per person for the return trip. Twenty-seven persons joined us on Saturday and many more were expected on Sunday morning. With some members arriving late, we left the depot at 10:20 a.m. with two boats cruising along.

During the outward journey, Sheldon Edwards identified Centipede Island, and Dr. Victor Quesnel said he was interested in doing some research there. Maybe, if someone can make the necessary arrangements for Dr. Quesnel, the research would be done in much quicker time. In the distance we saw the historical island of Chacachacare with its many abandoned buildings and rusted roof-tops. Arriving at the jetty at 11:30 a.m. some fishermen helped us to off-load the luggage. As we walked up the steps, Selwyn Gomes pointed out the building for the overnight camp.

Walking back to the jetty I had a short conversation with the fishermen who were curious about our purpose on the island. I told them we are on some environmental research for the weekend. The humble young fishermen complained about the hard times inflicted on them by the trawlers which are depleting their fish stocks and making life miserable for them.

As I walked back to the house, Juanita Henry and others swept and cleaned the building. Other members who preferred to stay in the large wooden building behind, did the same. Though the foundation and structure of the buildings remain firm, some serious vandalism is taking place in Chacachacare. Windows, doors and glass panes were stolen. Also missing were toilet sets, both tank and bowl, face basin, mirrors from walls, kitchen sink, door frames, locks, water taps, flooring boards and many other things too numerous to mention. In the large wooden building at the back, extensive areas have been removed, including flooring boards and sill supports. Vandals have been operating for quite some time and if security and patrols are not stepped up, the destruction will continue. As six boats were seen anchored offshore, one field naturalist said that the strong pitch pine boards are used for boat repairs.

Victor Quesnel, not wanting to waste any time, began research work at 13:00 hrs. Our first stop was at the Nun's Cemetery and we saw ten grave sites, all marked according to each nun's country of origin. These humanitarians had dedicated their lives to others who were afflicted with Hansen's disease, or leprosy as it is commonly called. The cemetery was well maintained with an iron fence, all painted white. We also saw a fresh flower on one of the grave sites. Walking up the trail we came to a turning point, the left branch headed for the Salt Pond and the right to La Tinta. We took the right turn, telling members we would be taking a left turn on Sunday morning.

Walking down this trail, Victor Quesnel identified the saltfish wood tree, *Machaerium robiniifolium*. On reaching the sea he also identified the button mangrove, *Conocarpus erectus*. This beach was cleared up by the Naturalists' Club and Solid Waste Management a few years ago, but hundreds of styrotex plates and cups, plus cans and bottles have since swept up onto the site.

Some sections of the trail had eroded into the sea forcing us to take higher ground for our safety. At 15:25 hrs. we saw a bird which resembled the turkey vulture, but which was later identified by Paul Christopher as the zone-tailed hawk, *Buteo albonotatus.* Along this part of the trail some cotton trees were seen with their white, soft cotton. We hailed some campers, and arriving at La Tinta, two birds flying overhead seemed to be deeply disturbed by human presence. These were identified as the yellow-headed caracara, Milvago chimachima.

At La Tinta, as we took a respite under the shady trees, Victor, Frankie and Luiza told us they were not too sure whether they would join us on the trip to the lighthouse. Close by, I collected a beautiful piece of driftwood and hid it in the bushes to collect on my way back. We then continued the strenuous walk in the hot sun up to the Chacachacare lighthouse. At the lighthouse field naturalists hailed us to climb up the steps forthwith. After ascending 48 iron steps we reached a platform and walked around the secured railing. At this elevation all field naturalists were wearing hats or caps in an attempt to protect themselves from the UV rays of the sun but had to abandon the idea due to the breezy environment. With good views of Patos Island, Venezuela looked just like a short swim away. Flying overhead were four of the magnificent frigate birds, *Fregata magnificens*. Using the binoculars I sighted a cave on one of the islands. The Chacachacare lighthouse was well maintained, recently painted and well constructed by British engineers of the Chance Brothers and Company Limited in 1896. As we walked down the stairs, Sheldon Edwards expressed thanks to the caretaker.

Returning from the lighthouse, Paul Christopher identified the copper-rumped hummingbird, *Amazilia tobaci* and the sooty grassquit, *Tiaris fuliginosa*. Reaching La Tinta at 17:56 hrs., Sheldon Edwards was mesmerized by the glowing beauty of the setting sun and took many photographs, capturing a rare moment in time. I then went into the bushes to collect the piece of driftwood I had hidden on the way up to the lighthouse. After an extensive search, I realized that someone had stolen the driftwood. However, as we walked up to the campers I saw the same piece of driftwood stacked away neatly under a table. As we neared the camp, Sheldon and I called out for the guys and told them thanks for bringing along the driftwood for us. They did not hesitate to give it to us, as one man said he did not know we had put it under the bushes. They even offered Vicki Blanchard some hot coffee which was boiled in a rusty Klim can, but Vicky said, "No thanks!" Darkness crept up on us quickly and, using our flashlights we walked along the rest of the trail, arriving at the house at 19:00 hrs. After the interesting afternoon trip we walked down to the jetty and took a refreshing bath.

At 19:20 hrs, Sharon and Juanita dished out hot food and boiled corn for everyone. As we sat together having dinner as one large, happy family, we remained alert for the call of the white-tailed nightjar. By this time, Mariana and other charming young ladies sat quietly in the half-lotus posture concentrating and awaiting the full glory of the moon to come over the mountain. At 19:30 hrs. Dr. Victor Quesnel walked across and alerted us to the call of the white-tailed nightjar, *Caprimulgus cayennensis*. The call of this bird cheered up our spirits at Chacachacare.

At 19:45 hrs. the moon came over the mountain and across the trees in all its magnificent splendour, creating an extraordinarily beautiful sight, Two ladies who sat contemplating the moon and enraptured by its beauty, said that the moon was dispersing romantic lunar vibrations. Then a medical doctor from one of the boats came across, speaking to our members. We offered him food and hot coffee and he ate the food with great relish. Speaking with the doctor he told me that the main reason for his coming across to the house was to do the "sand dance". I inquired about the "sand dance" but he said I would not be able to see the sand dance as it must be done in solitude. He told me that vibrations in the house were positive and different from the vibrations in the cemetery. Shortly after, the doctor left saying he must do the sand dance in 15 minutes time.

After about 15 minutes, one of the ladies wanted to go across to her bags in the wooden building at the back, so I decided to accompany her. On the way up the stairs we heard some strange noises coming from a room and I remembered that someone had said that when the Coast Guard and Regiment men stayed in the building they reported that it was alleged to be haunted. Upon reaching the flooring I switched the lights off and told my friend to remain silent. Then I stepped up surreptitiously, heading for the door. Creeping like a cat I saw an open space in the door. Then I looked inside and to my amazement I saw the medical doctor doing the "sand dance." I watched carefully as he danced on one foot and shook the sand off the other foot. He then began making some weird unceremonious ges-

ticulations. Then he used his right foot and kicked the partition seven times. While all this was happening, Selwyn Gomes was sound asleep on the other side of the same partition. Then I remembered what the doctor had said, that the "sand dance" must be done in solitude, so I stepped back about seven metres and put the lights on as though we were now walking in. Then the doctor bolted out of the room and told me he had just done it. So I asked him "what?" and he said, "I have just done the sand dance." As he briskly walked away, Selwyn Gomes woke up and said he was feeling something strange about the place. Word spread around like wildfire about the doctor and the sand dance.

At 22:55 hrs. we walked down to the jetty and saw the doctor speaking with the ladies. He gave them good advice about healthy living and used a lot of legitimate medical terminologies. He soon paddled away in his dinghy, across to his large boat. Before he climbed inside he hailed out saying, "Dan, please take care of the nice ladies for me until tomorrow." At this time I recorded the last call of the white-tailed nightjar. The conversation on the jetty continued with primary and secondary school teachers, all discussing ways and means to enhance performance and learning skills of students across the country. We also spoke about celebrating Frankie Farrell's 90th birthday later in the year on December 29, 1997.

Leaving the jetty at 12:45 a.m. we went to our respective buildings and the conversation went on late into the night. As we awoke in the morning some members said they had a short sleep as the heavy snoring of some field naturalists reverberated throughout the building. Then I saw Paul Christopher who said he saw the white-tailed nightjar under the tree and Paul took the early bird field naturalists along the trail to the Salt Pond. Others walked down to the jetty, took an early morning bath and awaited the arrival of other field naturalists who came in at 08:35 hrs. These were members who worked on Saturday and could not join us for the overnight camp.

The new arrivals walked up to the house and shared in our hot coffee. This last group for the Sunday morning trip started off at 09:05 hrs. On the way, Detta Buch identified the call of the mangrove cuckoo, *Coccyzus minor*. Walking along the well-constructed roadway, we arrived at the Salt Pond at 10:35 hrs. Clayton Hull tasted the water and said it was very salty. Field naturalists visiting the Salt Pond for the first time remained curious about the vast body of water collected in this area. Walking across to the beach, we continued along and put our bags under the shady but feared manchineel tree, *Hippomane mancinella.* Here we cautioned members about the dangerous milky sap of this tree. After a refreshing bath in the warm waters along this beach, we shared a large pot of fried rice with everyone.

View from above Chacachacare salt pond March 27, 2010 TTFNC field trip.
photo: Eddison Baptiste

On our return journey, Victor Quesnel identified a very healthy poui tree, *Tabebuia rufescens*. Returning to the house at 13:00 hrs. we began tidying up and collected two bags of garbage to be taken away. Walking down to the jetty, we expected Gary's arrival at 14:00 hrs., but he delayed us for more than an hour. However, when he arrived he expressed an apology which was accepted. On the way back the waters were choppy and our clothes got soaked. We arrived at the jetty at Island Property Owners Association at 16:30 hrs. and saw that our vehicles were all safe. Some members had made previous arrangements to be collected, and the tour leaders waited until everyone had been picked up before leaving themselves. After seeing the two bags of garbage we brought across put in the van, the security told us we are always welcome, and said, "please come again".

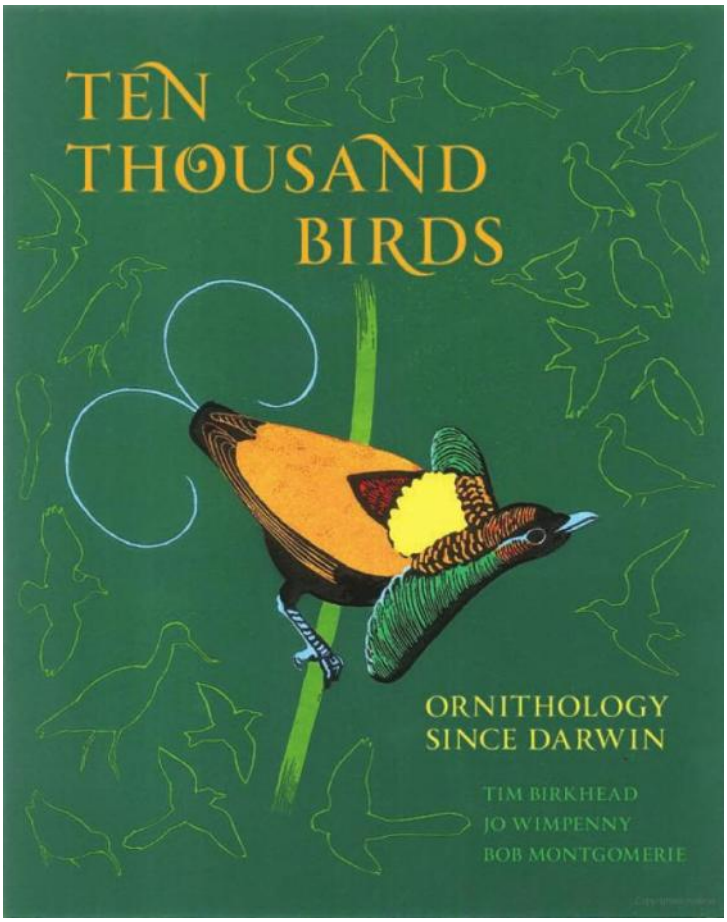
BOOK REVIEW
"TEN THOUSAND BIRDS"
by Matt Kelly

Here is a work for a serious birder to make the step to becoming a more serious ornithologist. This voluminous scientific work will certainly not be for everyone. But for those with a serious interest in modern ornithology it will be an invaluable teacher and companion. The book looks at the history of ornithology since Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, and brings us up to modern times, while introducing us to many of the key players in the shaping of today's many complex fields in bird study. The backgrounds, stories and anecdotes of many of the principals make for fascinating and entertaining reading. You'll get a rare glimpse into the dynamics of museums and academia. It will introduce you to more issues about birds, which have been researched, studied, published, discussed, debated and fought over, than you ever thought were possible. Most of these very topics are still on the front burners of ornithology today.

The book is also an eye opener for me, to also learn just how many other scientific endeavours owe their start to ornithology. Evolutionary Biology, Population Genetics, Ecological Adaptation, Behavioral Psychology, Sexual Selection, Form and Function, Instinct, and many more fields rest on the bedrock of ornithological studies.

This is not all light reading. The text is very packed with information. I found myself re-reading several passages. I would recommend at least a basic science background to take on this work. The information I gained was tremendously fulfilling for me. *Ten Thousand Birds* will also give you the names and authors of key publications in all the areas of interest, whetting your appetite, and sending you in new directions for even more studies in the never-ending topic of birds.

Ornithology has come a long way, since the days of shooting specimens for museums and private collections. It may be hard to keep track of all the directions in which ornithology is going today, but *Ten Thousand Birds* will get you on track.



TEN THOUSAND BIRDS
Ornithology Since Darwin

by

Tim Birkhead, Jo Wimpenny & Bob Montgomerie

544 pages, hardcover
List price $45.00 US

Dear Fellow Members, on 10th July, 2016 TTFNC will be Celebrating its 125th Birthday.

We therefore invite all to help create a special birthday experience with a lead up week of activities to commemorate this auspicious occasion.

We need volunteers to help plan and coordinate these upcoming activities.

Let's make our 125th birthday one that will be remembered for the next 125 years.

E-mail **admin@ttfnc.org**

if you would like to help plan the event

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TTFNC QUARTERLY BULLETINS ARE NOW ONLINE AND FULLY SEARCHABLE:
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Management Notices

New members; Volunteers; Publications

New Members

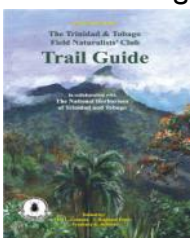
The Club warmly welcomes the following new members:

Ordinary members: **Adesh Ramnansingh, Ayodhya Ouditt, Dhaatrie Rampersad, Vijai Ramnarine**

Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club
P.O. Box 642, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

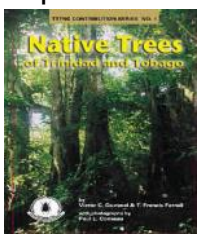
PUBLICATIONS

The following Club publications are available to members and non-members:



The TTFNC Trail Guide

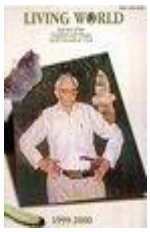
Members : TT$160.00

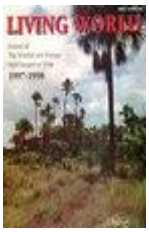


The Native Trees of T&T

2nd Edition
Members : TT$80.00

Living World Journal 1892-1896 CD
Members : TT$95.00





Living World Journal 2008
Living World Journal back issues
Members price : free

Living World 2012 supplement

Due to limited supply Living World 2012 supplements are $20.00 each.

MISCELLANEOUS

The Greenhall Trust

Started in 2005, in memory of Elizabeth and Arthur Greenhall, dedicated artist and zoologist respectively, the Trust offers financial assistance to aspiring artists and biologists (in the areas of flora and fauna) in Trinidad and Tobago. Full details are available on their website: http://www.greenhallstrust-wi.org/link.htm

Your 2014 Annual Membership Fees are Due:

Please view bottom right of the mailing label to check if your subscription has been paid.

Submission of articles and field trip reports:

1. **All articles must reach the editor by the eighth week of each quarter. Submission deadline for the 4rd Quarter 2014 issue is November 30, 2014.**
2. **Electronic copies can be submitted to the 'Editor' at: admin@ttfnc.org or directly to the editor or any member of Management. Please include the code QB2014-4 in the email subject label.**