



# THE FIELD NATURALIST

*Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club*

April – June 2015

Issue No: 2/2015



## Field Trip Report, January 24 - 25, 2015 OVERNIGHT TRIP TO CHACACHACARE

*by Matt Kelly*



I had my alarm set for 4:30 am. We were out the door by 5:00 am. Selwyn drove his blue car through the streets of St. James, which were reeling and rocking since the night before. There was loud music, and lots of people were drinking and dancing on the sidewalks and in the road. The doubles vendors were just setting up. Selwyn wouldn't stop. We got out at the highway entrance, near the stadium,

and drove on over to Chagauramas, to the Trinidad and Tobago Sailing Association. I had been there before one night, with Dr Feroze Omardeen. We went there to investigate a story of fish-eating bats seen along the docks at night.

We were the first ones there. Selwyn parked,

*(Continued on page 3)*



The Group: (L to R): **Selwyn Gomes, Kay Hinkson, Kris Sookdeo, Graham Rostant, Eddison Baptiste, Roma Wong Sang, Jeffrey Wong Sang.**

*Photo: Matt Kelly*

## Inside This Issue

- I     **TTFNC OVERNIGHT FIELD TRIP  
TO CHACACHACARE**  
January 23 & 24, 2015  
- *Matt Kelly*
- 12    **FIELD TRIP TO MOUNT TAMANA**  
February 23, 2015  
- *Marlene Maynard*
- 14    **A QUARTERLY UPDATE:  
YOUR IDEAS AND OBSERVATIONS**
- 15    **EL SOCORRO CENTRE  
FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION**  
Art Group Trip Report, April 25, 2015  
- *Amy Deacon*
- 18    **The 'Alternative' Trip to  
LA LAJA WATERFALL**  
Field Trip Report, March 29, 2015  
- *Reginald Potter*
- 21    **ENCOUNTERS WITH BOTHROPS (Part 4 of 5)**  
- *Hans Boos*
- 23    **IN THE WAKE OF THE CARIBS (Part 2 of 5)**  
- *Glenn Wilkes*
- 25    **BUSHMASTER: RAYMOND DITMARS  
AND THE SEARCH FOR THE WORLD'S  
LARGEST VIPER**  
Book Review  
- *Hans Boos*
- 27    **Management Notices**
- 28    **Notes to Contributors**

### Editors' note :

Many thanks to all who contributed and assisted with articles and photographs.

### Disclaimer :

The views expressed in this bulletin are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion and views of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

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Quarterly Bulletin of the  
Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

**April - June 2015**

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## OVERNIGHT FIELD TRIP TO CHACACHACARE

(Continued from page 1)

and we waited at the side of the road, in case someone missed the place, and drove by. I started to tally birds while we waited, and made a list of birds identified by the time we left [See my tally at the end of this article].

Eventually, our group of 7 strong was there. We transferred all of our gear to the dock, where our sailing vessel awaited. We were: Selwyn Gomes, Kris Sookdeo, Jeffrey Wong Sang, Roma Wong Sang, Kay Hinkson, Eddison Baptiste and I. It felt strange that Dan Jaggernauth was not there. Our Captain was Graham Rostant, a new TTFNC member, and captain of the 11.6 m (38 ft.) 'Dear Bear' sailing yacht. The yacht was named by his father. Graham had graciously offered to carry us to Chacachacare and back. We quickly loaded the yacht and motored off, with a view of POS silhouetted in the sunrise.

Graham used his small boat motor, rather than the sails, to move us. We were moving with the tide, which helped us along. The sea was as smooth as glass. From our starting point, we had to sail around Pointe Gourde, then past Carrera and the Cronstadt Islands. We came close to Gasparee or Gaspar Grande with Little Gaspar (also called "Centipede Island") on the right. As we left Gasparee, we were joined by 2 (or maybe 3) dolphins, that playfully swam directly under our bow for quite a while. I stood on the bow and watched them joyfully swimming as close as 2 metres from me. It was quite an experience!

Before I left Tobago, I had been warned that Chacachacare was haunted, especially the old buildings around the Nun's Quarters, church, and hospital. Because it was known to be haunted, I was told I should stay away. 'Ghost Hunter's International', an American TV series, did a documentary programme about the preternatural activity there, and aired the show on international TV. In their investigation, they concluded that, "'the island is supporting evidence of paranormal activity."

Chacachacare was the Amerindian name before the first European contact. Saladoid (c. 500 B.C.E. to 500 C.E.) Amerindian artifacts found on the island could be as old as 100 A.D. One theory of the origin of the name comes from the rufous nightjar, (*Caprimulgus rufus*) which has been found to inhabit

the island, and which makes the repeated call, "Chuck-wit-wit-wee-o." In 1498 Christopher Columbus passed the island on his third voyage, and named the island "El Caracol", which means "The Snail", as he thought the outline looked as such from the south. In 1999, New York Developer, Donald Trump, visited the island and proposed building a huge casino there. Fortunately, the project never materialized.

Our captain's family connection to Chacachacare can be traced back many years, as Graham is a direct descendant of Irishman Gerald Fitzgerald Carry, who was granted the 5 square km island in 1788 by the King of Spain as recognition for his military service in Spain. The Carrys, their extended families and tenants, cultivated much of the island's 534 hectares for the then-lucrative cotton business. No one cultivates any crops on the island now, although random cotton plants (*Gossypium barbadense*) can still be found growing today.

Kay also remembers, as a young girl, going with a friend whose father worked on Chacachacare, for a 2-week vacation on the island c. 1962, while the leprosarium was still in operation. She remembers having a grand time there, away from, and with no contact with the leprosarium, which operated from 1926 to 1984.

As we sailed in between Point Romain on the left, and Point Girod on the right, we were now in the big horseshoe-shaped Chacachacare Bay, which contains several smaller bays all around the inside of the horseshoe. One of our first sights was a sea turtle diving down into the deep, not far away. We passed the historic Doctor's House, at Rust's Bay, which still looks impressive, in its classic architectural style. The next sight on the right hand shoreline was the old whaling station. The building is in ruins but the old skidway, where whales were once hauled up for processing for consumption and export, is still there. Henry Joell is believed to have established the whaling station on Chacachacare sometime in the 1820s. Whaling was never a very large industry in T&T, but it was a major factor in the extermination of the aboriginal populations of whales from the Gulf of Paria. Whaling was pretty well over in T&T by the 1880s.

For more Chacachacare history and lore by Club Members, see John Lum Young's excellent trip



report (2003 QB2) and Hans Boos' extensive historical narratives in the Quarterly Bulletins (2010 QBI, 2, & 3).

Our Captain stopped the yacht at La Chapelle Bay, just below the old leprosarium buildings, (the Nun's Quarters, church, and hospital). Graham dropped the Dear Bear's anchor in the bay and quickly shuttled us to the jetty at Marine Bay, which was to be our Base Camp area. We were greeted by a passing belted kingfisher, many black vultures and several large cavalli, lazily swimming around the jetty.

During a quick walk up to the old structures, we saw many black vultures hanging on and around all of the buildings. We found a nest with two baby black vulture chicks in a nest under the floorboards of the church. The hospital had an especially large number of ant lions all around its perimeter. The last time I saw so many was on Huevos, last year. After a quick inspection of the buildings, Selwyn, Kris, and I decided that we would make our camp on the second floor of the old hospital. The others would stay below.

I was not the only one who was keen to start exploring. Eddy, Kris, and I struck out on a hike to the salt pond. Graham took Jeffrey, Roma and Kay on a tour of the bay in his dinghy. Selwyn could not get on his mask and snorkel soon enough to explore the underwater. We left Selwyn to cavort with the cavalli.

The track from the jetty cut up to the ridge, through the bush, past the buildings, past the Nun's Cemetery, and up on to the old asphalt road. Some areas along the trail were thick with the sansevieria plant (*Sansevieria hyacinthoides*), which is also called "mother-in-law tongue plant" or "bowstring hemp". Kris said this plant is native to Africa, but is now thriving here. It is not to be confused with the native ground orchid (*Oeceoclades maculata*), which has a very similar leaf, although much shorter. We passed some areas of forest, where the ground was covered with *Bromelia humilis*, which is a low-growing, ground bromeliad, with very spikey-sharp leaves, and which is painful to pass through. I saw a lot of this same ground-dwelling bromeliad on Huevos. It was about a 45 minute walk to the salt pond. The sun was already hot; the forest was very dry here, just like it was on Huevos last year. We

did not see any morpho butterflies, as on Huevos. But surprisingly, mosquitos were very quick and thick whenever you came to a stop. That seems odd, as mosquitos need fresh water to breed, and I could see none anywhere. I wanted to minimize my contact with mosquitos, as the prevalence of chikungunya (nicknamed, "Chik V") in T&T is high right now. On the 1992 trip to Chacachacare, Martinez reports the abundance of the *Aedes taeniorhynchus* mosquito on this very track. He states that in a 15 minute pause on the track, over 450 of these attacking mosquitoes were killed. Bacon sites a 1927 study which found the larva of this same species of mosquito in the salt pond.

Walking the trail, we passed many birds and lizards. The predominant birds (besides the black vulture) were the white-fringed antwren (which is not found in Trinidad), the brown crested flycatcher, and the tropical parula. Of these three species, we were to see many, many individuals during our stay on the island. We also saw two mangrove cuckoos, which we were surprised to see here. Mangrove cuckoo was also seen on the 1997 field trip on this same track. Many of the plants growing here have thorns and 'pickers.' The climate is very dry, bordering on xerophytic.

Even though I did not get a chance to investigate the very tops of the ridges, I am making the assumption that the black vultures use the ridge tops as nests and nurseries, as I saw on two trips to Huevos. There, the adults were rearing their young on the tops of the hills, quite out in the open. Apparently, the vultures here also have no predators that would target their vulnerable young. On the mainland, vulture nests are discretely camouflaged and are indeed an extremely rare find.

As we arrived at the salt pond, one spotted sandpiper flushed from the shore. We could see no fish in the pond. I took a drink to taste the salinity. It was much more salty than sea water. Incidentally, even though I did not swallow the salt pond water, I had a strong stomach cramp on my right side for two days, starting immediately after the test taste. In 1967, Peter Bacon measured the salinity of this water, and found it to be almost twice as saline as ocean water. Many small birds flitted in and out of the button mangrove (*Conocarpus erectus*) around the edges of this naturally-formed pond. Kris set a



camera trap on the edge of the pond [When he recovered the camera the next day, there were no animal's photos captured]. We looked as closely as we could but could see no fish or other vertebrates in the water. The water was teeming with brine shrimp, (*Artemia* sp), which Bacon says were released here prior to 1967. We also found two species of dragonfly, which again was puzzling, as we thought the dragonfly larva needs fresh water to live in. Eddy found a small white worm living under the water, and Kris found some kind of a small underwater cocoon. We saw two doves fighting in the bush across the pond, but could not get a good ID on them.

We walked to the sea at Bande du Sud Bay. Lining the shores were heaps and heaps of plastic bottles, discarded and broken footwear, and many scraps of foam. I did a quick survey of what labels I could read on the plastic bottles to see how much of this trash is coming from Venezuela. I could not find any labels in Spanish, and I recognized all the brands of soft drinks as native to T&T. Monos and Huevos are both closer to Trinidad, and it would be reasonable to assume that *most* of the trash floating from Trinidad passes them, and goes out to sea. Chacachacare has two large catchment areas, like open arms, to catch the tremendous amounts of trash that wash up here. I have heard that clean-ups

(Continued on page 8)



The second boat 'Emmanuel' captained by Mario Young joined the trip on Sunday morning at Fishing Pond.

Photo: Eddison Baptiste



## Some photos taken by Matt Kelly of the Club's 2015 field trip to Chacachacare

**A :** Beach runner,  
*Cnemidophorus lemniscatus*,  
at Bande du Sud Bay



**B :** Wasps at nest.

**C :** Tropical screech owl, *Megascops choliba*,  
attracted to Kris's light trap.

**D :** Hummingbird at agave  
or 'century plant' flowers.



**E :** Our efforts pay off!  
We find a bonanza on top of Morne  
Cabresse.

**F :** White banded gecko or  
streaked lizard *Gonatodes vittatus*  
*vittatus* on the walk to the Salt Pond.

**G :** Bicoloured conebill, *Conirostrum bicolor*,  
at the Salt Pond. A first record for the  
Bocas

**H:** The salt pond

**I :** The T&T Spirit steams through the Bocas,  
between Chacachacare and Huevos.

**J :** Our Captain, Graham Rostant.









**OVERNIGHT FIELD TRIP TO CHACACHACARE***(Continued from page 5)*

here always yield a huge amount of trash. But if humans on the mainland are not mindful, the trash will not only keep piling up here but, more urgently, keep filling up the Caribbean Sea. This problem is not unique to Trinidad. In the Pacific Ocean, a floating trash island has been growing to the point where it is now twice the size of Texas! People of Trinidad can do better.

The beach in front of the salt pond is made of round stones. The sea water was crystal clear. Kris took a swim. Eddy took a break. I went exploring some more. Just inside the pond, I found at least 2 bicoloured cone-bills. I found them to be very tame. I made a small “phish” sound, and the birds immediately landed near me. My only problem was that they would not sit still for photographs. Later, Martyn Kenefick told me that this was the first record of these birds for the Bocas. On the return trip, we encountered a large moth, with about 13-15 cm wingspan, that eluded us, and remains unidentified. I looked for, but saw no evidence of leaf cutter ants anywhere.

On our return to our base camp, we found that the others had a delightful tour around the big bay, compliments of Graham, including a visit to the Doctor’s House. Selwyn reported identifying several underwater fish, including; French angelfish, ‘footballers’ (sergeant majors), garfish, and a sting-ray. Overhead, on the western side of the island, I counted an average of 60 black vultures soaring at any one time.

The old hospital buildings are not much longer for this world. They must have been quite nice in their day. The woodwork on the stairs, bannisters, fretwork, posts, railings, and windows was of the superior quality that no one does any longer. All the buildings have been seriously vandalized, covered with graffiti, and stripped of anything valuable. Most of the roof is still covering the buildings. The concrete abutments underneath that hold up the former hospital are seriously deteriorating. Once they kick out, the hospital will come tumbling down.

Just after 2:00pm, Graham shuttled a group of us across the bay to the shore of Perruquier Bay. From there, we hiked to the 1870’s Lighthouse, which crowns Morne Cabresse at 825 feet above

sea level. Besides myself, Kay, Eddy, Jeffrey and Roma came along. The birds were extremely quiet, and it was very hot and dry. It was about a 45 minute hike up the asphalt road to the lighthouse. On this eastern side of the island, there appeared to be an average of around 50 black vultures soaring, as well as different individuals from the other side. As we approached the top, we scared up about another 75 black vultures who flew up to soar with their comrades. The lighthouse was locked and closed up. There was a residence building for the lighthouse keeper, but it looked as though it had not been used for some time, and is quickly falling into disrepair. I remember being here about 6 years ago, and it seemed active and occupied then. There is a new radar tower here, and an impressive new bank of solar panels, evidently to power it. But the power for the station was coming from an operating diesel generator; many empty 55 gallon drums were lined up nearby.

The views here are quite spectacular. According to Google Maps, from the lighthouse, Venezuela’s Paria Peninsula and island of Patos are just about 14 km (each) across the Boca Grande, to the west. Looking east are Huevos (4 km), Monos (6 km), and the North Coast of Trinidad (10 km.). At the back of one of the outbuildings, Eddy found an area where fruit trees were planted, probably by some former keeper of the lighthouse. There was a pom-erac, with great ripe red fruits, a soursop, with one fruit ready, and some other trees like cherry, which were not bearing at the time. We had a pom-erac fruit feast, and took many back to our camp. I was very keen to see a rufous-necked wood rail, as I had heard they are present here, but it was not to be.

We returned to the bay just in time for Graham to shuttle us back before sunset. I needed to quickly get back to our ‘camp’ at the hospital to sling my hammock before dark. Selwyn and Kris had already strung their hammocks out on the deck from one post to a metal hinge on an old ward room window. I strung mine from a post to the same hinge as Selwyn. I was up before tropical darkness descended.

Back down at the jetty, we heard the call of a white-tailed nightjar, and as darkness descended, we saw what we took to be a fish-eating bat skimming along very close to the water. Kris set his moth

trap. He brought a sheet, a large battery, an inverter to plug in to, and both white lights and black lights to attract insects. Graham is a serious astronomer. Before he had settled in for the night on his yacht, he told us that if we looked just right in the sky we had the opportunity to see the 'Lovejoy Comet' tonight. He gave the specific stellar directions. After dark, I followed his directions, and I saw it! I never thought I would see it. It looked like a fuzzy star cluster. It's not been too many times in my life when I have seen a comet. There were also other campers' campfires visible around the bay in at least 3 other locations. It was a beautifully clear night under a quarter moon.

Around 9:00, I took my flashlight and went for a night walk on the ridge. As I passed Kris minding his light trap I found a tropical screech owl. My guess is that the owl was attracted to the lights, or maybe, better yet, he was attracted to what was attracted to the lights. I got some good photos with the assistance of Kris. I walked about half way to the salt pond but failed to find any night birds, insects, reptiles or centipedes. On my way back to the hospital, I did find ants from two active leaf cutter nests busily working among the old building's ruins. I later heard that Kris had had a fair night; not great, but better than last year on Huevos.

Well, now we were going to find out if these old buildings were haunted! It was pretty eerie walking through the rubble outside, and through the old buildings. I made myself comfortable in my hammock. There was a nice breeze blowing and there were no mosquitos. Selwyn had already turned in. At about 1:00 am, I was startled from sleep, as my hammock dropped down to the floor. I was on the ground. I got up to investigate, and found Selwyn also on the ground. The metal hinge we had both hooked our hammocks to had broken loose. Or maybe it was the work of the spirits? I moved my stuff and tied off in a new place.

I thought I was dreaming. I was hearing, "thump, thump, thump" on and off. Sometimes it was loud, then it faded away. It was music. It had to be 2 or 3 o'clock. I got up to investigate. I later found out it was the party boats which leave Chagauramas at midnight, and ply these waters around the Bocas till

3:00 or 4:00 am. I also heard the call of at least 3 tropical screech owls.["b-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-a-hoo! "b-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-a-hoo!].

Sunday, I woke late, to find I had been sleeping quite comfortably. Selwyn was still here. Kris was gone. Selwyn and I surmised that Kris must have gone to check his camera trap at the salt pond, so we set off to find him. We didn't realize he was down at the jetty, being treated to a nice breakfast by the rest of our group. On the way to the salt pond, we saw the usual white-fringed antwrens, brown-crested flycatchers and the tropical parulas in abundance. We also saw two mangrove cuckoos. We spent a little time, and waked along the SW shore of the pond. Unbeknownst to me, I picked up about 50 thorns in the bottoms of my sneakers, which later came back to haunt me (I would spend a good part of my ferry ride back to Tobago picking out the embedded thorns).

As we walked back up the mountain we found an interesting hummingbird nest on the trail. We passed the rest of our group coming down to the pond. They related that the T&T Coast Guard had motored up to the jetty in the middle of the night, and had them all in a beam from a bright searchlight.

Selwyn and I arrived at our jetty at 10:00 am to find that the second TTFNC group had arrived. They came across with Mario Young on his boat, 'Emmanuel' (he named it after his father), that was outfitted with two 250-horsepower motors. This boat moved with real speed and power and had an awesome music system on board. In this group were: Haroon Husein, Feroze Omardeen, Kamal Mahabir, Neezam Mohammed, Peter Kowlessar, Linda Kowlessar, Merle Reynold, Yufie Wu, and Wendy Zhong. Selwyn had me jump aboard, to take everyone back to the salt pond.

Mario headed over to the south side of the island to the Bande du Sud Bay. He anchored on the sandy side of the beach, just before the salt pond. The water was crystal clear, and there were no waves. Many of the group decided they would rather enjoy the water, and they did. Others went to see the pond. We stayed there about 1½ hours. When we decided to move out we could not find those who went in search of the salt pond. We finally decided they must have crossed over the ridge

to the other side. There was no cell phone reception there to call them. Mario drove us back to the jetty, where there was reception, and we found that they had walked most of the way over but then turned back, and were waiting on the beach for pick-up back at Bande du Sud Bay. Feroze spotted a white hawk, and we also saw an osprey here.

After sorting everything out, and getting back to the original jetty, Feroze, Kamal, and I took a walk up the ridge. It was midday, and it was hot. This is generally siesta time for birds. We did locate the common birds again, and Kamal photographed what turned out to be a northern scrub flycatcher, after a lot of debate on the 'TnT Bird Alert' email list.

As far as reptiles went, neither I nor anyone else on the trip reported any snakes. I did identify a few species of lizard, 3 white banded gecko or 'streaked lizard' (*Gonatodes vittatus vittatus*), many 'zandoli' (*Ameiva ameiva*), several of the 'hand-waving' lizards, and the 'beach runner' version of the same species, (*Cnemidophorus lemniscatus*), and many small brown lizards that scurried out of sight, and which I never identified. [Incidentally, with only my partial knowledge, I find it interesting that the 'hand-waving' and 'beach runner' lizards are classified as a single species. To my untrained eye, they appear two distinct species.] I also heard the call of the house gecko or 'woodslave' (*Thecadactylus rapicauda*) in the night, off in the bush, below the hospital. We also saw a sea turtle in the bay upon our arrival.

By 3:00 pm I was back to the jetty for my transport back with Graham, as he wanted to take advantage of the tide again. The trip back was also a nice ride. Overall, it was a great trip. The weather was perfect, and the seas were perfect. Thanks for arranging all of that, Selwyn! Also, a great big "Thank-you" is in order for Graham and Mario, for the use of their boats, their fuel, their time, and their generous hospitality. 🦋

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#### Birds identified at the Sailing Association, Saturday 6-6.45am. (Name, number seen, notes).

Black vulture <i>Coragyps atratus</i>	225	132 flew overhead, travelling E to W. The rest were on shoreline.
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1	Cruising over the water.
Spotted sandpiper <i>Actitis macularia</i>	1	Shoreline
Ferruginous pygmy-owl <i>Glaucidium brasilianum</i>	1	Across street from parking lot.
Orange-winged parrot <i>Amazona amazonica</i>	26	Flying E to W.
Great kiskadee <i>Pitangus sulphuratus</i>	2	
Gray-breasted martin <i>Progne chalybea</i>	5	Hunting over the water.
Tropical mockingbird <i>Mimus gilvus</i>	1	First bird call of the morning.
Palm tanager <i>Thraupis palmarum</i>	2	
Crested oropendola <i>Psarocolius decumanus</i>	1	



## Birds identified on Chacachacare: Saturday

Magnificent frigatebird <i>Fregata magnificens</i>	1	Soaring
Brown pelican <i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	3	
Black vulture <i>Coragyps atratus</i>	200 +	Everywhere
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1	Soaring with black vultures
Short-tailed hawk <i>Buteo brachyurus</i>	1	
Spotted sandpiper <i>Actitis macularia</i>	2	
White-tipped dove <i>Leptotila verreauxi</i>	~10	
Mangrove cuckoo <i>Coccyzus minor</i>	2	On the way to the Salt Pond
Tropical screech-owl <i>Megascops choliba</i>	1	Near Kris' moth trap, photo
White-tailed nightjar <i>Caprimulgus cayennensis</i>	1	Calling just after dusk
Copper-rumped hummingbird <i>Amazilia tobaci</i>	1	
Belted kingfisher <i>Ceryle alcyon</i>	1	Along bay, upon our arrival
Yellow-headed caracara <i>Milvago chimachima</i>	2	
Orange-winged parrot <i>Amazona amazonica</i>	6	
Black-crested antshrike <i>Sakesphorus canadensis</i>	2	Both heard
White-fringed antwren <i>Formicivora grisea</i>	20+	Very common everywhere
Mouse-colored tyrannulet <i>Phaeomyias murina</i>	2	On walk to Salt Pond
Fuscous flycatcher <i>Cnemotriccus fuscatus</i>	1	
Brown-crested flycatcher <i>Myiarchus tyrannulus</i>	20+	Probably more
Great kiskadee <i>Pitangus sulphuratus</i>	1	Near jetty
Rufous-browed peppershrike <i>Cyclarhis gujanensis</i>	1	ID'd by Kay
House wren <i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	2	
Tropical mockingbird <i>Mimus gilvus</i>	1	
Northern waterthrush <i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>	1	Near Salt Pond
Tropical parula <i>Parula pitayumi</i>	20+	There could have been more
White-lined tanager <i>Tachyphonus rufus</i>	4	2 pair
Blue-grey tanager <i>Thraupis episcopus</i>	1	
Bicolored conebill <i>Conirostrum bicolor</i>	2	Salt Pond. First record for the Bocas
Bananaquit <i>Coereba flaveola</i>	5	Around Salt Pond
Yellow oriole <i>Icterus nigrogularis</i>	2	On walk to Salt Pond

## Birds identified on Chacachacare: Sunday

Magnificent frigatebird <i>Fregata magnificens</i>	11	Soaring
Brown pelican <i>Pelecanus occidentalis</i>	21	Flock of 16 flying by in "V" formation
Black vulture <i>Coragyps atratus</i>	60+	
Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	1	Bande de Sude Bay
White hawk <i>Leucopternis albigollis</i>	1	Bande de Sude Bay, spotted by Feroze
Short-tailed hawk <i>Buteo brachyurus</i>	1	
Zone-tailed hawk <i>Buteo albonotatus</i>	1	Seen by Kris near Salt Pond
Spotted sandpiper <i>Actitis macularia</i>	3	At Salt Pond
White-tipped dove <i>Leptotila verreauxi</i>	~7	
Mangrove cuckoo <i>Coccyzus minor</i>	2	Matt, Selwyn, on trail above hospital
Tropical screech-owl <i>Megascops choliba</i>	3	Calling in the night
Yellow-headed caracara <i>Milvago chimachima</i>	4	At least one was a juvenile
Orange-winged parrot <i>Amazona amazonica</i>	8	
White-fringed antwren <i>Formicivora grisea</i>	~20	Everywhere
Yellow-bellied elaenia <i>Elaenia flavogaster</i>	2	
Northern scrub-flycatcher <i>Sublegatus arenarum</i>	1	Photographed by Kamal
Brown-crested flycatcher <i>Myiarchus tyrannulus</i>	20+	Everywhere
Great kiskadee <i>Pitangus sulphuratus</i>	1	At jetty
Spectacled thrush <i>Turdus nudigenis</i>	2	
Northern waterthrush <i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>	3	At Salt Pond
Tropical parula <i>Parula pitayumi</i>	~18	Everywhere
Bananaquit <i>Coereba flaveola</i>	6	
Yellow oriole <i>Icterus nigrogularis</i>	2	



One of the dolphins seen on the ride to Chacachacare.  
Photo: Jeffrey Wong Sang



Field Trip Report, February 23, 2015

# MOUNT TAMANA

by Marlene Maynard



On Sunday the 23<sup>rd</sup> February, 26 members journeyed to Central Trinidad to see the bat caves located in the Tamana Forest Reserve.



Above : **Dan Jaggernaut briefs the group before embarking on the hike.**

Below : **The estate trail at the start of the hike**

Photos: Jeffrey Wong Sang



The trip began at about 7 am. After departing from UWI we travelled for almost two hours, passing through villages like San Raphael and Guiano, admiring the scenic beauty of the rural areas. We veered left into Coora road which led us on to a bumpy, rugged dirt track that finally brought us to the starting point of our adventure. After a briefing session led by Dan Jaggernaut, the group commenced the trek.

Along the hike there were many trees that were made known to the group by Dan. We also discovered a veiled lady mushroom. Some of the plant species encountered were as follows:

1. Immortelle tree with bright orange flowers.
2. Nutmeg tree. Mostly seen in Matelot and Macqueripe. The nutmeg can be used to make punch. The seed can be roasted and its red, web-like covering, mace, is used as flavouring in foods. A nutmeg tree can bear up to 190 fruit. Birds like the pawi and wild kajuka feed on the nutmeg.
3. Pawpaw tree - also known as papaya is used to make chow and candy (with green paw paw). The leaves of the tree can be drawn to make a tea to help combat the chikungunya virus.
4. Rubber tree - *Castilia Elastica*. When cut, the tree oozes a white milky liquid which eventually turns elastomeric. This allows it to be converted to latex / rubber. The tree produces edible fruit.
5. Silk cotton - *Ceiba Pentandra*. Produces brown cotton material. In Trinidad, the tree is associated with folklore. There are bigger ones in the areas of Moruga in South Trinidad and Castara in Tobago. The soft lumber from the tree can be used to make boxing boards.
6. Bois pois fruit - grows on the trunk of the tree instead of the branches. The fruit is inedible
7. *Cicania Trinitensis* - resembles passion fruit, but belongs to the pumpkin family. It grows on a vine and is edible
8. Cedar trees
9. Star apple trees
10. Tannia (dasheen) bush



11. Breadfruit tree
12. Pee wah tree
13. Ficus tree which produces a white milky liquid
14. Celaganella tree
15. Cannon ball tree - fruit is inedible and grows on the trunk instead of the branches
16. Stinging nettle. There are two types
17. Heliconia balisier
18. *Anthurium* sp.
19. *Ripsalis* - commonly known as 'Old man's beard'

After much walking, the group finally arrived at the caves. There were three openings. The scent of the bat droppings was pungent. Some persons ventured close to one of the openings, with a couple individuals actually going in. Light was shone overhead and numerous bats were seen flying around.



**The entrance to the Tamana Caves**

*Photo: Jeffrey Wong Sang*

The caves are home to 11 out of 67 of the bat species endemic to Trinidad. The bats are mainly fruit or insect eating. We also saw one lone bat flying out of the cave.


Afterwards, we proceeded towards the summit, passing many trees and plants along the way. Numerous red howler monkeys were heard (although unfortunately not seen). On reaching the summit, mention was made of the 'trigmark' or trigonometrical point, as evidenced by a section of brass surrounded by concrete. This represented the highest point in Central Trinidad.



**The view from the top of Tamana Hill was spectacular. Photo: Jeffrey Wong Sang**

Once up on top, the view was spectacular. There were clear views of the Northern Range, Arena dam, land quarrying or slippage on a distant hill and Brasso Venado village. There was a view of many immortal, breadfruit and chataigne trees. One hiker even spotted a plane landing at Piarco. Birds including parrots and corbeaux were seen flying overhead.

The group relaxed and took in all the breathtaking scenery. It began to rain and shelter was sought in a grove of balisier plants. Once the rain ceased, we started our descent. On our way down, the whistling of the brown woodcreeper was heard by some.

We eventually reached back to the starting point at around 1:30 pm. Indeed it was a pleasant trip. 






## Your Ideas and Observations A Quarterly Update

- Mike Rutherford indicated that a frog photographed in Bush Bush during the 2014 Nariva Bioblitz seems likely to have been *Leptodactylus longirostri*, which was previously known only from the South American mainland, making this a potential new record for Trinidad. A specimen has yet to be collected despite a subsequent search.
- Reginald Potter reported in May on a consultation concerning the CDA's Chaguaramas Master Plan. He found it to be unsatisfactory as no consulting took place, and the plans appeared not to be in the interest of the environment, only aimed at making money. He urged the club to speak out on this issue.
- Following a comment on the white tigers at the zoo, Hans Boos mentioned that the first tiger was donated to the Emperor Valley Zoo in 1952 by Walt Disney after it was used in the filming of Swiss Family Robinson in Tobago.
- At the June meeting, Stuart Millar spoke about three otter sightings in the rivers of the Northern Range during the prior two months. He said that one was in North Oropouche River, while a mother and two babies were at Macajuel Pond and that the other sighting was in the Yarra River.
- Some interest has been received from members regarding potential projects, the most popular ideas being tree planting and garbage clean-ups. Kris Sookdeo proposed beginning with a clean-up project before beginning anything more ambitious. However the Club needs persons willing to lead these activities! If you are interested please contact management.
- Hans Boos has suggested that a naming project for the Botanical Garden would be a worthwhile exercise as many trees lack name plates.



- This quarter, the Club has been represented at numerous events. In May, Amy Deacon, Yasmin Baksh-Comeau, Akilah Jaramogi and Lester Doonath took part in a panel discussion about T&T's biodiversity at the San Antonio Green Market, followed by various displays for the public (above left).
- In June, Dan Jaggernaut and Renoir Auguste presented an exhibit to thousands of school children and the public at the annual Atlantic LNG Biodiversity event in Point Fortin (above right).
- Both events benefitted from the generous loan of specimens and posters from Mike Rutherford of the UWI Zoology Museum. 



Art Group Report, April 25, 2015  
**EL SOCORRO CENTRE  
FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION**  
*by Amy Deacon*



Despite the name, the El Socorro Centre for Wildlife Conservation (ESCWC) is in fact situated near Freeport, surrounded by citrus and teak plantations and – at this time of year - under the constant threat of bush fires.

One of the centre's founders, Ricardo Meade, began by giving our small group (there were six of us) some background about the centre, founded in 2005 with a mission of 'education, rehabilitation, and propagation'. Ricardo and his colleagues take in a wide range of rescued wildlife from many different

sources. Some have been found by members of the public, injured, while others were formerly kept as pets, many of whom are still suffering the psychological damage of being treated badly by their owners – especially the capuchins. ESCWC work tirelessly, without any government assistance, to house, feed and rehabilitate any wild animal that falls into their care (with the emphasis on 'wild' – there are no domestic dogs or cats at the centre).



***Channel-billed toucan***  
*Jeffrey Wong Sang*



We were treated to a full tour of the property, which supports a fantastic variety of *Heliconia* plants, some sweet citrus (with which we filled our hats and pockets!) and two ponds teeming with life. On returning to the main house, we dispersed in different directions with our pencils, paints and cameras. Ricardo set the photographers the task of taking shots that minimised the presence of the enclosures – tricky to achieve given that the majority of residents were unavoidably in some kind of cage or vivarium, but Jeffrey and Kamal accepted the challenge happily!

Many of the animals we met are destined for release to the wild – including their latest arrival, a baby ocelot, born at the centre just a couple of weeks ago. We were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of this beautiful creature; she will be kept with minimal human contact and fed live prey to maximise her chance of successful release. Some of the other animals will never be equipped for reintroduction – including some of the hawks, howler monkeys and boas; instead, these individuals are used as ambassadors, engaging visiting school groups or appearing at different outreach events around the island. Ricardo believes that this is one way of rebuilding a connection with nature in our younger generations, who will be the decision-makers and potential conservationists of the future.

I opted to stay in the shade and sketch the extremely tame resident yellow-crested and orange winged parrots. Despite their valiant attempt to destroy my paintbrush, the end result was met with avian approval. Alësha found a proud male turkey, who also proved an excellent subject. Jeffrey and Kamal each produced impressive portfolios of animal portraits, using their skills to fully meet Ricardo's challenge to capture the wild side of each species, without bars or glass panels – a great achievement!

As artists, this trip offered a unique opportunity to “get up close and personal” with many species that ordinarily we would only be able to photograph with a lot of luck and a very long zoom lens, or only have the chance to paint from a photograph. We left feeling impressed and inspired by the excellent work that Ricardo and his team do.

For both of these reasons, we hope to return soon. 🐛

*The centre is not open to the public, and therefore does not charge an entrance fee. However, visits can be arranged privately and voluntary donations are gratefully received. Contact [wildlife.tt@gmail.com](mailto:wildlife.tt@gmail.com) to enquire further about visiting, volunteering or making a donation.*

**Members of the  
art group  
touring the grounds  
of the  
El Socorro Centre  
for Wildlife  
Conservation**



*Photo:  
Jeffrey Wong Sang*



## Images from the Art Group Trip:

### A - Lotus

photo: Kamal Mahabir

### B - Ocelot, *Leopardus pardalis*

photo: Kamal Mahabir

### C - Parrot approval of Amy's painting

photo: Kamal Mahabir

### D - Parrot and iguana

drawing: Amy Deacon

### E - Turkey

drawing: Alësha Naranjit



A



B



C



D



E





Field Trip Report, March 29, 2015  
**The 'Alternative' Trip to  
 LA LAJA WATERFALL**  
*by Reginald Potter*



Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2015 and the monthly field trip was changed, at the last minute, to La Laja Waterfall because it is supposed to be a short hike and members wanted to be back in town in time to attend the Horticultural Show where we were having a stall.

Having previously heard that it was a short walk and very near to the main road we did not anticipate any difficulty finding it, so when only two cars appeared at the Central Bank meeting point and a total of 8 people, we pressed on though fully expecting to meet others at UWI. The start was bad because my car immediately developed a flat tyre while on the Beetham Highway, so we decided that Jeffrey would continue to UWI to meet the rest of the group while I drove down the Eastern Main Road hoping to find a tyre repair place open on a Sunday morning. If I failed I would retire from the

trip and Eddy, having work to do at home, decided to accompany me.

Well we soon found a tyre repair shop with the owner stretching and rubbing sleep from his eyes, bought a replacement tyre since the flat was beyond repair, and continued on our way. Then we got a phone call from Jeffrey that he had not seen anyone at UWI, and indeed when we passed there was no one in sight, so we continued, on thinking that we would surely find some others on the La Laja road. Having met Kamal on the Arima road we drove into the Arima-Blanchisseuse road, turned into La Laja and made our way slowly along it until we sighted 2 villagers armed with digging tools. Asking for directions to the La Laja waterfall we were told that it is a very long hike and we were given instructions how to identify the turn off from the main trail to the

**Below - View from the trail to La Laja Waterfall looking south east towards the Guanapo quarry**

**Right - Road/trail to La Laja Waterfall**

*Photos: Jeffrey Wong Sang*



waterfall. This we were told is in a tonka bean patch about 3 km down the main trail. At this point I should mention that I had never been to La Laja waterfall, although I have been on the surrounding trails to Guanapo Gorge, Aripo and Morne Bleu so did not anticipate any trouble on this 'short' hike. The villagers probably just felt we were inexperienced and would think the walk was 'long'!


We thanked them and moved on to the normal car park and started the hike at 09.15 am. It was a beautiful day, the views were great and the limestone cliff of the Guanapo quarry could clearly be seen. We passed a 'matapal' parasitic tree so well developed that here was no sign left of the host tree that it had evidently strangled into oblivion. Jeff was busy photographing just about everything. We passed a few houses, the last having dogs that barked crazily seeming to be on the verge of having a fit. Eddy said he had been on a club trip once to the waterfall and thought he would remember the turn off point.

After the crazy dog house the trail changed from a drivable trail to a footpath and some cutting was needed in a few places so the pace slowed while I ensured we would find the way back and the members who were by then lagging far behind would have no doubt where we had passed. We entered patches of forest then overgrown plantation and it was a truly delightful walk along the gentle descent of the benched trail which continues all the way down to Guanapo. Despite waiting at several points for the rear guard to catch up and the slow pace we maintained while 'chipping' a few obstructed spots, we were effectively divided into 'front guard' consisting of Eddy, Betsy, Kamal and I, and a 'rear guard' consisting of Jeffrey, Roma, Paula and Nick. We passed many ravines, some with pleasant streams flowing that survived the current dry season.

Eventually we had travelled so long that I concluded that we had missed the turn off, and anyway this hike was turning out to be rather long so we would soon have to turn back. Then Eddy spotted the left turn and it all began to look possible again. I got a GPS fix, then we found the trail to be well marked at first and had evidently been a proper benched trail in the past, and it was a delightful walk

passing an area of an enormous bachac nest in clear forest. But we were soon in an area of numerous side tracks around fallen trees and the route was often so winding that we could not imagine anyone consciously making a trail like that. We had a short delay when, on Eddy's advice, I returned to the turning point to 'block' it and mark arrows showing the turning to warn the slow walkers in case they decided to continue that far (we had assumed they had turned back by now). We continued making nearly complete circles at times and going down unnecessarily steep slopes. Also the benched trail, completely overgrown, was often visible above us which would make a far more sensible route with a little clearing. Eventually the sound of the falls could be heard and we spotted the top of the lower fall through the forest. Descending was fairly steep and a rope used finally but there we were looking at the base of the lower fall. It was 12.10 pm.

Here we ate lunch, saw a large swarm of pale coloured tadpoles that evidently had no natural predators, I had a quick swim and it was time to head back. I was unable to pick up enough satellites for a GPS position. Eddy and I diverted to see the upper and more spectacular upper fall, pictures were taken then the long trek back began. We arrived back at the cars at 4:10 pm. Jeffrey and company had already departed for home having spoken to us on the phone when we managed to get reception nearing the car park. That 'short' trip had been very long! However it was a glorious day and the forest was very clear in parts making it a really pleasant experience.

The next evening I received a call from Selwyn saying that there had indeed been a gathering at UWI with 27 people assembling there and they had driven to Morne La Croix where they visited another waterfall which someone had described as "La Laja" despite being several kilometres further along the Arima-Blanchisseuse road, in a different river system, and nowhere near any place called "La Laja"! Looking at the Trail Guide I saw our description of La Laja and Sombasson waterfalls exactly where we had visited, Sombasson being further and more difficult to access. 

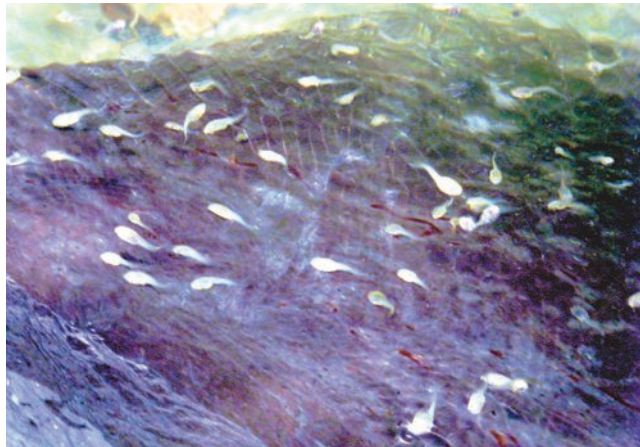
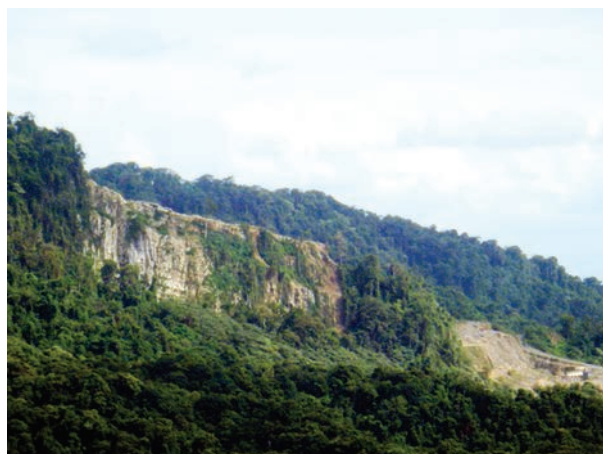
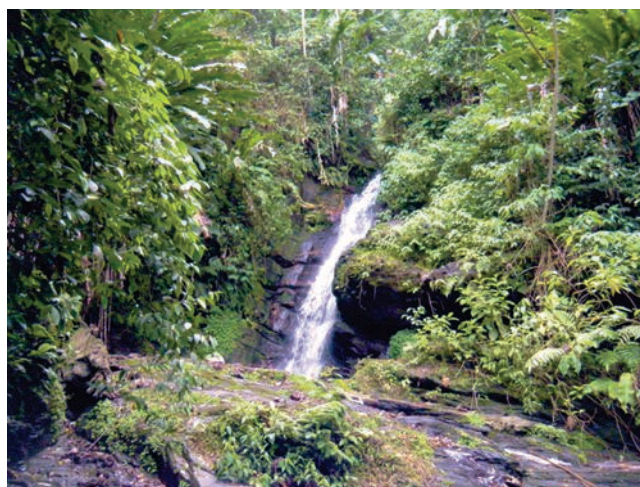


Top right  
**Eddison Baptiste in front of the first  
waterfall below La Laja**

Middle left and right  
**Second waterfall below  
La Laja**

Bottom left  
**Limestone escarpment  
and quarry**

Bottom right  
**White tadpoles**  
*photos: Reg Potter*







## ENCOUNTERS WITH BOTHROPS

by Hans Boos

Part 4 of 5



How close we can come to these superbly camouflaged snakes is illustrated by the next encounter I had while hiking up the Marianne River on the way to explore the clear pools that are a well known spot on this river. I was leading a group of young Canadian teenagers up into the forest along the river bank, and in one area the path took us around a very slippery, muddy outcropping, and where we had to proceed single file, everyone following closely the person ahead and assisting when the inevitable slips and slides occurred. It had been raining the night before and the ground was soggy and each footstep left a small crater in the mud that slowly filled with ground-water. As I stepped upward over a high shelf in the hillside the fellow behind called out to me that I had just stepped on a snake. He was attracted to the writhing of the crushed body in the water-filled foot-impression I had made with my last tread. I looked back to see that I had indeed stepped on a juvenile mapepire balsain which unfortunately was killed, crushed by my hiking boot.

On another hike into the Avocat waterfall on the Arima/Blanchisseuse road with a group of young people, I fell back from the rather rowdy group as I wanted to take some pictures of a flowering mountain immortelle tree against the intensely blue sky. As I was setting up my camera I heard Detta Buch calling to me from the path ahead, saying there was a snake in one of the large ruts on the trail left by off-roading four-wheel drive jeeps that had been using the trail to enjoy their "sport." I hurried forward over the churned up muddy path to where she was standing and she pointed to a muddy pool where there was a small snake attempting to climb out of the water up the slick yellow mud bank of its temporary trap. It was difficult to determine what species it was, as it was entirely covered by a coating of liquid, yellowish mud, which obscured its natural pattern completely, but from the general shape and mobility I recognized it as a juvenile mapepire balsain. Detta blithely then said, "I was going to catch it and bring it for you as I knew you were busy taking photos back there on the trail." All I could reply was that it was a good thing she had not tried to do so,

for she would surely have been bitten.

On another occasion while walking into the Cumaca Cave in Platanal, I was with my cousin Neville, another friend and his two pre-teen boys. With their usual young enthusiasm and energy, these two boys were forging ahead of us as we plodded along the difficult track, despite my warnings to them, through their father, that they should not go too far ahead to be out of our sight, for I was fully aware of the dangers that could lurk on this remote trail and where a snake bite on a small child is infinitely more dangerous and deadly than to an adult. But several times I was vowing to myself never again to bring small children, especially young boys, on a jungle hike, for we had to call them back several times and admonish them to stay within sight and to not interfere with anything they might encounter while ahead of us.

And as fate would have it, the two boys came running back in a panic to breathlessly tell us that there was a snake on the trail ahead. Hurrying up the trail we came to the point where they said they had seen the snake, and sure enough, in a patch of bright sunlight was a midsized mapepire balsain, delicately drinking from a small water-filled depression in the earth of the trail.

I took this opportunity to register the usual "I told you so's" but showed them the mechanics of how the snake was drinking, the jaws and throat pumping and sucking the water up with a subtle suction. With a stick I encouraged it to crawl off into the bush at the side of the trail. For the rest of the trip they stayed fairly close to the adults. These encounters illustrate how fairly common this species is in the forests of the Northern Range.

But for me the ultimate was the finding of two specimens on the same day.

In the 1980s the Curator of Reptiles of the Bronx Park Zoo in New York, Dr John Behler (now deceased) visited the Emperor Valley Zoo as the representative of the New York Zoological Society, during the William Beebe memorial and display we had arranged in the Emperor Valley Zoo. On our

days off we organized several trips to take John snake hunting in the jungles of the Northern Range, but knowing how frustrating was the usual event of not finding a snake when you were looking for them I arranged for our head keeper John Seyjagat and I to take him to where we were sure to catch at least one snake.

As mentioned above I knew that we were almost one hundred percent sure to be able to spot and capture a tree boa from the tree branches that overhang the water in the Hollis Reservoir. So it was to this locale that we set out one weekday with high hopes and expectations.

Arriving at the broad top of the embankment that constitutes the dam that holds back the lake, we set out to explore the abandoned manager's house that overlooked the broad expanse of water that supplies some of the potable drinking water for the island.

This once-beautiful colonial residence had fallen into disrepair and was a good hunting ground for small reptiles that utilized the spaces under discarded boards or in the crumbling rafters and joists under the house.

All around the walls of the house the jungle was encroaching and around the back, against the bushy hillside, there was a huge paw-paw tree that had taken root under the house, but managed to grow horizontally out of the darkness and along the ground for several feet, before curving upwards towards the light between the eaves of the house and the shadowing trees. Lying, perched on this horizontal bole of the tree, which at this point was fully 46 cm (18 inches) in diameter, was a brightly patterned mapepire balsain. It posed there unconcerned while we took its picture, while John Behler could little hide his delight at this piece of serendipity.

This was number one.

We had also been hoping to see and capture for photos the most beautiful little gecko, *Gonatodes ceciliae*, that we had often seen inhabiting the cracks and fissures of the timbers under the house, but look as we might there were none to be found.

Embarking on the lake boat we did eventually capture a couple of tree boas and John had the opportunity to assist in their capture and eventual release back to the wild of these aggressive but non venomous snakes.

But all was not lost in our chances of seeing the gecko, for I also had seen them on the pillars of one of the many small bridges that spanned the many steep rivulets that crossed the road up to the dam.

So on the way down from the dam we were on the lookout for these bridges and we stopped at the first one where I was sure there might be these beauties. And sure enough, when we stopped at the first promising bridge, a cursory look spotted a large colourful male, but he was far down the bridge pillar, close to the ground level, and in no position to be captured from where we were. John Seyjagat, fully aware of what was needed to either capture the lizard where it was or to scare it upwards to where we could snag it, began to make his way down the steep gully side to where he could approach the lizard from below its perch and either grab it or scare it up the pillar within our reach.

He emerged on the other side of the gully and there was a small stream separating him from the pillar on which he could see the perched lizard. All it would take to cross this stream, a mere 1.5m (five feet) wide, was a leap onto the flat apron of concrete surrounding the opposite pillar. Keeping his eyes on the lizard, so as to locate it, if his leap across had spooked it, John prepared to jump across the stream; he was committed to the jump when his eyes took in the spot on the concrete apron, where he anticipated he would have to land, when he had to change direction, almost literally in mid air, for unseen until that moment, lying on the warmed concrete apron, was the biggest mapepire that either he or I had ever seen.

I heard him yell out as he, changing the trajectory of his jump, landed on the opposite bank of the stream.

"Mapepire," he yelled, and as I peered over the edge and down the pillar, I then made out the coiled mass of this huge snake. Though the snake was indeed large, and obviously about 1.5—2m (five or six feet) in length, it seemed to be exceedingly skinny, almost emaciated.

It lay there, in a compact coil, sunning itself as we made our way down to it to photograph it, its head tucked down low in the center of its coils, the velvety patterns blending into a living leafy menace.

(Continued on page 27)





Memoirs of a two week paddle around Trinidad in a canoe in 1985

## IN THE WAKE OF THE CARIBS

by Glenn Wilkes — Part 2 of 5



### Monday 12th. 21 miles

We woke late and loafed a bit, reluctant to leave such an idyllic camp, but we were on a mission and the sea was calm, so we had no excuse. We left Madamas and did a sightseeing cruise, since we were now in unfamiliar waters. As we approached Matelot, a Rasta fisherman offered us a tow. It was an offer we occasionally got, and one we always refused with the utmost tact, since we appreciated the concern that prompted it. I'll never forget our first venture on the north, a paddle from Maracas to Las Cuevas. Halfway across, we started to feel we had bitten off more than we could chew, and when we pulled into the sheltered water near the village, it was quite a relief. As we sat on the beach looking at the choppy sea, the instinct for survival almost got the better of pride, but eventually we summoned up enough courage to launch for the return trip. Just off the point, a fisherman pulled alongside, about 200 yards out to sea. He didn't say a word, but throttled down and stayed abreast until we were safely heading into Maracas, then gunned his engine and went his way. I don't like to generalise, but I feel a lot happier in the company of fishermen than around power-boaters.

Even though there was always the temptation to come ashore in a village to treat ourselves to a beer or two, we usually found it hard to make the necessary detours, so we bypassed Matelot and landed at a cove before Grande Riviere.

Soon after we resumed paddling, we saw rain coming, and pulled into another cove opposite Grande Riviere, to sit it out. Then it was on to Sans Souci, where we'd planned to lunch, but it seemed a long way in, so we continued to L'Anse Noir. The landing there looked a bit difficult and we kept on going past Trois Roches, feeling proud of how we negotiated them. In the distance we could now see the fisherman's jetty at Toco, and I told Foots we might as well go there. The sea was dead calm, and we really revved up coming into that bay. We had a fisherman's lunch of bake, saltfish and fried fish. As we relaxed on the beach next to the jetty, I scanned the sea for any signs of sharks, but there were none.

After a while we decided that we might as well make use of the calm sea to get to Salybia, the closest bay to Galera Point, tomorrow's big challenge. As we came out of the shelter of Reef's point, we felt the first of the Atlantic swells. It was like sitting on the chest of a sleeping giant. I prayed that he'd remain sleeping for the next few days. We stayed clear of rocks and reefs and landed safely at Salybia.

On the beach we met Patrick Kirton, Donald Patience and his wife. They treated us to the contents of their cooler, and limed with us for quite a while. When they left, they promised to bring an up-to-date weather report in the morning. Foots went with them to call home. I set up camp, and rigged up the flysheet, as it had started to drizzle. We went to bed early, for tomorrow was going to be a big day. Sometime in the night we were wakened by Dread, Scobie and Cherie, who had driven all the way from Port of Spain to bring us home-cooked food.

### Tuesday 13th. 15 miles

True to their word, the Patiences and Patrick came down to the beach early, a bit unhappy that the weather report had been rather vague. They brought a flask of coffee, the sort of simple gesture that is worth a lot more than words. We packed, psyched up ourselves, and headed out. Our plan was simple - stay well away from reefs rocks and breaking waves.

Years before, I had spent a week in the Toco lighthouse, with a bird's eye view of the critical part of the day's trip. I had been involved in observations to connect the Survey of Trinidad with that of Tobago. The trig. station we used was on the parapet of the lighthouse, and although everyone else camped in the harbour-master's house next to it, I couldn't resist the urge to move into 'the room at the top'. Modern lights are quite compact, so there was a lot of empty space that must have once been occupied by machinery. The room had a low roof and smelled of oil, but I spent most of my time out on the parapet, even sleeping under the stars once the weather permitted. Our observations were

done at midday and at night, so there were long periods when I could just look out at the long rollers crashing onto the rocks. The force of those waves was embedded on my mind, and I didn't just want to stay out of reach, I wanted enough room to play with, in case we capsized.

We "took the corner wide", and those watching from shore later told us they were really worried. The thing with a small boat like a kayak is that it is dwarfed by even moderate swells, and looks very fragile, but both its size and speed act in your favour in open waters. The size prevents it from being caught half on a crest, and half in the trough, the dangerous position a bigger boat could find itself in, while we move too slowly to get the pounding of faster boats. Moreover, unlike open boats, it is designed to cater for water coming over the top - it's a wet ride but safe. We went around La Foret point, and since the coastline was concave, and Guayamara was another dicey bit of sea, remained well out until we pulled in to rest at Petite L'Anse. We were running with the swells, and if anything, held back a bit to avoid surfing speeds. We had never acquired the sort of skills that were needed to properly control the kayak when riding a wave. Petite L'Anse is one of numerous coves hemmed in by cliffs, and I climbed up to the top to see where we were in relation to the string of holiday homes in this area. Our next stop was the 'calm' side of Balandra, where we had lunch. From there on we were in fairly sheltered waters right up to our destination at Salibea, where we paddled up the river to take a fresh water bath, before landing by a line of fishing boats. We met Sham Mohammed, not the "Mastana Bahar" Sham, but one who, years after, still symbolises the "people" aspect of our trip. He offered us accommodation in his small hut on the beach. Because there were many coastal villages where we could replenish our supplies, I had deliberately limited our stocks to a minimum. We now needed to buy a few things, and took a short walk to the village. On the way I saw two familiar faces, cousin Maggie of the McGregor Mitchell clan, and a former Tiger Sharks team-mate, Alan Walker. We lined with them for a while, then, as it was getting dark, bought our supplies and headed back. That night, Sham insisted that we sleep in his bed so that we

could get a good night's rest. He slept on the floor.

### **Wednesday 14th. 23 miles**

We made an early start, since we had decided not to come ashore on the Matura coast. From numerous turtle watches there, I had found the surf looked dangerous. In addition, I had heard grisly accounts of hunters killing turtles on the beach, and then taking pot shots at sharks attracted by the blood. Even though that particular story had taken place years ago, turtles were still being killed at Matura, and I had no desire to linger in "chummed" waters. We stayed about a quarter mile out as we headed south, constantly fighting the wind and waves to maintain our course. Ahead of us in the distance, we saw a school of the small species of dolphin surfing the waves, but they vanished as we approached. Perhaps the warning colours and pattern on the boat worked on dolphins as well as sharks. If so, it was a hard price to pay, for our most memorable encounter with nature was the day off North Post when a school of dolphins had surrounded the kayak and escorted us for about a mile, showing off their incredible swimming skills. Our role had been that of straight guys, keeping a steady course and a constant paddling rhythm. The dolphins had been the performers, plunging across our bow and surfacing between paddle and boat, without touching either.

Later we passed the smoking hill of North Manzanilla, where petrochemicals in the soil sometimes ignite and burn for long periods. As we rounded the "nose" of Trinidad at Manzanilla Point, two small islets confronted us. With our limited paddling skills, we normally steered clear of narrow channels, but we were already in the turbulent water and there was no turning back. Instead we paddled hard, relying on speed to give us extra stability. In the lee of the rocks we met the clapotis of combined waves, and one broke on the kayak. The weight of water on the spray-skirts pulled them down, flooding the cockpit. We kept on paddling until we were in the lee of the point, where we bailed out the boat and re-fitted the skirts. Then we angled into the mouth of the Embranche River, where the coastal steamers used to call in the old days. Sham was awaiting us, overjoyed that we had made it OK.

*(Continued on page 26)*





## BOOK REVIEW

# “BUSHMASTER: RAYMOND DITMARS AND THE SEARCH FOR THE WORLD’S LARGEST VIPER”

by Hans Boos

When, several years ago, Dan Eatherley, contacted me and told me he was interested in meeting me to discuss his plans to write a biography about Raymond Ditmars, I was thrilled.

I was willing to share with him whatever information and artifacts I had in my collection with anyone who could bring this giant of a herpetologist, the ultimate “snake-man” to light.

Dan visited with me several times and I showed him the photos passed on to me by Ludolph Wehekind, who had accompanied Ditmars, Greenhall and Bridges in their work when they visited Trinidad in the 1930s to search for vampire bats and the ultimate snake, the bushmaster *Lachesis muta*, which, translated, means “silent fate”.

These photos were prints made from some ancient glass negatives that Wehekind told me had been taken by Ditmars and left behind when he left Trinidad, without his fabled snake, and though Dan told me he would try to accommodate a couple of the pictures in the book. Unfortunately, none were.

Reading the biography, published this year, 2015, I was astonished to read about the young Ditmars and his quest to collect and understand not only the serpents in his native United States, but from all regions of the globe and how this quest in many ways paralleled my own lonely search for knowledge in the reptilian wasteland of knowledge of the snakes of Trinidad.

Ditmars’ search led him to become one of the best and most influential herpetologists in the world, mainly due to his major works on Snakes and Reptiles, books that any herpetologist worth his salt had to have read or have on their book-shelves.

I was fortunate to have been associated with two very great gentlemen who rubbed shoulders with him, Ludolph Wehekind, a member of the Field naturalists’ Club and Arthur Greenhall, one of my mentors, who ended his days as a consultant in The Smithsonian, but who spent years in Trinidad and published as co author of “The Bats of Trinidad and

Tobago”.

The book is an easy read, though I had a little difficulty in following Dan’s writing style as he jumped back and forth in time, tracking Ditmars’ progress in one paragraph and then his, as he sought to follow the footsteps of his subject in his search for the ultimate prize, the Bushmaster. It is a welcome addition to any naturalist’s or zoologist’s collection, and Dan’s visit to Trinidad and the people he met assisting him in his unsuccessful quest too, to see and catch a wild Bushmaster are given great coverage.



## BUSHMASTER

RAYMOND DITMARS AND THE HUNT FOR  
THE WORLD’S LARGEST VIPER

DAN EATHERLEY



But he should not feel badly, for I too, taking my cue from Ditmars, had searched all my herping life for this elusive snake, but it was only a couple of years ago that I finally was able to see and catch one in the wild, a prize few herpetologists are blessed to have experienced.

The collections of books of the world can only be enriched by Dan's wonderful biography of one of the world's most adventurous and unique men, Raymond Ditmars. 🐍



top right : **Dan Eatherley author of "BUSHMASTER: RAYMOND DITMARS AND THE SEARCH FOR THE WORLD'S LARGEST VIPER "** Photo: Rob Judges

bottom left : **Black-headed Bushmaster profile** Photo: Raymond Ditmars

bottom right : **Central American Bushmaster** Photo: Dean Ripa



## IN THE WAKE OF THE CARIBS

(Continued from page 24)

The 15-mile run that we had just completed was to be the longest non-stop trip for the entire journey. Where the configuration of the coastline permitted, we could sometimes look across the water and see our intended destination at the end of the day. Most times it looked impossible, and later we would look back in disbelief at having paddled so far. "Pee-Wee" De Roche, who did his own circumnavigation two

years later, confided that often it was just the idea that we had done it before, that kept him going. We continued down to the mouth of the Mitán and pitched camp. Soon after dark a storm broke. We abandoned the hammocks and scrambled to rig up the flysheet next to the kayak, to enable us to sleep on the sand. After a while Foots decided that it was too uncomfortable, and hustled through the rain to the nearby bridge, under which he spent the night. 🐍

To be continued...



## ENCOUNTERS WITH BOTHROPS.


## Part 4 of 5

*(Continued from page 22)*

It paid no attention to our circling about taking photos, and when we went back up to the road above I took a handful of gravel and sprinkled it down on to the sleeping snake. As the first little pebbles hit, it came awake and the sharp head came up, alert, and with the second handful, it slithered off its resting place, crossed the stream swiftly and disappeared into the grasses on the other side.

The only reason I can account for its extreme

thinness was perhaps it was a large female that had recently given birth to a large litter of young mapepires, and had not been able to capture enough food to start to build back its fatty reserves for the next breeding season. Or perhaps it was a very old snake whose overburden of parasites was bringing it to the natural end of its life.

We were elated to have witnessed such a magnificent specimen in the wild and felt we had had a successful day, for that had been number two. We also captured and photographed the little gecko. 

*To be continued...*



**Dear Fellow Members,  
In 2016, TTFNC will be celebrating its  
125<sup>th</sup> birthday.**

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

We need volunteers to help plan and coordinate these activities.

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

E-mail [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org)

*if you would like to help plan the event*



**TTFNC QUARTERLY BULLETINS & INDEX ONLINE LINK :**

<http://ttfnc.org/publication/field-naturalist/>



**Management Notices**

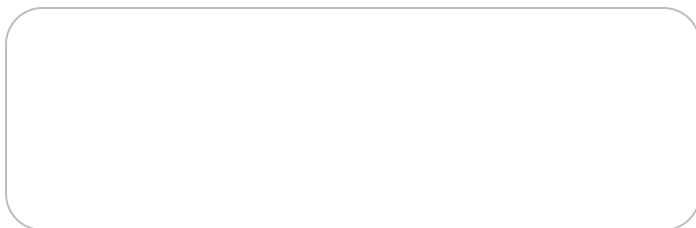
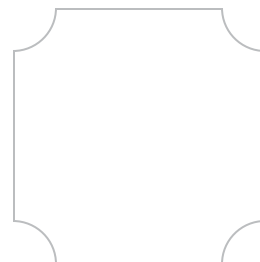
**New Members**

The Club warmly welcomes the following new members:

**Ordinary members:** Allan Knight, Adesh Seeram, Aviola Knights, Christine Mayouske, Elizabeth Rose Seebaran, Elsa Taylor, Hema David, Keishan Ramsaran, Kriston Chen, Melony Mejias, Martine Vonetta Clarke, Mohindra Seepersaud, Rachel Boodoo, Robyn Bath-Rosenfeld

**Family members :** Alex Guzman and Cintra Sooknaman, Claudia and James Keddle

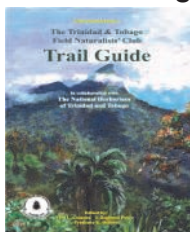
**NOTICE FROM THE EDITORS:** *Do you have any natural history articles, anecdotes or trip reports that could be published in The Field Naturalist? We welcome contributions from members. Please email your ideas or finished pieces to [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org). We look forward to hearing from you!*



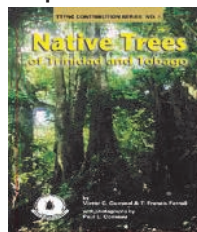
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## PUBLICATIONS

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



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## 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 2015 Annual Membership Fees are Due:

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### Submission of articles and field trip reports:

1. All articles must reach the editors by the eighth week of each quarter.
2. Electronic copies can be submitted to the editors at: [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org) or directly to the editors or any member of Management. Please include 'QB2015' in the email subject label.