

ENVIRONMENT

# Two new bird species for TT

TRINIDAD and Tobago has always been a fantastic location for observing birds and to date over 474 species of birds have been recorded on both islands. Part of this success is due to our location along a significant migratory path for North American birds and our proximity to the South American mainland.

Rare species occasionally turn up (much to the delight of the local bird-watching community) and ever so often the list of birds recorded for the island actually increases as species never before recorded for the country put in an appearance for the first time. This week we will look at two of these recent additions.

On the morning of October 15, 2013 a Whistling Heron (*Syrigma sibilatrix*) was reported from Turure in Sangre Grande by Kamal Mahabir. At the time, the bird was feeding in one of the many cattle pastures that dot the landscape of Turure.

Hérons are a diverse family of birds, most having long necks and legs which enable them to hunt for fish or insect prey in shallow water, reeds or grass. Many have an affinity for water but several species can be found in dry areas. The Whistling Heron is such a bird, being fond of pasture and grassland. It is fairly large and is attractively coloured with a blue cap and reddish bill. Perhaps the most extraordinary feature is its call which is a lovely whistle, unlike the harsh croaks that most members of the heron family possess.

The Whistling Heron is a widespread inhabitant of similar habitat on the South American mainland and this particular individual is likely to have wandered over from neighbouring Venezuela. It must have been an especially good wanderer as it could not be relocated despite the best efforts of dozens of local birdwatch-



TENNESSEE Warbler (*Oreothlypis peregrina*) at Carli Bay in Couva.  
PHOTO BY NIGEL LALLSINGH

ers in the days that followed.

The Whistling Heron was not the only new record for Trinidad and Tobago in recent times.

On February 17, 2014, a Tennessee Warbler (*Oreothlypis peregrina*) was discovered feeding in trees at Carli Bay in Couva by Nigel Lallsingh. While it was been previously believed that Tennessee Warblers visit our shores during migration and there had been undocumented reports in the past, this sighting provided the first documented report for Trinidad.

Warblers are small, active birds that spend most of their time actively flitting about the vegetation in search of insects and other invertebrates. Twenty-six species of warbler have been recorded in Trinidad and Tobago, however only three of these are resident species. The others are migrants from the United States and Canada which head south at the onset of the northern winter. The

majority of these birds are very rarely seen in Trinidad and Tobago.

This warbler breeds in eastern North America and Canada's boreal forest. During the northern winter, they migrate to southern Central America and northern South America, including Colombia and Venezuela.

The Tennessee Warbler is a dainty little songbird, with a few distinct field marks. It has a short sharply pointed bill, a thin white line over the eye, a thin black eye line, an olive



WHISTLING Heron (*Syrigma sibilatrix*) at Turure.  
PHOTO BY KAMAL MAHABIR

green back and whitish underparts with greyish sides, and a short tail. Measuring only 4.5 inches and with a wingspan of just eight inches, it flies more than 1000 miles each year to its wintering grounds.

Incredibly, despite its rarity and nondescript appearance, local bird-watchers succeeded in finding a second Tennessee Warbler at the same location a few days later. In their favoured tree at Carli Bay, the birds were very active, flittering among the foliage and making short flights to reach leaf tips while searching for food, at times hovering while foraging, and occasionally giving their warbler-like chipping song.

Both the Whistling Heron and Tennessee Warblers are welcome

additions to the birdlife of Trinidad and Tobago. Their presence here should serve to emphasise just how important preserving our natural environment is and illustrates the fact that protecting a species requires more than just setting aside some "bush" or swampland for them - sometimes it requires an international collaborative effort to ensure they are adequately protected.

*Today's feature was produced by Kamal Mahabir and Nigel Lallsingh. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@tfnfnc.org](mailto:admin@tfnfnc.org) or visit our website at [www.tfnfnc.org](http://www.tfnfnc.org).*



The Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club