

ENVIRONMENT



A SMALL fer de lance (Bothrops of asper) on the trail.
PHOTOS BY KRIS SOOKDEO



ROCK face along the trail to the Aripo Caves.

Learning about natural world

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The rain had however raised the water level a bit and we decided to stay at the mouth of the cave for a only few minutes in case the water level rose further.

The cave itself is very interesting. According to *A register of the caves of Trinidad and Tobago* by Paul Shaw, the cave "is structured on a series of levels, chambers and tunnels, created by water flow under conditions of falling base level, thus the upper cave system is largely dry, even during heavy rains.

"Access to the upper part is by scrambling down a boulder slope to a stream bed, but access beyond is limited by vertical drops of 9.2m and 15.2 m. A crawlway (low ceiling) has to be negotiated to reach the furthest section, comprising a waterfall, pool and terminal pot. Total vertical drop is estimated around 164 m." It would be very interesting to explore such a system but also very fool hardy given our lack of preparation.

Even above the roar of rushing water you could hear the inhabitants of the cave. Oilbirds make it their home and in the gloom you could just make out the shapes of the birds as they fluttered about from their roost. Oilbirds make a terrible racket, complete with demonic shrieks and wails, and this has led to their local name of "diablotin". These large birds live their entire lives in the dark, leaving the caves only at night to feed on the fruit of forest trees. They are unique among birds in that they echo locate, allowing them to navigate their dark world. In addition to the oilbirds, a few bats could be seen. Paul Shaw listed three species of bat that inhabit the cave - Anoura geoffroyi, Chilonycteris rubiginosa fusca, Glossophaga soricina - and noted that they roosted further into the cave than the oilbirds. With our time up and not wanting to annoy the oilbirds any further, we decided leave.

About an hour later we were passing the large limestone rock faces when someone found a snake. Of course it was a fer de lance Bothrops of asper and of course it was right on the trail where several others had just passed. But this is par for the course on forest walks and many a "mapapire balsain" are passed on the trails without being noticed. This particular specimen, a baby at just about 30 cm, was very reluctant to do anything and was never aggressive. It is sometimes claimed that the young individuals, inexperienced and vulnerable, are more likely to deliver a full load of venom on biting. Whether this is true of fer de lance in Trinidad I cannot say but we didn't care to test it and quickly escorted the snake safely off the trail.

Cave exploration should never be attempted without training and proper equipment, however a visit to these natural attractions provides countless opportunities for a naturalist to learn more about the natural world. Extra care must be taken when a sensitive species, such as the oilbird, is present but the more we educate ourselves about areas such as the Aripo Caves, the better our chance of preserving it for future generations to explore and enjoy.

Today's feature was written by Kris Sookdeo. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfncc.org or visit our website at www.tfncc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on April 10, 2014 at St Mary's College. This month's lecture: "The Lionfish in TT" presented by Jahson Alemnue.

ENVIRONMENT



THE mountain rose (Brownea coccinea).



INDIAN head ginger (Costus scaber).

The Aripo Caves

WHEN it comes to connecting with nature, there are few experiences that can beat a walk in the forest. Add to that the opportunity to see oilbirds and a better than average chance to see snakes and you have yourself a very rewarding encounter with nature. And so it was that during the month of January, the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalist's Club visited the Aripo Caves.

Trinidad and Tobago is home to several documented cave systems. In addition, unknown or "forgotten" systems exist that have not been formally documented and these are occasionally mentioned in the literature. One of the better documented caves is the Aripo Cave system which is actually comprised of at least three caves. Accessed via the Heights of Guanapo, Aripo Cave #1 is the largest known cave in Trinidad, measuring some 862 metres in length.

There were lots of interesting plants for us to study along the trail to the cave including the widespread Indian head ginger *Costus scaber* and the gorgeous mountain rose, *Brownea coccinea*. These, like many of the blooms that one encounters in the forest understory, are red in colour. This is likely to be related to the plants' choice of pollinators and the tubular shapes of the flowers of the Indian head ginger, mountain rose and baliser implicates hummingbirds as the main suspect. Indeed the downward facing blossoms of the mountain rose may also indicate



The Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

pollination by the hummingbirds, in particular the hermit hummingbirds which are fond of the forest undergrowth. The landscape of the Aripo area is fascinating. In many areas outcrops of limestone are visible, and range from rock faces several metres high to jagged protrusions that barely scrape at your knees. The many crevices and gaps should be great resting places for snakes but we searched many of them in vain. It was raining that day and this probably contributed to their absence.

Following a series of descents and ascents, the trail eventually reaches a small ravine that leads to the cave and after navigating the remaining length of the boulder-choked waterway we reached the cave mouth.

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Date of Event: Saturday 24th May, 2014
Description of Event/Activity: Neal and Massv Family Dav