

FEATURES

# 'Bioblitzing' for Botanic Gardens

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FOR the past four years the Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club and the University of the West Indies Zoology Museum have been the organisers of an annual Bioblitz. The purpose of these events was to see how many different species of plants, animals and other living organisms could be found in a certain area during a 24-hour period.

The volunteers and experts who do the surveying then shared that information with members of the public who came along to learn more about biodiversity and go on guided walks. As we prepare for the fifth TT Bioblitz, which will take place early next month, we have been looking back on these first four memorable events.

Each year a base camp was selected based on the variety of habitats that could be found nearby. The teams would survey up to five kilometres away from the camp, normally from noon on a Saturday to noon the next day. We started off in Tucker Valley in 2012 with a great array of marine diversity in the bay and a mix of habitats on land, and a final species count of 685. We then followed up in 2013 by surveying the lush forests of the Northern Range in Arima Valley, based at the Asa Wright Nature Centre. Here, we recorded 772 species. We headed east in 2014 to the Nariva Swamp with its mix of mangroves, sandy beaches and marsh and clocked up 742 species. We finally made it to Tobago in 2015, with Charlotteville providing



TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

us with a great mix of reef and rainforest and giving us our best result yet – 1,044 species.

The first event saw around 80 experts and volunteers take part. Last year in Charlotteville we had over 120 people conducting the surveys. Every year more groups and individuals get involved. For the first time this year we will have a special microbiology team going to gather samples from soil, water and the air and then see what type of bacteria, fungi and other microbes team members can find.

Over the years the Bioblitz events have attracted good support from the public; we have given guided walks up to the Tracking Station above Macqueripe, along the trails at the Asa Wright Nature Centre, and into Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctuary. However, due to the remote locations of the past events we know that many people were unable to join in. It is for this reason that we have decided to bring the event to the people this year, by basing ourselves in the Botanic Gardens, Port-of-Spain. Also, this year the event will run over three days



Bioblitzers getting briefed before the start of the 2014 event at Nariva Swamp.

rather than the usual two days, so there will be plenty of opportunity to come and see what we are up to.

Since the outset, First Citizens have been the main sponsor of the event as part of their commitment to their CARE programme (Citizens in Action to Restore the Environment). That sponsorship allowed us to provide food, accommodation and transport for the volunteers, pay for equipment like trail cameras, and print banners and a full-colour report in the form of an edition of *The Field Naturalist* the quarterly bulletin of the TTFNC. All these

reports are available free online at <http://ttfnc.org/publication/field-naturalist/>

There have been many highlights over the years: a Robinson's mouse opossum and a huge dead bushmaster snake from Tucker Valley, a giant velvet worm in Arima Valley, a long-snouted, thin-toed frog from Nariva Swamp (a new species for the island) and two crab-eating raccoons caught on a trail camera near Charlotteville – to name just a few. One of the best outcomes of these events is that Bioblitzers have been able to expand their interests by interacting with the

other volunteers; birders learned more about plants, herpetologists got interested in mushrooms and everyone has shared their passion for nature with each other and the public.

On November 4, 5 and 6 the Botanic Gardens, Port-of-Spain will be host to the biggest gathering of nature groups in TT this year. Many groups participate in the Bioblitz and it is open to the public as well.

More info about the event will be in next week's column but in the meantime check out the Facebook page T&T Bioblitz.

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