

ENVIRONMENT

The Erin Savannah:

Beauty under siege

WHEN someone mentions the word "savannah" in TT, the first image that comes to mind is often a playing field or perhaps Queen's Park in Port-of-Spain. However, the word savannah also applies to a much more biologically and geologically significant feature.

Natural savannahs exist in Trinidad, formed not by the actions of man, but by the unseen hands of geology and climate. Poor soils limit the type of vegetation and are usually well drained to the point that nutrients are washed out of the top soil layer. The vegetation is typically low and scrubby.

Natural savannahs are a critically threatened environment in Trinidad, readily destroyed for other types of land use. Piarco, for example, was once a natural savannah but is now



covered by tarmac and airplane hangers. The remaining savannahs are at Aripo (the most well known), St Joseph (a hillside savannah that is almost gone) and Erin. It is the latter that the Club sought to visit during the month of March.

After a long winding drive



MEMBERS of the Club rest in the Erin savannah. The characteristic dry vegetation and rocky surface is visible here.

through Fyzabad and Pt Fortin, the TTFNC group snaked its way through the dry hills of Erin. Our landmark was a bar reported to be

over one hundred years old which, unfortunately, seemed to be undergoing a facelift.

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WILD passionfruit (*Passiflora quadriglandulosa*) seen along the trail.

ENVIRONMENT

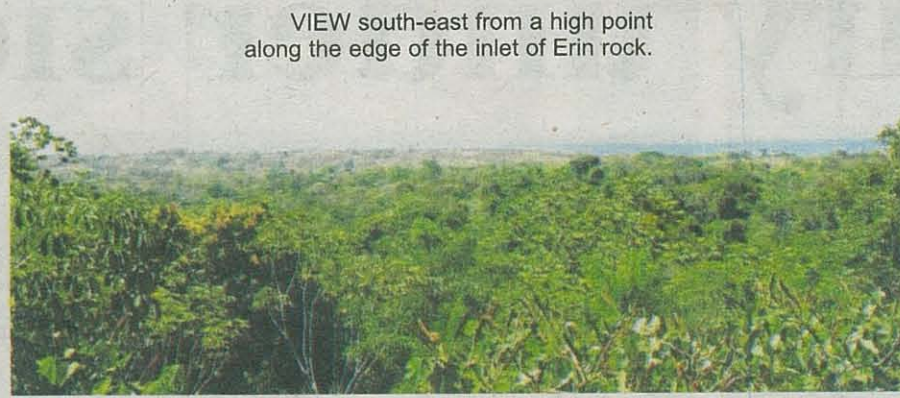
Diverse land use sows seeds of destruction

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We turned down a quiet unassuming side lane, much to the interest of the residents, and proceeded down a track through dense undergrowth.

Our group numbered 14 persons, who immediately began attempting to identify the flora that would be our companions for the rest of the day. The gardens of timite, cocorite palms, razor grass and "banga" or "grugru bef" were perforated only by the appearances of the introduced Caribbean pine (*Pinus caribe*), a species introduced by the Forestry Department. This planting programme was strongly opposed by the TTFNC in previous years, but appears to have continued regardless – there was evidence of spread from the original plantations, with smaller trees now encroaching on the remaining natural savannah.

We had a request from one of UWI's botany experts to report back on the presence and abundance of moriche palm, *Mauritia flexuosa* on the savannah, but there were none to be immediately seen. While Dan, our trip leader, singled out a specimen of *Desmonicus ortocantus*, the spiny broad-leaf climbing palm, another



VIEW south-east from a high point along the edge of the inlet of Erin rock.

member attempted to ascertain our position on a map by cross-referencing with his GPS. After much deliberation the group concluded that we should walk to the more visible road just south of where we were.

As we made our way across this arid landscape in the ever-present sun and cool consistent breeze, we were told about the feral cows that once roamed the area (and perhaps still do). Venturing deeper, we noticed that we were no longer on familiar soil. As if transported to

some Martian landscape, we were now on a planet of pink and orange earth. A localized soil type, found only in this quiet part of South Trinidad, lay beneath us. A very brittle clayish soil, Reginald, our in-house geologist, easily crushed it in his hands in the hope of finding plant imprints within its strata. He explained how the rock, known locally as Erin stone and prized in the making of roads, is thought to have been created by the intense burning of lignite (a low-grade coal) many years ago, producing the

extensive layer of partially baked earth that lay beneath us. The extent of this phenomenon could be seen later into our expedition, at a quarry site in the savannah which was quite conspicuous with its blatant pink-orange colouring.

The debate as to precisely how the stone was formed, however, continued well into the rest of the expedition, a good geologist never quite being convinced of accepted theories.

Genipa americana made a modest appearance along our path. Known as the "monkey apple", it stood proud welcoming us on our way. The spotlight was soon on the distant nesting of the crested oropendola or combird which had adorned two distant cocorite palms with its well-knitted hanging nests that blew in the wind like hanging baskets. A type of "pois doux" was identified with its long green pods which were teasingly out of reach for our hungry enthusiasts. Contrasted against the unfamiliar background, an old friend made his exit at the sound of our approach – a matte lizard.

Pine cones (or Christmas cones if you prefer) littered the path, reminding us of the ever-present invasion of the non-native pine trees. More unexpected in this wild untamed landscape was the presence of bee hives assembled in a quiet cove. About twenty-six unassuming boxes kept the group ill at ease at the prospect of harassment by ill-tempered bees. The real interest of the bees was clearly apparent along our journey: the majestic cocorite palms (*Attalea maripa*) were in flower, a grand and voluminous bouquet of yellow floral abundance. Dan, our trip leader, explained that the fruit produced would number in the hundreds.

A course in webbing was offered by two experts in the field. One web that measured about four inches across was by a common but quite impressive spider that sat quietly observing our bee-phobic bunch. On the adjacent branch, as though at a web symposium, was the second instructor, what we could only speculate was a tent caterpillar. But competing with these for our interest, and winning, was the webless pink-toed tarantula (*Avicularia avicularia*) with its blazing red abdomen and hairy legs. From here, we realised we could see Venezuela, our ominous guardian and birth mother.

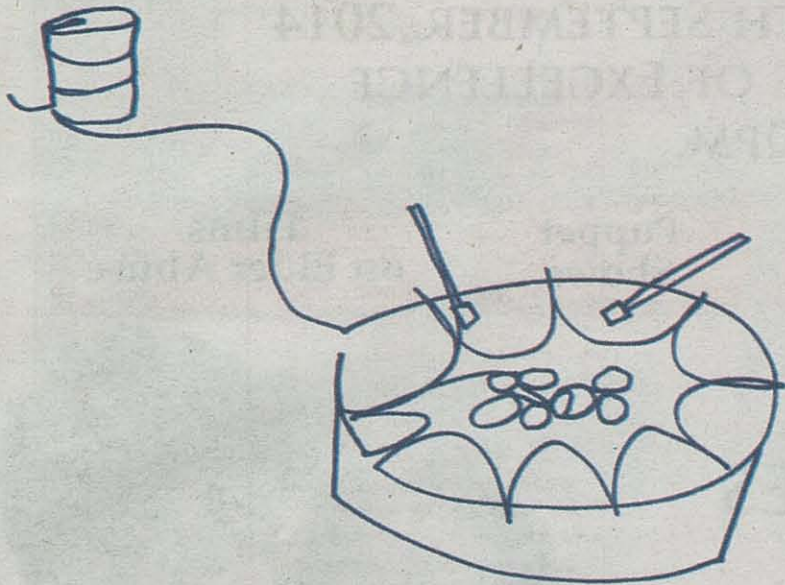
We were now in the savannah, an inlet of Erin rock and grass shaped in a modest bowl. It is here our group rested and met the remaining TTFNC group (early-rising birders and entomologists who had arrived at the crack of dawn) adding six to our party. Armed with butterfly nets and cameras, most eagerly sought the residents of this quiet sanctuary. Others sought shade. The birders were excited to share their morning's sightings with us, which had included toucans and three species of warbler. An emerald-patched cattleheart butterfly, *Parides sesostris trinitensis* entertained us by sipping from a bottle of Gatorade before fluttering off into the radiant sun.

The floor of this quaint bowl was littered with the black round seeds of the cocorite palm. The grasses and spotting of trees presented an almost theatrical setting for the myriad butterflies to dance to the urging of the sun and wind. Not much else dared venture in this heat. Only the emblem of Trinidad's ever present waste problem, the proud corbeaux, would oversee our expedition. This was the natural savannah of the Erin plains – a land of pink stones and proud palms. And pertinacious pines? The group made its way briskly back to a point where both Dan and Reginald speculated that another trail into the savannah actually lay. But by now the sun was high overhead and the group slowly began to disband. As we left, Dan continued on in the heat alone, along a different trail deep into the savannah, and finally discovered a single, proud specimen of the elusive moriche palm.

Today's feature was written by Richard Acosta; photographs by Eddison Baptiste. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, PoS. Lecture: "Recording the biodiversity of TT" presented by Mike Rutherford of the UWI Zoology Museum.

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