

New book on bats of TT

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The great fruit-eating bat is a very efficient seed-disperser. Photo: Christian Ziegler

DR BURTON K LIM

A NEW BOOK on our native bats, entitled *Bats of Trinidad and Tobago*, has been produced by Geoffrey Gomes and Fiona Reid. The following is a review of the book by Dr Burton K Lim of the Royal Ontario Museum.

As with many field guides, the genesis of this book is firmly rooted in the two authors having a great passion and curious interest in the only mammal that has mastered the art of flight. Whether it be for conservation or education, this love of bats shines through from the entertaining writing style about their biology to the detailed descriptions and beautiful paintings of the species found on the twin islands of Trinidad and Tobago.

What distinguishes this publication from others in the genre are Gomes' and Reid's ability to break out of the formulaic, field-guide mould by balancing typical species accounts with an equally engaging presentation of the ecology of bats and their significance to people. Another nice aspect is the frequent reference to local examples that give the book a truly Trinidadian and Tobagonian flavour. Where else would we learn about the tradition of "Authentic Bats" and "Fancy Bats" in mas bands during Carnival?

A big inspiration to the authors comes from the founder of Bat Conservation International, Dr Merlin Tuttle, who not only has written the foreword to the book but also generously provided stunning photographs, especially of bats in flight. In fact,

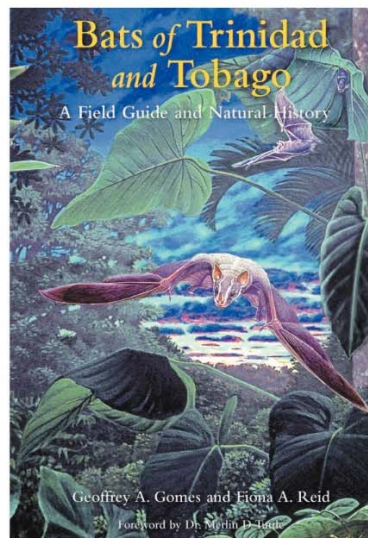


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there are many talented photographers and artists who have contributed to make this a great visual publication. Not the least of which are the exquisitely executed renderings of bats in the species accounts by Reid. She has mastered a unique style that combines life-like poses while highlighting key identification features.

The book begins with an introduction to the presentation format and a good overview of the geography of the islands and their diverse habitats. The main text is divided into three parts beginning with a very thorough coverage of the natural history of bats. This section takes a holistic ecosystem approach to cover topics ranging from echolocation to roosting in a refreshing non-textbook way. They do one of the better jobs of articulating the importance of bats to the environment and dispelling age-old misunderstandings such as the false hysteria of vampires by early taxonomists trying to get a grasp of this unknown plethora of biodiversity being discovered in the New World tropics.

In the second part, I was impressed by the wealth of information on the relationships between bats and humans that is both broad in scope, covering topics such as folklore and rabies, while staying almost exclusively focused on examples from the islands. This is one of



The new field guide, 'Bats of Trinidad and Tobago'.

the benefits of having Gomes, a local Trini, as the first author. Especially interesting to me was a subsection on amazingly recognisable bat effigies portrayed in pre-Columbian ceramic pottery of the Salodoid Amerindians living in Trinidad from about 500 BCE.

The last part of the book comprises the accounts of 68 species of bats currently known from TT, which represents about 70 percent of the mammalian diversity on the islands. Each species has a life-sized, colour illustration of the bat done by the second author. A feature not regularly seen in other field guides is a detailed subsection devoted exclusively to echolocation calls specific to that species. This is one of the fastest growing areas of bat research that may eventually start a niche market that enables ecotourists to eavesdrop on these mysterious nocturnal flyers with bat detectors, which are becoming more readily available and cheaper in price.

The book is attrac-

tively packaged into almost 300 pages of a handy, tablet-sized format that is self-published through Trinibats, a bat conservation organisation in Trinidad that the first author co-founded in 2011, and will be sold in the US by Speleobooks. As the first monograph on the bats of TT (Goodwin and Greenhall, 1961) spurred a wave of interest in researchers from throughout the world, the current contribution, over half a century later, will open up this fascinating world to the amateur naturalist while still being a useful reference to professional biologists. It sets a new standard for not only field guides but bat books in general.

Bats of Trinidad and Tobago is now available at leading bookstores. More info can be found at www.trinibats.com.

For information on our natural environment contact the T&T Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfnco.org, or website www.tfnco.org, Facebook and YouTube pages.

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