

FEATURES

A Naturalist's view of Aripo Savannas



The beautiful savanna flower (Mandevilla hirsuta).



The galap

THE Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club (TTFNC) visited the Aripo Savanna Scientific Reserve during March. This unique area is one of the few remaining natural savanna ecosystems in Trinidad. It is characterised by low, scrubby vegetation, waterlogged soils and open grasslands. It is a place of extremes – during the wet season the savannas are flooded but are bone-dry for the rest of the year. It was declared an Environmentally Sensitive Area in 2007.

One of the key species in the



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savanna is the towering moriche palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*). Outside of the savanna, it is found in only a few other areas in Trinidad including Valencia, Erin,

Nariva and Los Blanquizaes. The fruits of the palm provide food for macaws, parrots, agoutis and other wildlife.

These fruit can sometimes wash ashore on the south coast from trees growing in neighbouring Venezuela!

In 1978, the botany group of the TTFNC undertook a field study of one of the orchids found growing in the savannas - *Cyrtopodium broadwayi*.

The purpose of this six-year study was to document as much of the life history of this species as possible.

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Aripo at dusk.

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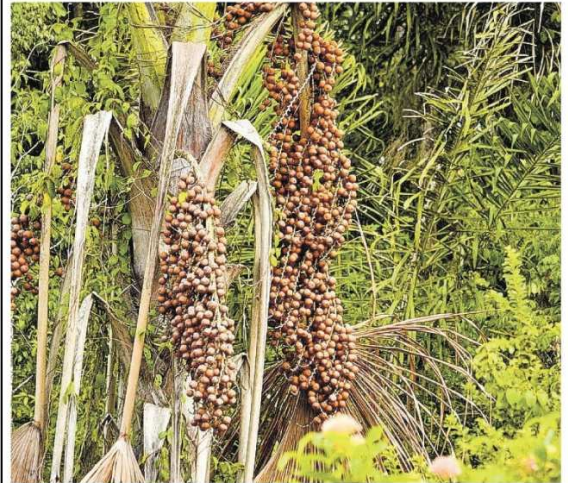


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FEATURES



The fruit of the moriche palm.

Reptiles, amphibians found in savanna

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Another attractive plant is the savanna flower (Mandevilla hirsuta).

This vine is commonly found in the forest edge and is easily identified by its gorgeous yellow petals and red centre. It is common outside of the savanna as well.

Certainly one of the more bizarre plant species to be found in the savanna is the sundew (Drosera capillaris). Because the soils of the savanna are frequently waterlogged, nutrients are quickly leached out. The poor soils force some plants to seek their nutrition elsewhere. This sundew traps small insects in the sticky secretions on its leaves and the insects are slowly digested to release much-needed nutrition.

Despite the environmental ex-

trêmes, various reptiles and amphibians can be found in the savanna. One such inhabitant is the galap (Rhinoclemmys punctularia). This turtle can be found in wet forests throughout Trinidad and is occasionally kept as a pet.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfnfnc.org or visit our website at www.tfnfnc.org. The club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. This month's lecture: Bacterial flora of leatherback turtle egg shells and nest sand at Grande Riviere beach by Dr Carla Phillips of the University of the West Indies (UWI) Veterinary School.



The bizarre sundew captures small insects for additional nutrition.