

# Further Records of Birds on Trinidad and Tobago

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## Introduction.

This paper presents data on the occurrence and status of 35 species on Trinidad and Tobago, including three new for Trinidad and eight new for Tobago. The information comes from a variety of sources, including records from observers sent directly to me, notes deposited at the Asa Wright Nature Centre, two from reports already published elsewhere, and in a few cases my own direct observations. I should like to thank all contributors for their co-operation and efforts to update the local ornithological situation.

For some time now I have been anxious to see a valid system of bird recording established on Trinidad and Tobago, such as is standard in more developed countries. Until this is done, records unsubstantiated by adequate field descriptions, uncorroborated by physical evidence (specimens or photographs) and unsupported by the testimony of experienced and knowledgeable observers, must be treated with due caution. For this reason, where the following records have not been adequately supported, I have denoted them by an asterisk beside the species name. This is not to disparage in any way the integrity of any observers, but in the hope of influencing all those interested to present fully documented records in future. I look forward to the implementation of such a recording scheme by any responsible organisation on Trinidad and Tobago.

## Species List

1. Cory's Shearwater. *Calonectris diomedea*. About 10 birds of this species were seen flying close to shore off Manzanilla beach on 30 December 1991 by tour-leader W. Petersen along with other members of his party. These are the first records for the area for 30 years.

2. Sooty Shearwater. *Puffinus griseus*. The body of a recently dead bird of this species was found on Manzanilla beach near Nariva Swamp on 12 December 1991 by Dr. C. Haass, who is thoroughly familiar with the species. It was an all-black shearwater with weak whitish stripes on the underwing. This is the first record for Trinidad of this species, which breeds in the sub-antarctic, migrating north mostly in April-May into the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, returning in August-September. There are few records from the West Indies, and this record (occurring during the breeding season) is extremely interesting, presumably involving a non-breeding individual, some of which are known occasionally to

remain north of the equator during the southern summer. There are January and February records from the Caribbean coast of Colombia (Hilty & Brown 1986). The only similar species, *P. tenuirostris*, has never been recorded in the Atlantic Ocean.

3. Northern Gannet\* *Sula bassana*. An adult bird was seen within 100 metres at sea just off Speyside, Tobago on 29 November 1991 by E. Kwater. The observer, who is very familiar with this northern species, was able to see clearly the white secondaries and blue-gray bill, which together with the considerably larger size and yellowish head and nape separate this species from the common local sulid, the Red-footed Booby, *S. sula*. This is the first record for Tobago and the southern Caribbean area of this species, which breeds in northern Europe and off the northeast coast of N. America, wintering south to west Africa and the coasts of Florida and the northern Gulf of Mexico.

4. Anhinga. *Anhinga anhinga*. When I lived in Trinidad I looked assiduously but in vain for evidence of local breeding in this species. It was common at Pointe-a-Pierre from December to August, but records were sparse between August and December, so it seemed likely that birds returned to the mainland to breed. However, a nest with two young was found at Pointe-a-Pierre in January 1991 by J.B. Saunders and photographed by Molly Gaskin. It was in a casuarina tree beside one of the reservoirs. It will be interesting to see if the cormorants, *Phalacrocorax*, that have become so common in that area follow the Anhinga's example.

5. Jabiru Stork\* *Jabiru mycteria*. An adult bird was seen at Caroni on 12 May 1990 by R. Ramlal and five other observers; the first record for Trinidad. It has already been recorded on Tobago.

6. Scarlet Ibis. *Eudocimus ruber*. Recent studies by Bildstein (1990) have at last produced a credible and non-controversial theory to account for the abandonment of Trinidad as a nesting ground by this species after the 1960s, namely the need for freshwater feeding areas within reach of foraging adults during the breeding cycle. While I was studying the Caroni swampbirds during 1958-1959 I witnessed the gradual breakdown of the North-South Dyke that had preserved the freshwater marsh to the east of the swamp. Now that it seems unlikely that the dyke can ever be restored, we can probably expect the ibis to continue breeding on the

mainland, and to visit Trinidad only in the off-season, as at present.

In this connection, some most interesting observations have recently been made. On 2 August 1992 Dr. J. S. Kenny (pers. comm.) saw a large flock of ibis flying westwards along the north coast near Blanchisseuse. About 2 km offshore, the flock numbered at least 1000 birds, even quite possibly as many as 3000, judging from the size of the flock as it appeared to the observer on shore; the birds were flying some 50 m above the waves. In addition, David Rooks told me of a flock of about 1000 ibis present during August 1991 and again in August 1992 at Buccoo Lagoon, Tobago.

Previous Tobago records of ibis have been only of very small numbers. Since the Trinidad population moved its breeding site into the Orinoco delta, those birds that return to Caroni after breeding usually arrive in the area about August, with numbers peaking in September or October. Flocks have frequently been observed over Trinidad's west coast or the Gulf of Paria, but the above sighting is the first to my knowledge for the north coast of Trinidad. It is possible that the same birds were involved in the Tobago and Blanchisseuse sightings. In any case, they form evidence of a seasonal, post-breeding movement along the South American coast, originating probably in the Guianas or even N.E. Brazil.

If the birds came from the Orinoco delta in Venezuela, it is difficult to imagine why they should travel up the east coast of Trinidad, rather than westward along the south coast. If on the other hand they moved along the coast from much farther east, they might well have flown too far to the north and missed the channel south of Galeota Point. It is also inconceivable that a large flock of ibis could have crossed the mountains of the Northern Range between the Caroni plain and the north coast, as birds of this family seldom fly higher than about 100 m above ground and habitually frequent low-lying areas. At all events, these records add significantly to the currently sparse details of our knowledge of seasonal movements and dispersal within the region (see Frederick et al. 1990).

7. Northern Shoveler. *Anas clypeata*. A female was seen at close quarters at the Port of Spain sewage ponds on 25 September 1990 by W.L. Murphy and others. The species is known to hunters but is quite rare locally.

8. Ring-necked Duck. *Aythya collaris*. A pair seen at Buccoo marsh on 18/19 January 1992 constitute the first record of the species for Tobago; they were seen by tour-leader D. Finch and members of his party.

9. Hook-billed Kite. *Chondrohierax uncinatus*. More records of this rare raptor have been reported recently, including one at Waller Field in April 1992, a

pair at Laventille in July 1992, and a female at Speyside, Tobago. The latter was seen and photographed by J. Mc Williams on 13 August 1992, the first record of the species for Tobago; it was found again nearby on the next day. A most interesting record for this normally sedentary species.

10. White-tailed Hawk. *Buteo albicaudatus*. Owing to some similarity with the much smaller *B. brachyurus* there has been some confusion over identification of this species, which frequents mainly lowland savanna and marsh. An adult was well seen at Nariva Swamp on 12 December 1990 by B. Soderstrom and two other observers.

11. Savanna Hawk\* *Heterospizias meridionalis*. David Rooks has reported one at Lowlands Estate, Tobago in August 1990. This is the first record for Tobago, and represents an interesting range extension, to be expected in a species which regularly exploits cattle-rearing ranch lands.

12. Yellow-headed Caracara. *Milvago chimachima*. David Rooks reports it as a regular visitor to western Tobago since its discovery there in 1987. I would expect it to establish permanent residence on Tobago in the near future.

13. Crested Caracara. *Polyborus plancus*. An adult was found at Waller Field Agricultural Station on many occasions in 1991/1992, being first seen by J. Ramlal and others on 21 April 1991. There were few records previously of this rare visitor to Trinidad, which is, however, abundant on Venezuela.

14. American Kestrel. *Falco sparverius*. An immature male was seen at Grafton Estate and near Crown Point airport, Tobago on 9/10 February 1991, recorded by W.L. Murphy and others. This is the first record for Tobago.

15. Sungrebe\* *Heliornis fulica*. Sight-records of this rarely seen species are occasionally reported, all from the Hollis Reservoir, Valencia. The most recent is of two birds seen by R. Ramlal and others on 10 May 1990.

16. Double-striped Thick-knee. *Burhinus bistriatus*. One was seen in a field at Orange Grove on 14 August 1991 by Graham White. Typically, when approached it tended to run rather than fly. This is only the second record for Trinidad of this strange-looking species.

17. Ruff. *Philomachus pugnax*. Records of this vagrant shorebird from the Old World continue to be reported. Recent occurrences include a young bird seen at Port of Spain sewage ponds on 14 December 1990 by B. Soderstrom and others, and one photographed by G. White at Buccoo Marsh, Tobago.

18. Pomarine Jaeger. *Stercorarius pomarinus*. A bird of this species was seen at Buccoo Reef on 19 January 1992 by tour-leader D. Finch and others. This is the first Tobago record of this seabird, which has been recorded elsewhere in the region.

19. Lesser Black-backed Gull. *Larus fuscus*. An individual seen at Turtle Beach on 19 January 1992 by D. Finch and others is only the second record for Tobago of this species, which appears to be expanding its range.

20. Orange-winged Parrot. *Amazona amazonica*. Two golden-yellow individuals of this species were observed at Morne Catherine by R. Neckles and R. Barrow on 30 July 1991, and one of them again on 9 August. Some good photographs were taken, showing clearly the generally yellow plumage, pale primaries, and some orange secondaries and tail feathers as in normal plumage; the eyes were red. These were examples of xanthochroism, a phenomenon allied to albinism, very rarely seen in the wild state.\*

21. Yellow-billed Cuckoo. *Coccyzus americanus*. In a survey of the Lowlands area of Tobago in November 1991 David Rooks found "hundreds" of this species in the coastal scrub. This was clearly an example of a spectacular migration "fall" in this passage migrant, which is rarely seen on our islands except on passage.

22. Mangrove Cuckoo. *Coccyzus minor*. Further recent sightings on Tobago include birds seen at Buccoo marsh on 18/19 January 1992 by tour-leader D. Finch and his party. It is likely that a small resident population inhabits suitable areas of southwestern Tobago.

23. Burrowing Owl. *Speotyto cunicularia*. A report in Morpho News Vol 1: No. II for April-June 1992, Newsletter of the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago, relates the discovery of this species in March 1992 at Point Lisas Industrial Estate. Further investigation in July 1992 showed that a pair of birds had excavated a burrow in an embankment on a building site. Photographs were taken. Unfortunately, industrial activity at the site resulted in the birds abandoning their burrow. This is the first record for Trinidad of this unique owl, which ranges widely but locally from western North America and Florida south to Honduras, throughout most of South America, and in the Bahamas and Hispaniola. Formerly resident in Antigua, St. Kitts and Nevis, it may well have fallen victim there to the introduced mongoose. In Venezuela it is a fairly common resident of the llanos and is widely distributed in the north of the country from Zulia to Monagas and the Delta Amacuro, also on Margarita Island. Presumably the Point Lisas birds originated from northeastern Venezuela; no migration in the South American forms has been recorded, and this

occurrence may well be a result of post-breeding dispersal, about which so little is known.

24. Oilbird. *Steatornis caripensis*. The first quarterly bulletin for 1992 of the Club's newsletter, Field Naturalist, contained an account by Hans Boos of a trip to Hillsborough Dam, Tobago in September 1988. While collecting caiman by night on the reservoir, the party, comprising H. Boos, G. Gomes, J. Seyjagat and N. Leith, observed "foraging Oilbirds on the edge of the jungle overhanging the lake". The clicking sounds used by the birds in echo-location were also heard, so it seems unlikely that the identification (though made in the dark) was erroneous. Oilbirds have not been found on Tobago before, nor have they been seen there since September 1988 (H. Boos, pers. comm.). Although it is tempting to speculate on the possible existence of an Oilbird colony on Tobago, such a possibility is discounted by the small amount of suitable habitat available on the island, and by the complete lack of any record (or even rumour) or such an unusual species, well known to neighbouring rural communities on Trinidad and elsewhere. Dr. David Snow, the world authority on the species, has commented (pers. comm.) that in his opinion the birds must have been vagrants, but might well survive on the island for some time. Certainly it is well worth checking for future occurrences. It is known that the species occasionally disperses, even migrates, in some numbers from traditional sites, possibly because of seasonal variation in food supply or through population pressures. The Tobago occurrence is the first instance of the species undertaking a sea crossing of as much as 20 miles. The bird is of course familiar with the marine environment, as several caves on the North Coast of Trinidad are well-known. More data on this most interesting subject are urgently needed.

25. Long-billed Starthroat. *Heliomaster longirostris*. More evidence of local breeding, rarely recorded, comes from an observation by R. Radix of a female incubating on a nest at the Asa Wright Nature Centre on 17 April 1991.

26. Rufous-shafted Woodstar. *Chaetocercus jourdani*. This tiny hummingbird is still seen occasionally at the Nature Centre, recently on 9 and 14 May 1991.

27. Variegated Flycatcher. *Empidonomus varius*. This species, which is difficult to separate in the field from the Piratic Flycatcher *Legatus*, has recently been identified at Simla on 12 January 1991 by tour-leader D. Finch and others, and by Graham and Alison White and myself near Rio Claro on 11 July 1991. Trinidad records between May and October are likely to involve birds of the southern migratory race *varius*, which moves north at

\* Edward Rooks observed and photographed a xanthochroic Orange-winged Parrot at Toco on 3 Nov. 1985 - Ed

that time. I would suspect the January record to involve the resident northern race *rufinus*, which is distinguished by more indistinct streaking on underparts, but which has not been positively identified on Trinidad.

28. Great Kiskadee. *Pitangus sulphuratus*. I was disturbed, but not surprised, to learn from D. Rooks that nesting birds of this species were recently observed at Louis D'Or, Tobago, several miles south of the point where the species was, most regrettably, introduced to Tobago at Speyside by R. Deane and the late E. Lau over 20 years ago.

The introduction of this aggressive and successful species is likely to have a detrimental effect on the indigenous birds of Tobago. I hope that those in authority will see to it that similar introductions are prevented in future.

29. Short-tailed Pygmy-Tyrant. *Myiornis ecaudatus*. A second breeding record for Trinidad comes from a pair feeding two newly flying young near Rio Claro on 11 July 1991, seen by myself, Graham and Alison White.

30. Cliff Swallow. *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*. Further records of this northern migrant include one seen at Kilgwyn Lake, Tobago on 6 December 1990 by B. Soderstrom with two friends, also one at Buccoo beach on 7 February 1991 seen by L. Samuelson with three others; these are the first records for Tobago. Also one was seen at Port of Spain sewage ponds on 15 January 1992 by D. Finch and his party.

31. Red-breasted Blackbird. *Sturnella militaris*. D. Rooks reports the species is no longer to be found on Tobago. If this is the case, one must conclude that the few individuals recorded on Tobago between 1974 and 1980 were unable to establish a viable population.

32. Black-throated Blue Warbler\* *Dendroica caerulescens*. One was seen at Aripo Heights on 22 March 1992 by R. Neckles, only the second record for Trinidad. It is rarely seen as far south.

33. Blackburnian Warbler. *Dendroica fusca*. A male seen and photographed by R. Neckles at Mount Catherine on 8 March 1992 was the fifth record for Trinidad. The species is a common winter resident in Venezuela.

34. Palm Tanager. *Thraupis palmarum*. This has apparently established itself in small numbers locally on Tobago since its first appearance there in 1982.

35. Scarlet Tanager. *Piranga olivacea*. One was seen on Little Tobago in March 1992 by D. Rooks and others of his party; the third record for the island.

## Discussion

**Long-distance migrants.** As long as regular attention is being paid to the monitoring of unusual species, especially by professional and highly experienced amateur ornithologists leading groups of eco-tourists, it is likely that records will continue to be made of species unknown or extremely rare on Trinidad and Tobago. Above are listed five seabirds, three of them new to our islands; there are also three Old World species; and seven North American species, most of them rarely recorded here, with two new to Tobago.

**The South American connection.** For historical and political reasons, attention has hitherto been readily paid to the ornithological relationship between the islands of Trinidad and Tobago and North America. Banding data for migrants has enabled connections to be made and effectively analysed. Faunistically, however, there is a much closer connection between our islands and the South American mainland, in particular Venezuela. Yet little is known about many details of this connection, partly because of inadequate research facilities on both sides of the divide. Now it may be hoped that this deficiency may be remedied, both as a result of the greater willingness towards co-operation between our islands and Latin America, and because of recent developments in ornithological circles in both communities. This paper has included details on about twenty species that move between our islands and the mainland, or in some cases between Trinidad and Tobago. It is perhaps not surprising that these include six diurnal birds of prey, for members of this group are well-known for their extended territories and their wide range. Less predictable are the range extensions of birds of such diverse taxa as *Steatornis*, *Speotyto*, *Burhinus*, *Sturnella* and *Thraupis palmarum*. From time to time we must expect records of secretive species such as *Heliornis* and *Coccyzus minor* along with very small species like *Chaetocercus* and *Myiornis* which might well be missed by all but the most diligent (or lucky!) field worker.

## References

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