
BOOK REVIEWS

Field Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago

Martyn Kenefick, Robin Restall and Floyd Hayes

London: Christopher Helm/A & C Black, 2007. Octavo, paperback, 256 p.

All ornithologists and birders should try to quickly get hold of a copy of this very useful book. I was fortunate to secure a copy before its release in Trinidad, and it now accompanies my binoculars everywhere.

The dedication is to Richard French, whose seminal work *A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago* became a major contribution to neotropical ornithology, and nurtured Trinidad birding from infancy to adulthood. However, this *Field Guide* is a new species evolved to fill a different ecological niche.

The principal author, Martyn Kenefick, is now the foremost authority on bird identification resident in the country, and this text gives us the opportunity of sharing his tremendous experience and knowledge. Floyd Hayes, a central figure in Trinidadian ornithological research, is now resident and lecturing in the USA. He is a prolific writer, and has published over fifty papers on ornithologic subjects, much of this research done in Trinidad and Tobago. Robin Restall, less well-known to Trinidadians, is the executive director of the Phelps Institute for Ornithological Studies in Caracas, and is co-author of *Birds of Northern South America*.

With such an accomplished group of authors one would have high expectations of this guide. It does not disappoint.

The ideal field guide should be lightweight, portable or even pocket sized, and this book achieves that end without compromising on its purpose. Only 15 pages are allocated for the traditional introductory chapters concerning Trinidad's geography, climate and habitats, and general information on bird taxonomy and identification. Following these are seven valuable pages on "where to watch birds in Trinidad and Tobago", concisely packaged practical information reflecting so many years of the authors' experience.

Then the text quickly gets down to business. Family descriptions are usually limited to three lines. The species descriptions are dispassionate, to-the-point and thorough, directly facing the illustration for reference. The descriptions and transcriptions of the bird vocalizations are equally good, but correspondingly brief. The dimensions are given in centimetres, a challenge for us imperially-hung-over inches. Particularly useful in each species account is the section on distinguishing the subject species from similar species in the field.

A major strength of the book is the collection of illustrations. There are 107 colour plates. Virtually all birds (almost 470 species) ever recorded from our islands are illustrated, even the accidentals and vagrants. The pictures are large, all

in colour, and generally of good to excellent quality. There is a good balance between realistic faithfulness to the subject and diagrammatic utility for identification. Short lines on the illustrations quietly and quickly point out the useful field identification marks for emphasis. Most important for field identification is that several illustrations are given for each species, often showing sexual dimorphism, juvenile and immature plumages, and in the case of migrants, the breeding and non-breeding plumage. The warbler and seedeater illustrations are of particularly high standard, with six images given, for instance, of different stages of the Blackpoll Warbler. For the raptors and flycatchers the body proportions of the images do not always match what I see in the field, but this does not seem to hinder identification from the images. Admittedly the oilbird picture is unfortunate. Don't judge the book on the very simple image of the scarlet ibis, which does no justice to our national bird. Instead, bear in mind that the ibis can hardly be confused with anything else in the field.

In keeping the book lightweight and concise, some sacrifices were necessary. The text font is small (aging birders seldom take reading glasses into the field!). The text does not attempt to carry information concerning species natural history, nesting, diet, "jizz", and relationships in natural systems. There is a single index covering the scientific name and the "formal common name" in English. The local names are not used. Therefore if you wanted to search for a *Palmiste*, you'd either have to know the latin name, or know that it belonged to the *tanager* family, and look up tanager in the index.

A useful checklist is included at the end of the book. Also, there is a brief section from the Rare Birds Committee, listing the birds considered to be "reportable".

This is likely to be the most thorough and comprehensive guide to identification of Trinidad and Tobago's birds for several decades. Although comparisons are inevitable, this book is designed to fill a particular need - field identification. Ideally it should be used in conjunction with the French, with Restall's *Birds of Northern South America*, and with Steven Hilty's monumental work *Birds of Venezuela*, to allow us to find and identify a species, appreciate its place in its Trinidadian habitat, and see how the species has developed in the wider neotropical world. It's a great time to be a birder!

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