

Sixteenth Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Birds Status and Distribution Committee Records Submitted During 2018

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The Trinidad and Tobago Rare Birds Committee was established in 1995 to assess, document and archive the occurrence of rare or unusual birds in Trinidad and Tobago and thus provide reliable long-term monitoring of our rarer species. Now re-named the Birds Status and Distribution Committee, we have assessed all records submitted during 2018. In all 107 records were adjudged, representing 54 different species. These included a first documented account for South America and two new species for Tobago. As in previous years, we wish to commend the quality of photographic submissions by so many observers.

Of the submissions assessed, in only 12 cases did the Committee find the identification inconclusive.

Records presented below follow the revised nomenclature and taxonomic order of the South American Classification Committee (SACC) as at December 2018.

The Committee comprises the following members: Martyn Kenefick (Secretary), Faraaz Abdool, Geoffrey Gomes, Nigel Lallsingh, Bill Murphy, Kris Sookdeo and Graham White. Again, there are instances where we have benefited from supporting international expert knowledge to assist us with certain identification issues. We wish to acknowledge the valuable assistance provided by Bill Clark and Scott Weisenthal during 2018

Archived records including photographic submissions number 1,476 at the end of 2018. Previous reports of this Committee were prepared by Hayes and White, (2000); White and Hayes (2002) and Kenefick (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018).

The list of species considered by the TTBSDC (TTRBC), together with the Official List of the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago and details of all accepted records by the Committee can be accessed, from our website at <http://rbc.ttfnc.org>. We urge finders to document and report their sightings to us.

All recorded sightings summarized below occurred in 2018 unless otherwise stated

Records accepted

A **White-faced Whistling-Duck**, *Dendrocygna viduata* was found in flooded farmland at Aranguez on 24 July (JF). This is the only photographic record for 2018 although we are aware of an undocumented flock within the Caroni Rice Project during September.

An eclipsed- plumaged drake **Northern Shoveler**,

Spatula clypeata was found at the Canaan sewage ponds, Tobago on 4 December. (MKe). This is just the fourth documented sighting of this North American migrant in the last 18 years, all being found between late October – early February.

An immature/female plumaged **Lesser Scaup**, *Aythya affinis* found on 30 November at Lowlands, Tobago, remained and was photographed until 10 December at least (GW, MKe). This migrant duck has been documented in six of the last 10 years, all sightings between 16 November – 15 February.

A flock of **American Flamingos**, *Phoenicopterus ruber*, first documented on 31 January and seen throughout the year feeding in the Caroni Swamp, peaked at a magnificent 163 birds by the end of June (many obs).

Two **Dark-billed Cuckoos**, *Coccyzus melacoryphus* were found adjacent to the Caroni Rice Project on 12 July (JF) (Fig.1.) with one still present until 15 September at least. This was in almost the exact location where up to three birds were regularly seen during August 2017 (see Kenefick 2018). What was likely to be a different individual was found along Baboonia Trace on 15 July (RA).

A **Band-rumped Swift**, *Chaetura spinicaudus* was photographed hawking low over the swimming pool at Cuffie River Nature Retreat, Tobago on 14 June.(AB) Whilst a common resident in Trinidad hill forest, this is the first documented record for Tobago.



Fig. 1. dark-billed Cuckoo, Caroni Rice project, July 2018.
Photo Jerome Foster.

For the fourth year in a row, since first being found in 2015, **Amethyst Woodstars**, *Calliphlox amethystinahas* were photographed in Trinidad during 2018 with sightings of an adult male undergoing a complete moult at Yerette from 28 April – 7 July at least (TF) (Fig. 2) and possibly two different individuals feeding on vervain at the Asa Wright Nature Centre between 22 May and 14 June. (MR, CS).



Fig. 2. Amethyst Woodstar, Yerette, July 2018. Photo Theo Furguson.

Single **Black-necked Stilts**, *Himantopus mexicanus* were photographed at Lowlands, Tobago on 18 January (MKe, SN) and at the Canaan sewage ponds on 20 November (MKe). Whether both sightings refer to the same individual is unknown. These are the first documented records for Tobago since 2005.

A **Double-striped Thick-Knee**, *Burhinus bistriatus* remained faithful to a small area of the Queens Park Savanna, Port of Spain from 18 July – 1 September at least (Bd'A *et al.*). It is likely to be the same individual which was found in the same unlikely spot in August 2017 (see Kenefick 2018). Additionally, two birds were photographed close to Kernaham settlement on 2 September (ZA). All but two documented sightings of this species in the last 24 years have occurred between 6 July - 2 September.

An immature (probable male) **Ruff**, *Calidris pugnax* was photographed feeding in wet farmland at Aranguez on 20 October (RA). Still a truly rare wanderer, breeding in Europe and wintering in Africa, this is just the third documented record in the last 18 years.

For the eighth year in a row, **Franklin's Gulls**, *Leucophaeus pipixcan* have been found amongst the Laughing Gull high tide roost on the west coast tidal mudflats with a first winter plumaged bird at Brickfield on 1 January (NL) (Fig.3) and an adult in winter plumage on 17 October at Orange Valley (NL).

An **Audubon's Shearwater**, *Puffinus lherminieri* was well documented swimming close inshore at Salybia Bay on 26 November 2017 (LA, MR). This species is normally only seen when nesting on Little Tobago island. It rarely



Fig. 3. Franklin's Gull, Brickfield Mudflats, January 2018. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

comes in sight of land during daylight hours and had not been found in Trinidad waters for many years.

A **Jabiru**, *Jabiru mycteria*, was found feeding in a wet field close to Fishing Pond on 6 July (KM). Sadly it only remained for a few moments and could not be relocated. As is to be expected with austral wanderers, all ten documented sightings in the last 18 years have been between 11 June – 9 September.

An adult **Striated Heron**, *Butorides striata* was photographed at Castara, Tobago on 20 June (AB). Despite its abundance in Trinidad, this is just the second documented Tobago sighting in the last 23 years.

The **Gray Heron**, *Ardea cinerea*, first found on the west coast tidal mudflats in 2016 (see Kenefick 2017, 2018) was still present until 27 May at least. (many obs)

Up to two **Little Egrets**, *Egretta garzetta*, first found in 2016 (see Kenefick 2017, 2018), remained throughout the year on the Trincity River (many obs).

A flock of approximately 500 **Scarlet Ibis**, *Eudocimus ruber* were seen from many locations along the Tobago coastline on 9-10 September. (ES *et al.*) This coincides with vastly increasing numbers taking up residence in Caroni Swamp and may have been a consequence of a major earthquake which had an epicentre in north eastern Venezuela on 21 August.

Single **Snail Kites**, *Rostrhamus sociabilis* were found hunting over Caroni Rice Project on 12 January (JF), Aranguez farmland on 30 March (BJ) and at Pt Fortin on 7 April (CS). Of the 15 documented sightings in the last 20 years, all but four have occurred between January-May.

A **Plumbeous Kite**, *Ictinia plumbea* was photographed gliding NE over Englishman's Bay, Tobago on 5 January. (MKe) Not only is this an exceptionally early date for this visitor from the mainland, it also constitutes the first documented record for Tobago.

A pair of **Great Black Hawks**, *Buteogallus urubitinga* were documented soaring over Gran Couva on 10 January (NL) whilst two more were photographed near Manzanilla on 18 March (KM). Identification of this large raptor

remains a real challenge and its similarity to the regularly seen Common Black Hawk, *Buteogallus anthracinus* may well mask its true status in Trinidad.

The hybrid **White-tailed Hawk**, *Geranoaetus albicaudatus* x **Savanna Hawk**, *Buteogallus meridionalis* first found on the Caroni Rice Project on 26 July 2017 (see Kenefick 2018) remained until 12 January at least (many observers).

An adult **White-tailed Hawk**, *Geranoaetus albicaudatus* was photographed close to Kernaham village in Nariva swamp on 21 January (KM). This is the fourth time in six years that this species, and likely the same individual, has been recorded in this area.

A **Bat Falcon**, *Falco ruficularis* was photographed perched atop a dead tree overlooking Englishman's Bay, Tobago on 1 December 2017 (LA, NG)(Fig. 4). Whilst widespread yet uncommon in Trinidad, this constitutes just the third documented record for Tobago, and the first for eight years.



Fig. 4. Bat Falcon, Englishman's Bay, December 2017, Photo Luis Arce.

A **White-eyed Parakeet**, *Psittacara leucophthalmus* was photographed feeding in coastal trees at Brickfield on 19 May (CC).

Small-billed Elaenia, *Elaenia parvirostris* in recent years has become an expected austral visitor to Trinidad. During 2018, documented sightings were as follows:- one at the Asa Wright Nature Centre on 4 July (MK, GW); two adjacent to the Caroni Rice Project on 7 July (NL); two at Carlsen Fields on 28 July (JF); one at Orange Grove on 12 August (JF); up to three feeding close to the mangrove at Orange Valley on 27 August (NL) and one along Rahamut Trace on 31 August (JF *et al.*).

A male **Slaty Elaenia**, *Elaenia strepera* was carefully studied in woodland close to Arboretum Road, Chaguaramas on 30 May (Bd'A) (Fig. 5.). This is just the second documented sighting of this austral wanderer in the last 20 years.

A **Lesser Elaenia**, *Elaenia chiriquensis* was photo-



Fig. 5. Slaty Elaenia, Chaguaramas, May 2018. Photo Brian D'Abreau.

graphed feeding on the border of Caroni Rice Project on 26 July (NL). This remains one of the most challenging resident species to identify in Trinidad. Whilst smaller, its similarity to the Yellow-bellied Elaenia may mask its true status and abundance, as size is often difficult to accurately determine in the field.

An immature male **Crested Doradito**, *Pseudocolopteryx sclateri* was found in a wet grassy field along Rahamut trace on 29 August (DH). This sighting was extremely close to the area where three pairs were present in July - September 2010.

An elusive, skulking **White-eyed Vireo**, *Vireo griseus* was photographed close to the Erin Savanna on 9 January, remaining until 12 January at least (NL *et al.*)(Fig.6). This constitutes the first photographed and documented record for South America. No photographs were ever submitted to support the only previous sighting in Tobago in January 1998. The normal wintering range for this species rarely extends further south than northern Nicaragua.



Fig. 6. White-eyed Vireo, Erin Savanna, January 2018. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

A **Black-whiskered Vireo**, *Vireo altiloquus* was found on Mt. St. Benedict on 22 September (JF). This species is still very scarce in Trinidad and Tobago despite being a common resident throughout much of the Lesser Antilles.

Three **Cliff Swallows**, *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota* were found hawking insects over Bon Accord sewage ponds, Tobago on 18 November (SMcC, CN) and up to four

birds were watched feeding over Lowlands, Tobago on 10 December (MKe).

Single adult male **Yellow-bellied Seedeaters**, *Sporophila nigricollis* were found in the southern foothills of the Northern range as follows :- farm roads close to Arima on 30 August (MO, BH); Maracas St Joseph on 22 September (FM, AS) and on Mt St Benedict the same date (JF, MH).

An adult male **Scarlet Tanager**, *Piranga olivacea* was photographed in forest close to Brasso Seco on 16 April. Almost all occurrences in Trinidad and Tobago are on north-bound migration; of those, all but one have occurred in April.

An adult male **Rose-breasted Grosbeak**, *Pheucticus ludovicianus* was photographed feeding on the fruit of both Trema and Wild Tobacco at the Asa Wright Nature Centre on 23 April (BR, MK *et al.*), remaining until 29 April at least (Fig. 7). Of the 13 documented records in the last 18 years, 10 have occurred during March-April.



Fig. 7. Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Asa Wright Nature Centre, April 2018. Photo Nancy Walker.

An immature **Cape May Warbler**, *Setophaga tigrina* was carefully studied and photographed at Gran Couva on 18 February (KS). This is just the fifth documented record of this migrant warbler in the last 23 years.

The immature female **Cerulean Warbler**, *Setophaga cerulean* first found on 4 December 2017 (see Kenefick 2018) remained faithful to a large Samaan tree in Gran Couva until 18 March. Amazingly, what is obviously the same bird, now in adult plumage, returned on 25 December,



Fig. 8. Cerulean Warbler, Grand Couva, December 2018. Photo Nigel Lalsingh

remaining to the year end (NL)(Fig. 8.).

Three basic plumaged **Blackburnian Warblers**, *Setophaga fusca* have been documented in 2018. During the first winter period, a probable female was at Gran Couva on 18 February (JF) and a probable male was photographed in the Caura Valley on 27 February (NL). At the end of the year another male was found at Gran Couva on 27 December (NL). This brings to five, the total of sightings in the last three years and may reflect the continuing abundance of Spruce Budworm, a favoured food source, on their breeding grounds.

A **Chestnut-sided Warbler**, *Setophaga pensylvanica* moulting into alternate plumage was photographed at Chaguaramas on 3 March (FO). Once considered to be an exceptionally rare winter visitor from the north, six birds have now been documented in the last eight years; all between 29 December – 6 April.

A flock of at least 50 **Bobolink**, *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* were feeding in weedy fields along Rahamut trace on 14 October (KSo, FA *et al.*). Of the 25 documented sightings of this southbound migrant, all but five have been during October.

A male **Red-winged Blackbird**, *Agelaius phoeniceus* was found in marshes close to Caroni Swamp, and was irregularly reported up until mid 1981 (TM). The sighting was accepted by Richard French and, in accordance with practice at that time was incorporated onto the Official List. Lack of photographic evidence however precluded the record being considered SACC for acceptance onto the South American Checklist. Photographs have now come to light and as such will be assessed by SACC. The photos (Fig. 9) are very poor quality. However they present sufficient detail to convince members of the Committee of

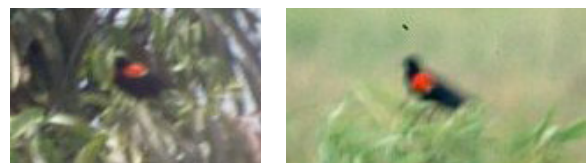


Fig. 9. Red-winged Blackbird, Caroni Swamp 1981. Photographer Tim Manolis.

the identification.

Escaped cage and aviary species

We are aware of a reintroduction project involving **Muscovy Ducks** *Cairina moschata* from Point-à-Pierre Wildfowl Trust. Sightings of this species from the south west peninsula of Trinidad may involve such birds.

Village Weavers, *Ploceus culcullatus* remain in small numbers on Caroni Rice Project; a **Rose-ringed Parakeet**, *Psittacula krameri* was found in Aranguez and **Red-and-Green Macaws**, *Ara chloropterus* continue to be seen at many locations throughout coastal Trinidad.

The provenance of seedeater and seed-finch species continues to be a problem. The Committee has taken a decision that, unless there is supporting evidence to the contrary, all sightings will be considered under this category and that assessment will be based on identification alone.

Additional records

Acceptable records were also received for a further 39 sightings of the following species whose status has been established but whose distribution continues to be monitored by the Committee: **Scaled Dove**, *Columbina squammata* (Fig. 10); **Blue Ground Dove**, *Claravis pretiosa*; **Rufous-necked Wood-Rail**, *Aramides axillaris* (Fig. 11); **Rufescent Tiger-Heron**, *Tigrisoma lineatum* (Fig. 12.); **Little Egret**, *Egretta garzetta*; **Glossy Ibis**, *Plegadis falcinellus*; **Black Hawk-Eagle**, *Spizaetus tyrannus*; **Crane Hawk**, *Geranospiza caerulescens*; **Rufous Crab Hawk**, *Buteogallus aequinoctialis*; **Crested Caracara**, *Caracara cheriway*; **Aplomado Falcon**, *Falco femoralis*; **Variigated Flycatcher**, *Empidonomus varius*; **Summer Tanager**, *Piranga rubra*.

Inconclusive records

Submissions of the following species were deemed inconclusive: **White-faced Whistling-Duck**, *Dendrocygna viduata*; **Chapman's Swift**, *Chaetura chapmani*; **Gull-billed Tern**, *Gelochelidon nilotica*; **Hook-billed Kite**, *Chondrohierax uncinatus*; **Great Black Hawk**, *Buteogallus urubitinga*; **Orange-breasted Falcon**, *Falco deiroleucus*; **White-eyed Parakeet**, *Psittacara leucophthalmus*; **Small-billed Elaenia**, *Elaenia parvirostris*; **Lesser Elaenia**, *Elaenia chiriquensis*; **Ruddy-breasted Seedeater**, *Sporophila minuta*; **Yellow-bellied Seedeater**, *Sporophila nigricollis*.

Nomenclature changes

Part of the mission statement of the South American Classification Committee is to create a standard classification, with English names, for the birds of South America. This is subject to constant revision by the proposal system to allow incorporation of new data.



Fig. 10. Scaled Dove, Brickfield, November 2018. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.



Fig. 12. Rufous-necked Wood-Rail, Manzanilla, April 2018. Photo Kamal Mahabir.



Fig. 11. Rufescent Tiger-Heron, Chatham, 12 January 2018. Photo Kamal Mahabir.

The following change was made in 2018: **Gray-cowled Wood-Rail** (*Aramides cajaneus*) formerly Gray-necked Wood-Rail. (Remsen *et al.* 2018)

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