

# Fifteenth report of the Trinidad and Tobago Birds Status and Distribution Committee

## Records submitted during 2017

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### INTRODUCTION

The Trinidad and Tobago Birds Status and Distribution Committee (TTBSDC) 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.

The official list of the birds of Trinidad and Tobago together with the list of species considered by the committee and details of all records accepted by the Committee can be accessed on-line at <http://rbc.ttfnc.org>. Previous reports of the committee were prepared by Hayes and White, (2000); White and Hayes (2002) and Kenefick (2005, annually 2007-2017). Archived records including photographic submissions number 1369 at the end of 2017.

The Committee has assessed all records submitted during 2017. In all 152 records were adjudged, representing 56 different species. This represents the highest number of submissions and the highest number of “reportable species” since the formation of the Committee. This illustrates both the continued growth and popularity of birdwatching nationally. We also wish to commend the quality of photographic submissions by so many observers and urge observers to continue to document and report their sightings to us.

Of the submissions assessed, in only nine cases did the Committee find the identification inconclusive. However the year coincided with a number of identification challenges for the Committee, principally with submissions of smaller *Elaenias* and immature *Ardea* herons. Currently five *Elaenia* submissions remain outstanding and a working party within the Committee aims to create a template to both scrutinise same and create a template to simplify the process for the future. Concurrent to that, a similar template is being worked upon to clarify proven differences between immature plumage of the three *Ardea* heron species known to occur.

Records presented below follow the revised nomenclature and taxonomic order of the South American Classification Committee as at June 2018 (Van Remsen *et al.* 2018).

The Committee comprises the following members: Martyn Kenefick (Secretary), 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, Jon Dunn, Dr Kamal Islam, Michael O’Brian David Sibley, James Smith

and Scott Weisensaul (USA ) and Robin Restall (UK) during 2017. All recorded sightings summarised below occurred in 2017 unless otherwise stated.

### Records accepted

A presumed pair of **White-faced Whistling-Duck**, *Dendrocygna viduata* found along an irrigation channel within farmland at Orange Grove on 13 May, increased to four birds on the 27 May (JF *et al.*). Almost all sightings of this austral wanderer occur between mid-May and mid-October.

A juvenile or adult female **Muscovy Duck**, *Cairina moschata* was photographed flying over Sumaria trace, Charlieville on 1 October (RA, MB). Whilst we remain concerned over provenance of this species in the south-west peninsula of Trinidad, all indications are that this bird could well be of wild origin.

A pair of **American Wigeon**, *Mareca americana* was found in Caroni Rice Project on 4 March (DN, JR). This is the first documented record of this species for the island of Trinidad in the last 22 years. On 8 March an adult female was photographed at Bon Accord sewage lagoons, Tobago (MKe). These constitute the latest dates for this migrant duck, previous latest being 21 February 2005.

Two **Northern Shoveler**, *Spatula clypeata* likely both females were found at Bon Accord sewage lagoons, Tobago on 2 November, remaining until the 25 November at least (LK). This is just the third documented account of this species in the last 22 years.

Two pairs of **Lesser Scaup**, *Aythya affinis* were photographed swimming on Arena Reservoir on 14 January (MKe, FO). This species is one of our more regular migrant ducks, having been found in seven of the last 17 years.

An adult **American Flamingo**, *Phoenicopterus ruber* was seen flying over Caroni Swamp on 18 March (MK *et al.*). Over the course of the next two months, numbers increased to a maximum of 75 birds on 7 May, with one remaining until at least 7 June.

An immature **Scaly-naped Pigeon**, *Patagioenas squamosa* was photographed perched in roadside mangrove south of Manzanilla on 25 October (BR). Whilst this species has now colonised Little Tobago island and the adjacent Tobago headlands, this is the first documented sighting for Trinidad.

A pair of **Blue Ground Dove**, *Claravis pretiosa* were

found on the Chaguaramas peninsula on 4 March (JF,FO) and subsequently seen and heard by many observers. Whilst this remains an uncommon and localised resident of dry Trinidad scrub and forest, its wary and secretive nature may belie its true abundance

A **Dark-billed Cuckoo**, *Coccyzus melacoryphus* was found in scrub bordering Caroni Rice Project on 8 August (NL). On subsequent days at least three birds were seen by many observers, with two still present on 13 August. All documented sightings of this austral wanderer in the last 22 years have occurred between 24 July and 31 August.

On 17 June 2013, a moulting adult male **Rufous-shafted Woodstar**, *Chaetocercus jourdani* was photographed at Asa Wright Nature Centre (SG). Whilst the identification of Woodstars sometimes represents a challenge for the Committee, this is the first documented individual to show its unique tail shape and pattern. There have now been five confirmed sightings of this erratic austral wanderer with all records from early May to late August

Single **Amethyst Woodstars**, *Calliphlox amethystina* were documented as follows :- an immature male at Surry village, Lopinot on 29 April (GW); an immature at Asa Wright on 2 May (DP); an adult male at Yerette on 24 May (TF) and another immature at Asa Wright on 8 June (MK). Since first found back in 2015, there have now been eight documented sightings of this wandering hummingbird from mainland South America, all occurring between 29 April and 26 July.

An **American Coot**, *Fulica americana* was found in a flooded field within Caroni Rice Project on 25 July (RA). The extent of white on the blaze, reaching the top of the head, together with the date show this to be a wandering *F a caribaea*, probably from the Lesser Antilles, formerly known as Caribbean Coot and now considered conspecific with American Coot.

A record-breaking total of four individual **Double-striped Thick-Knees**, *Burhinus bistriatus* were found in widely separate localities during the year as follows :- at Waller Field on 6 July (KF,DR); alongside a golf course at Trincity on 10 July (MK,RJ); in Caroni Rice Project on 30 July (NL) and finally in the unusual location of Queens Park Savanna, Port of Spain on 22 August (FO). Of interest, this last locality is the site of the very first record of this species in Trinidad, back in 1983. Now documented in four of the last six years, these sightings have all occurred within the expected date range of early July to early September.

An **Upland Sandpiper**, *Bartramia longicauda* was photographed, also on Queens Park Savanna, Port of Spain on 29 August (JF). This brings to 13, the total number of sightings of this rare southbound migrant from continental North America in the last 22 years with all but one birds occurring between 29 August and 26 October.

A basic plumaged adult **Curlew Sandpiper**, *Calidris ferruginea* was photographed at Brickfield on 16 December 2014 (NL). There have now been three documented records of this Eurasian shorebird in Trinidad, others being in May 2002 and September 2016.

Two **Buff-breasted Sandpiper**, *Calidris subruficollis* were found in agricultural fields north of Waterloo Main Rd. on 30 September, one remaining until 15 October at least (NL)(Fig. 1). All 18 documented records of this southbound migrant shorebird in the last 22 years, have been between



**Fig. 1.** Buff-breasted Sandpiper, *Calidris subruficollis*, Waterloo, October 2017. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

17 September and 28 October.

Up to three **Franklin's Gulls**, *Leucophaeus pipixcan* first found on 4 December 2016 (see Kenefick 2017) remained through to 16 February at least. An adult found at Pigeon Pt. Tobago on 3 April (RL) is the first documented record for the island. Elsewhere a late northbound adult was photographed at Brickfield on 5 May (NL) and an early arriving bird in first winter plumage found at the same site on 1 August (NL).

The **Audouin's Gull**, *Ichthyaeetus audouini* first found in December 2016 (see Kenefick 2017) was again present at Brickfield on 14 January (NL) and from 30 March to 3 April (many observers) and finally further north at Invaders Bay on 17 August (WR). This record has now been accepted by the South American Classification Committee of the American Ornithologists Union as the first confirmed sighting for South America.

An adult **White-tailed Tropicbird**, *Phaethon lepturus* was seen from the lookout on Little Tobago island on 12

January (KB, DJ)(Fig. 2). Subsequent reports confirmed a breeding pair which successfully raised one chick (many observers). Whilst long anticipated, this is the first confirmed breeding of this species in Trinidad and Tobago.



**Fig. 2.** White-tailed Tropicbird, *Phaethon lepturus*, Little Tobago island on 12 January 2017 photo Nigel Hacking.

A **Cory's Shearwater**, *Calonectris diomedea* was seen flying south along the coast at Manzanilla on 2 January (TJ). This remains a rare migrant seabird to local waters, with almost all sightings coming from the winward coast of Tobago and Trinidad's eastern coastline from November to May.

An immature **Agami Heron**, *Agamia agami* was found in flooded lowland forest east of Brasso Seco during early March (CF)(Fig. 3). This is the first documented record of this shy and elusive wanderer from mainland South America since 1961



**Fig. 3.** Agami Heron, *Agamia agami*, Brasso Seco, March 2017. Photo Carl Fitzjames.

The **Gray Heron**, *Ardea cinerea* first found at Bon Accord, Tobago on 28 December 2016 (see Kenefick 2017) was reported until 6 April. Similarly, the individual first found at Brickfield on 18 December 2016 (see Kenefick 2017) remained throughout the year. Additionally, a bird in first winter plumage was photographed at Waterloo on 8 July (NL).

At least one of the **Glossy Ibis**, *Plegadis falcinellus* first found on 27 November 2015 at Bon Accord, Tobago (see Kenefick 2016, 2017) remained until 1 February at least. Additionally single birds were photographed at Caroni Rice Project on 31 July (NL) and Saturnine trace, Penal on 14 August (RG). Once a rare wanderer from the mainland, they now occur annually and have been found in most months of the year

An adult male **Snail Kite**, *Rostrhamus sociabilis* was photographed on Caroni Rice Project on 21 March. Later joined by two birds in immature/female plumage they remained until 11 April at least (JF, JG, KM). On 23 April, a male was photographed at farmland in Aranguez (JF) and a further male was at Orange Grove on 13 May. It is possible that only three birds in total were involved. Formerly a very rare wanderer from the mainland, they have now occurred during the period March-May in four of the last seven years.

A bird of prey which puzzled many observers for a long while was eventually identified as a hybrid **White-tailed Hawk**, *Geranoaetus albicaudatus* x **Savanna Hawk**, *Buteogallus meridionalis*. It was first found on 26 July (RA *et al.*)(Fig. 4) and remained present until the year end. This is the first ever documented report of such hybridisation in Trinidad.



**Fig. 4.** Hybrid White-tailed Hawk, *Geranoaetus albicaudatus* x Savanna Hawk, *Buteogallus meridionalis*. Caroni Rice Project 2017. Photo Jerome Foster.

In each of the last five years, a pair of **Brown-throated Parakeet**, *Eupsittula pertinax* has been observed inspecting/excavating holes in termite nests in the Aripo savanna area. On 5 December, three birds were found together, indicative of successful breeding (EC, ES).

**Two White-eyed Parakeet**, *Psittacara leucophthalmus* were photographed close to Talparo on 27 February (FO).

In south-west Trinidad a flock of approximately 20 were seen flying into roost in Mango trees at Pleasantville, San Fernando on 9 June (RL) with varying numbers being seen in the general area on a number of dates subsequently (many observers). The feral flock, based in the northern suburbs of Port of Spain has been reported as far east as San Juan.

A **Small-billed Elaenia**, *Elaenia parvirostris* was found at Orange Grove on 23 May (JF) and two different birds were photographed at Carlsen Fields on 4 June and 10 June respectively (NL). Thereafter up to four birds were present in a small agricultural area alongside Caroni Rice Project on 10 August with at least one remaining until the 14 August (NL *et al.*). These sightings fall within the newly established pattern of sightings in Trinidad. In all since 2007, 25 birds have been found; all but one between 11 May and 5 September.

A **Lesser Elaenia**, *Elaenia chiriquensis* was photographed at Baboonia trace, Charlieville on 24 August (JF). Currently five other submissions are still under review by the Committee. This remains a scarce resident of Trinidad lowland scrub. The complexity of *Elaenia* flycatcher identification may mask its true abundance.

During the year, five sightings of **Black-whiskered Vireo**, *Vireo altiloquus* were as follows :- at Gran Couva on 12 February (JF); Poole on 24 March (FO); Carlsen Field on 16 June (JF); Caroni swamp on 16 September (WR) and Morne Bleu on 7 October (FA). This species is a partial or short-distance migrant, breeding both on many of the Lesser Antilles and also islands off of the Venezuelan coastline. Of the 37 documented records in the last 22 years, all but one reflect non-breeding dispersal. However we now have a June sighting. The question remains as to whether this is merely a delayed migrant, or whether the species may now become resident.

**Southern Rough-winged Swallow**, *Stelgidopteryx ruficollis* is a common and widespread Trinidad resident species, but in Tobago it is rare. One found over Bon Accord sewage lagoons on 11 January (DJ) is just the fourth documented record for the island.

A **Bank Swallow**, *Riparia riparia* was found at Bon Accord sewage lagoons on 3 November (CH, RH). Still a distinctly rare migrant to Tobago, all four records this century have been from this location.

Northbound migrant **Cliff Swallows**, *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota* were observed on Caroni Rice Project on 4 March (NL), 28 March (JF), 11 April (JF) and 27 April (JF). Returning southbound birds were found at Trincity on 11 September (MK, NL) and at Brickfield on 28 October (NL). This is by far the largest ever number of sightings in Trinidad. It is, however, uncertain whether this reflects increased observer coverage, increased observer awareness of *hirundine* identification or a true change in migration distribution.

A pair of **Lesson's Seedeaters**, *Sporophila bouvronides* were found in St. Joseph on 21 October (CC, JF). On the same date, a male was photographed in farmland at El Socorro (RJ, SR). The date pattern suggests natural wanderers from the mainland, however escapees from the pet trade cannot be eliminated. No reports were received this year from the historic breeding site in south Trinidad.

Single male **Yellow-bellied Seedeater**, *Sporophila nigricollis* were found at Orange Grove on 5 May (JF), Morne Catherine on 24 September (FO) and Mt. St. Benedict on 9 October (MC, JR). This follows the now anticipated trend of sightings from the north-west peninsula and farmlands and grasslands at the southern base of the Northern Range. Of the 22 documented records archived since the formation of this Committee, all but two were from these geographical areas.

An adult male **Scarlet Tanager**, *Piranga olivacea* was photographed at Asa Wright Nature Centre on 9 April (PD *et al.*) and again seen on 16 April (BR). Of the 11 documented, northbound migration records of this species, all but one have occurred from 8 to 28 April.

A returning adult female **Black and White Warbler**, *Mniotilta varia* was found once again in a patch of mangrove close to Carli Bay on 13 October (NL) for its fourth successive winter.

For the second year running, what we assume to be the same **Tennessee Warbler**, *Leiothlypis peregrina* was photographed feeding in a line of trees adjacent to Brickfield Fishing Depot on 9 December (NL). First documented in Trinidad as recently as 2014, there have now been five sightings of this southbound migrant, in three years.

A female **Cerulean Warbler**, *Setophaga cerulea* found on 4 December at Gran Couva remained until the year end at least (JF *et al.*), although its preference for feeding in the tops of an extremely large Samaan tree precluded positive identification for some while. Considered "vulnerable" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and known to have suffered a decrease in population by more than 70% in the last 50 years, this is the fourth documented sighting for Trinidad and Tobago and the only individual known to be present for more than one day.

The **Bay-breasted Warbler**, *Setophaga castanea* first found at Carli Bay on 18 December 2016 (see Kenefick 2017) remained until at least 31 January. Another was found at Talparo on 22 January (KM, FO). Since first found in 2014, they have been documented every year since; but not, as yet, from Tobago.

A **Chestnut-sided Warbler**, *Setophaga pensylvanica* in basic plumage was found at Bon Accord, Tobago on 15 February (MKe). This is the first documented record for Tobago in the last 22 years. Whilst still considered a very rare southbound migrant, five have been found in the last seven years.

A female **Canada Warbler**, *Cardellina canadensis* was found in mangrove adjacent to Bon Accord sewage lagoons on 8 February (MKe). This constitute the first documented sighting for Tobago and just the second nationally of this migrant warbler which has a wide wintering distribution throughout northern South America

A female **Baltimore Oriole**, *Icterus galbula* was found at Asa Wright Nature Centre on 13 May (RD,AG,LN)(Fig. 5). This is just the third documented sighting of this northbound migrant in the last 23 years.



**Fig. 5.** Baltimore Oriole, *Icterus galbula*, Asa Wright Nature Centre, May 13 2017. Photo Ashley Grove

A flock of 11 **Bobolink**, *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* was found inside Caroni Rice Project on 23 October (MC, JR). This southbound migrant from continental North America is now found almost annually with 18 out of the last 20 documented sightings being from 1 October to 22 November.

#### Additional records

Acceptable records were also received for a further 67 sightings of the following species whose status has been established but who's distribution continues to be monitored by the Committee. **Scaled Dove**, *Columbina squammata*; **Rufous-necked Wood-Rail**, *Aramides axillaris*; **Rufescent Tiger-Heron**, *Tigrisoma lineatum*; **Hook-billed Kite**, *Chondrohierax uncinatus*; **Black Hawk-Eagle**, *Spizaetus tyrannus*; **Rufous Crab-Hawk**, *Buteogallus aequinoctialis*; **Crane Hawk**, *Geranospiza caerulescens*; **Little Egret**, *Egretta garzetta*; **Crested Caracara**, *Caracara cheriway* (Fig. 6); **Applomado Falcon**, *Falco femoralis*; **Variiegated Flycatcher**, *Empidonomus varius*; **Summer Tanager**, *Piranga rubra*.



**Fig. 6.** Crested Caracara, *Caracara cheriway* adult with nestling. Nesting of this species was first documented in March-April 2017, location withheld. Photo Richard Lakhan.

#### Escaped cage and aviary species

We are aware of a reintroduction project involving **Muscovy Ducks** *Cairina moschata* from Point a Pierre Wildfowl Trust. Sightings of this species from the south-west peninsula of Trinidad may involve birds from this scheme. **Village Weavers**, *Ploceus culcullatus* remain in small numbers on Caroni Rice Project and **Tricolored Munias**, *Lonchura malacca* are spreading throughout western and central Trinidad. Elsewhere, exotic parrot species continue to be reported. **Painted Parakeet**, *Pyrrhura picta* has been photographed in both Princes Town and Port of Spain; **Red-shouldered Macaw**, *Diopsittaca nobilis* from Waterloo; **Red and Green Macaws**, *Ara chloropterus* from La Brea, Palo Seco, Vessigny, Quinam, Santa Flora, Las Cuevas, Blanchisseuse, Cumuto and Moka and a **Military Macaw**, *Ara militaris* from south Valsayn. A **Blue Bunting**, *Cyanocompsa parellina* at Orange Grove and a **Venezuelan Troupial**, *Icterus icterus* in Carlsen Fields are also presumed to be a loss to cage-bird owners .

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 on identification alone. **Chestnut-bellied Seed-Finch**, *Oryzoborus angolensis* was reported from South Oropouche and Carli Bay; an adult male **Lesson's Seedfinch**, *Sporophila bouvronides* from Nariva and a **Chestnut Munia**, *Lonchura atricapilla* was photographed at Caroni Rice Project.

#### Inconclusive records

Submissions of the following species were deemed inconclusive :- **Green Heron**, *Butorides virescens* (Trinidad); **Gray Heron**, *Ardea cinerea*; **Lesser Elaenia**, *Elaenia chiriquensis*; **Cliff Swallow**, *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota*; **Louisiana Waterthrush**, *Seiurus motacilla* **Blackburnian Warbler**, *Setophaga fusca*.

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