

History of The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club.

The years 1891 – 1953.*

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The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club was founded on July 10, 1891 by a small band of eight ardent naturalists, all of whom have since died. At this inaugural meeting held at the residence of Henry Caracciolo, R. R. Mole took the chair, and its most enthusiastic member and originator of the idea, Henry Caracciolo, was elected President, and Alfred Taitt, Hon. Secretary and Treasurer. The others were: W. E. Broadway, F. W. Urich, T. I. Potter, G. W. Hewlett and P. L. Guppy.

Preceded by a more august body – The Scientific Association of Trinidad – The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club was the first society of its kind to be formed in the island, and its object was (as it still is) to bring together those persons resident in Trinidad who were interested in Natural History. Although useful scientific work of local import was done – a fact borne out by papers on the biology and habits of insect and other pests, with the view to their control or eradication – emphasis was placed on the simpler aspiration of the naturalist and nature lover. In the words of His Excellency the then Governor of the island, Sir Napier Broome, Patron of the Club, and shortly afterwards a full-fledged participating member, the main purpose of the Club was “. . . to give pleasure to its members by observation of animal, insect and plant life in Trinidad.”

About a month after its founding – on August 8, 1891 – the Club held its first regular meeting with Henry Caracciolo as President in the chair. Great zeal marked the beginning of the Society. New members were elected and two papers presented. These were:- “On the Metamorphoses of Insects” by the President, and “On the Preservation of Entomological Specimens,” by P. L. Guppy. Mr. Urich read a letter from the Zoological Society, London, acknowledging the receipt of snakes and lizards sent by Mr. Mole and himself, and Mole exhibited a peculiarly marked lizard from Fort George, which seemed to be an undescribed, and possibly new species.** Two months later, Broadway reported that a dragon-fly captured by him was found to be a new genus by the British Museum authorities, and by the end of the year Broadway was credited with the discovery of a new species of butterfly, (then named *Tithorea flavescens*)

locally called “Sweet Oil.” Caracciolo had a new bat named after him (*Vampyrops caracciolo*)^o; and Urich and Mole had the distinction of their joint paper on Snakes and Lizards of Trinidad being read before the Zoological Society of London.

This sort of work – the collecting of specimens for identification of animals and plants, with detailed observations and study of life histories and habits – continued with enthusiasm. Starting with eight members, by the end of the first year, membership in the Club had increased to 49, including about seven foreign scientists as honorary members. A bi-monthly journal was started for the publication of papers and proceedings which ran into two volumes covering the period April 1892 to February 1894, and February 1894 to February 1896. Those volumes have long since been out of print, and have been in great demand by scientists and students interested in the natural history of the island.

As a member, and particularly during my eighteen years of office as Honorary Secretary and Treasurer, it was my good fortune to know Caracciolo, Broadway, Urich, Guppy, Carr[•] and Potter as veteran naturalists in their respective fields, and it is a matter of regret for me that I did not have the opportunity of knowing R. R. Mole, whose invaluable work on the “Snakes of Trinidad” (1) has the greatest appeal for me. Mole spent some thirty years in the study and recording of the snake fauna of the island and Guppy spent as many years in similar work on the fresh-water fishes. Mole's book, a constant source of reference for the interested student, is the only work on the subject, and it is out of print. Guppy's work on fresh-water fishes is still in manuscript form (2). It is regrettable that Urich and Broadway did not write much more than they did, for both these men were possessed of considerable knowledge of the local flora and fauna. Everyone, professional and amateur alike, regarded Broadway as a walking encyclopedia on the botany of the Island, and Urich as an excellent counterpart on its zoology, particularly insects and reptiles.

I remember the late Dr. Adamson, Professor of Entomology at the Imperial College of Tropical

* This article was originally published in the Aug. 1955 issue of The Caribbean, the Journal of the Anglo-American Caribbean Commission, an organization that is now defunct - Ed.

† Now deceased - Ed.

** This lizard was named *Sphaerodactylus molei* after the discoverer - Ed.

^o Now *Vampyropes caraccioloi* - Ed.

[•] A.B. Carr, Andrew Carr's uncle - Ed.

Agriculture – himself a scientist of world repute – saying to me on one occasion:– “Urich possesses a great fund of valuable information, but he does not care much for writing. It is a pity he has not got his “Boswell”.”

The Trinidad Field Naturalists’ Club has done much good work in placing our animals and plants on scientific record. Many species commemorate the names of some of its members and the published results of careful and accurate observation on plant and animal life have made valuable contributions to scientific knowledge. The aim of such contributions is not necessarily technically scientific. The Club has rather laid emphasis on the desirability of having its members interest themselves in some aspect of Natural History, carry out as close observations as possible, make accurate and illustrated notes, and submit them, however brief they may be, at meetings, under the feature – “Miscellaneous Notes.”

In furtherance of this purpose, Rev. Father L. J. Graf, C. S. Sp.†, a former President, who was in 1955 accorded the honour of honorary membership for life, gave a series of lectures a few years ago, on biology and zoology to the younger members of the Club.

By way of illustration, I should like to mention some achievements of members. An early member, J. E. Tanner, who devoted himself particularly to the study of the Parasol Ant, was the first person to observe its behaviour in artificial nests, and so confirmed Belt’s theory that the ant did not feed on the leaves and flowers which it so assiduously cuts and carries to its nest, but instead feeds on a fungus cultivated and grown on the chewed pulp of the material gathered. A. B. Carr discovered that our Trinidad viper – the Mapepire Z’anana or Bushmaster (*Lachesis muta*) laid eggs, and thus was different in its breeding habits from its close relative the Mapepire Balsain or Fer-de-lance, (*Bothrops atrox*) which brought forth its young alive. To him, is also accredited the discovery that the mournful notes of the “Poor-me-one” were not made by a mammal – the silky ant-eater, as was believed – but by a nocturnal bird which has since acquired the same name; the Giant Nightjar (*Nyctibeus griseus*) one of Trinidad’s rarest birds. F.W. Urich, who was before his death a lecturer in Entomology at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture, showed, in association with T. P. L. Wehekind that the vampire bat, (*Desmodus rufus*) was not a blood sucking bat in its feeding habits, as was commonly believed, but a “blood-lapping” creature. Urich’s name is associated with and

given to an insect – a type of thrips (*Liothrips urichi*), which figures in the text books as one of the finest examples of biological control on record.

Urich had discovered the tiny insects feeding on a species of plant (*Clidemia hirta*) in his backyard. Ardent naturalist that he was, he kept them under careful observation, and published full details in a Bulletin of the Imperial College. His findings soon came to the attention of the agricultural authorities in Fiji, and the Fijian Government sent down an emissary in 1930 to investigate and procure thousands of the tiny creatures, which he took back with him to Fiji for use with complete success, in the biological control of a similar weed which had become a serious pest, and which had hitherto resisted all attempts to control or eradicate it.

A few years ago, R. E. Johnson †, one of our finest ornithologists, made a valuable contribution to science by a comprehensive study of the life history of the Giant Nightjar, (*Nyctibeus griseus*) illustrated by excellent photographs of all stages of its development from the egg to the adult. Going into the woods at night alone with his favourite terrier, he would climb a selected tree, and sit there for hours stoically withstanding the onslaught of mosquitoes and sandflies, in order to get the flashlight photographs which he desired. His nocturnal habits soon earned for him among the villagers the sobriquet of “Devil Man.”+

The name “guppies,” known the world over as small but useful mosquito-larvae eating fish, bears to posterity a memorial to R. J. L. Guppy,* one of the Club’s earlier members.

In December 1921, W. J. Kaye published a catalogue of 460 Trinidad butterflies and acknowledged the collaboration of the late Sir Norman Lamont, F. W. Urich, Robert Dick† and other members. Additions and corrections published in the Transactions of the Royal Entomological Society of London on 14th December, 1940 brought the figure to 602, and our present lepidopterists, Percy Rodriguez,† Frank Ambard† and Malcolm Barcant,† among them, claim an additional 20 species giving the colony to date, a total of 622 species of butterflies.

G. D. Smooker†, who possesses an excellent collection of some 10,000 birds’ eggs collected from the Neo-Tropical region (Mexico to Patagonia), published jointly with Sir Charles Belcher†, a long paper on the nests and eggs of the birds of Trinidad, which appeared in

† Now deceased – Ed.

+ Ray Johnson published several articles in British journals. An example of his work in a local journal is UBOTIMES, The house magazine of the United British Oilfields of Trinidad Ltd. 1(5): 4-7, 1956 – Ed.

* P.L. Guppy’s father – Ed.

The Ibis from 1934 to 1937. A typewritten version, in two large volumes of this most complete compilation of the Trinidad Birds has been donated to the Royal Victoria Institute Museum by Mr. Smooker. Water colour drawings by another member, the late Thomas Spencer, subsequently acquired by the Museum have been embodied in these volumes by way of illustration.

In 1930, Ludolf Wehekind,† who retired from the Presidency of the Club at the end of 1954, did excellent work in collecting fishes from Trinidad and Venezuela under the sponsorship of The Barber Asphalt Company. Eight hundred specimens belonging to 106 species were collected in Trinidad, and 280 specimens representing 37 species from Venezuela. Eight species were new to science, and one of them, *Thalassophryne wehekindi*, collected at Gasparee Island, Trinidad, was named to commemorate his work, which was described by Henry W. Fowler in the Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, Vol. LXXXIII, 1931.

In 1940 Capt. Alex Mendes† published his work on "The Marine Fishes of Trinidad," and in 1942 Fr. L. J. Graf published a booklet entitled "Local Insect Pests," which contained notes on insects which attack coconut, cacao, sugar-cane and citrus in Trinidad.

In the same year (1942), Thomas I. Potter published a work entitled "Fruit – native and introduced – in the Island of Trinidad, B.W.I.". He was a keen and versatile naturalist, and it may be said that under his Presidency the Club enjoyed one of its greatest periods of popularity.

The Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club can claim an interesting history of good work. Apart from publications and opinions, which have served many practical purposes, it has always taken great interest in the Royal Victoria Institute Museum, and the Club's collections, as well as Leotaud's excellent collection of birds, formerly filled its halls. After the destruction of the building by fire on March 31, 1920, which also wiped out the Leotaud and other collections, the Club set about rebuilding the collections, and its members have worked in continuous and close association with the Board of Industrial Training, the custodians of the museum.

In 1947, the Club completed detailed plans for the formation of a zoo and a zoological society, and convened

a meeting at the Library of St. Mary's College where, through the generosity of the college authorities, the Club has been comfortably housed, for the past twenty-five years or so. In the presence of about two hundred persons, the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago was founded on April 24, 1947. Today, the Society is very active, with a small well established zoo in the Emperor Valley of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Port-of-Spain.

The Club has always interested itself in the conservation of plant and wild life in the Island, and its members serve on the wild life committee, and as honorary game wardens. Opportunities are provided for members to meet visiting scientists and to benefit from their interesting talks and lectures and two such cases come immediately to mind. One was Dr. William Beebe's visit to Trinidad in 1937. At a public lecture sponsored by the Club, Dr. Beebe told of his experiences in his Bathysphere among the strange luminous marine creatures some 3,000 feet below the sea at Nonsuch Island off Bermuda. The other was an excellent illustrated lecture on the Antarctic by Dr. Raymond (afterwards Sir Raymond) Priestly – a member of the scientific staff of Scott's Expedition to the South Pole in 1910-1913.

Like the Art Society, the dramatic clubs, the Little Carib, and the literary organisations and other such, the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club takes its place among the necessary cultural institutions in the Colony.

(1) Abridged version published: Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London – 31st March, 1924.

(2) At the Library of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture, St. Augustine, Trinidad, B.W.I. (However, in the Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London 1: 2-17, 1906, C. Tate Regan published a paper on the fresh-water fishes of Trinidad based on "the collections, notes and sketches, made by Mr. Lechmere Guppy Jnr." The sixteen "beautifully executed water colour drawings" that accompanied the text prove that Guppy was an accomplished artist. Guppy himself published a paper in Tropical Agriculture. The journal of the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture 11: 117-122, 1934, entitled "Observations on Trinidad larvicidal fishes", so Guppy's work has not been entirely unpublished or unrecognised – Ed.)

† Now deceased – Ed.