

## First Record of the Stygian Owl *Asio stygius* in Trinidad, W.I.

On 13 December 2018, while conducting a nocturnal faunal survey of the Caroni Swamp, an unidentified owl was observed perched on the bare, extended branches of a hog plum *Spondias mombin* tree, approximately 10m above the ground (UTM 671610E, 1172870N). The time was approximately 23:00h. The owl was observed for about four minutes before it flew off in a northerly direction. The owl was initially thought to be a Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus pallidicaudus*, a species previously recorded in this area. But from photographs taken, it was subsequently identified as *A. stygius* by Christian Artuso. Dr Artuso pointed out that the size, dark plumage, the evenly dark facial disc with a pale (almost white) border all point to Stygian Owl and rule-out Short-eared Owl. The Stygian Owl *Asio stygius* (Wagler, 1832), is a medium to large-sized "horned" owl (Crozarior 2010) 38-46cm in length (Restall *et al.* 2006) and weighs approximately 675g (Latta 2006). It can be identified by its large size, dark coloration, and conspicuous ear tufts (Latta *et al.* 2006), with a dark facial disc, cream-coloured upperparts with white spots, and streaked underparts.

Dr Artuso further elaborated that the coarse mottling of black and white on warm buff of the underparts, of the owl photographed, points to *A. stygius* and is unlike the streaked underparts of *A. flammeus*. Even the darker races of Short-eared Owl, which are buff below, do not show white within the plumage. He also noted that the ear tufts appeared too long for *A. flammeus*. Garrido *et al.* 2000 also notes that *A. flammeus* is a smaller species, has barely visible ear tufts and a pale buff facial disc, traits which do not match the species we photographed.



**Fig. 1.** Stygian Owl *Asio stygius* perched on a Hog Plum tree in the Caroni Swamp. 13 December 2018. Photo Rainer Deo.

This note documents a considerable extension of the known range of *A. stygius* to Trinidad, and brings the total number of owl species observed within Trinidad & Tobago to nine, including the Barn Owl *Tyto alba hellmayri* (Tytonidae). *A. stygius* occurs in the Neotropics between Mexico and southern Brazil, although the available data on its geographic distribution are scant, patchy, and almost certainly incomplete (Crozarior 2010). As to why *A. stygius* was not previously recorded, the general rarity of this owl in the region, the fact it is described as a sedentary (non-migratory) species (Weidensaul 2015), and that it is nocturnal and prefers to perch and roost in the canopy of trees (Restall *et al.* 2006) could all be major contributing factors.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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