

Predation of a Greater Windward Skink *Copeoglossum auae* by a Great Egret *Ardea alba* in Trinidad, Trinidad & Tobago, W.I.

On 20 February 2024, at 0846h, we were driving along the Kernaham Road in Kernaham Village, Manzanilla (approximate location UTM 20P 717642E, 1145519N) when we observed an adult Great Egret *Ardea alba* (Linnaeus, 1758) standing with a dark and slender prey in its bill. The egret was approximately 4 m away from the road and 1 m away from a ravine. It was identified by its all white plumage, yellow bill, black legs and large size (102 cm as adults) (French 2012). Initially, we thought that the prey was a Zangee *Synbranchus marmoratus*, a slender and eel-like fish, but upon further investigation with the use of binoculars and a camera equipped with a zoom lens (Nikon D500, AF-S Nikkor 200-500 mm, f/5.6E ED VR), it was identified as a Greater Windward Skink *Copeoglossum auae* Hedges and Conn, 2012. Although it is not clearly visible in Fig. 1 (Above), the skink was identified by its heavily spotted dorsum, a characteristic which helps distinguish the species from the only other skink on the island, *Marisora aurulae* (Murphy *et al.* 2018). Blood was observed on the bill of the egret as well as on the body of the skink. The skink appeared to have an injury diagonally across the midsection of its body with red, fleshy tissue protruding on both ends of the wound. This led us to believe the skink was impaled by the egret's bill during the encounter. The skink was still alive and twisted its body from side-to-side in an attempt to escape Fig. 1 (Below) but the egret eventually repositioned the skink's body in its bill and swallowed it whole and headfirst. The encounter, from the moment that we first observed the egret to the moment that the skink was swallowed, was brief and lasted less than 1 minute.

The Greater Windward Skink averages 98.5 mm SVL in males and 109 mm SVL in females. It is diurnal, has a wide distribution throughout the islands of Trinidad and Tobago and is also found on Huevos Island (Trinidad), Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Bequia, Carriacou, Mustique, Petit Martinique, and Union Islands) (Murphy *et al.* 2018). RND has observed this species on tree trunks, shrubs, rafters of wooden sheds, banana plants, amongst pilings of building materials, short grass and leaf litter. Murphy *et al.* (2013) described the skink as being semi-arboreal and documented the only other predation event by a Rutherford's Vine Snake *Oxybelis rutherfordi*. Harrison *et al.* (2019) interpreted an observation of the skink being found asleep on an exposed branch to support their arboreality. However, no trees, shrubs, debris or anthropogenic structures were observed

near the egret suggesting that in this instance the skink may have been on the ground amongst the short grass and leaf litter between the side of the road and the ravine. Photographs of the species in similar habitats in Trinidad & Tobago have been recorded previously on iNaturalist (Jameer 2022, wildlife_tobago 2022, Ramdeen 2022).

Miranda and Collazo (1997) documented fish and crustaceans as main prey items for Great Egrets in Puerto Rico, and listed insects as less important prey items. Other predation reports for this species are relatively common and include observations of them feeding on a wide diversity of small animals such as lizards, birds and frogs (Pommer-Barbosa *et al.* 2021, Kelly 2023, Oliveira-Souza *et al.* 2020). To our knowledge however, this appears to be the first record of a Great Egret predating on a Greater Windward Skink and is an important contribution to the scarce life history



Fig. 1 Above- Greater Windward Skink grasped near the hind limbs in the bill of the Great Egret. Below- Greater Windward Skink twisting its body to the side in an attempt to escape.

information for the skink in the literature. We'd like to thank John C. Murphy for his confirmation on the identification of the skink.

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