

# SOME INTERESTING BIRD RECORDS FROM TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

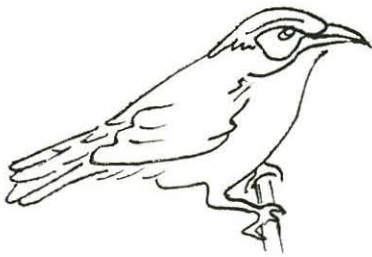
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IN the preface to my book on local birds (1973) I suggested that one of its chief functions was to identify the areas of our ignorance of the avifauna, so that students of birds might be encouraged to try to fill in some of the gaps. In presenting some new data collected since mid-1975, I am therefore gratified to include several records passed on to me by people who have followed my suggestion; their cooperation is cordially acknowledged.

The records include five species new to Trinidad and three new to Tobago, several others recorded only rarely, and two first breeding records. Though the majority are sight-records, all these are corroborated by several observers and/or supported by careful field-notes made at the time of observation, to eliminate doubt and sources of confusion. The importance of the latter cannot be over-emphasised if sight-records are to be of any value.

## SPECIES RECORDS.

Great Shearwater *Puffinus gravis*. Four individuals were found dead at Fishing Pond beach on 19th June 1975 (R.G. Gibbs) and one exhausted at Mayaro on 10th June 1976. Some birds have been found in June each year from 1971 to 1976.



indicating a regular passage of this South Atlantic migrant past Trinidad to its wintering grounds in the north.

Reddish Egret *Dichromanassa rufescens*. First records of this species for Trinidad were made by Mr. and Mrs. David Simon, along with Dr. T. Bassett, who found four birds in Caroni Swamp on several occasions between 11 and 16 January 1973. The species has also been identified during October 1976 by myself at Pointe-a-Pierre, in company with D.J. Fisher, D. Gilbert and R. Harding, also at Mucurapo; the birds are usually found on the coast, their size and feeding behaviour distinguishing them from the somewhat similar Little Blue Heron. Their occurrence in Trinidad may be part of a significant range extension, since Spaans (1974) recently recorded first breeding records in Bonaire, 700 km south of the species' previously known breeding range.

White Ibis *Eudocimus albus*. One bird was seen in the Caroni Swamp on 9th March 1976 by Ian Lambie and several other observers. This is only the second record for Trinidad.

Snow Goose *Chen hyperborea*. One bird was seen in the

Caroni Swamp about Christmas time 1975 by a number of people including Winston Nanan and Clive Green (of the Bahamas). Accurate descriptions were given of this spectacular bird, which did not give any impression of being an escape from captivity (nor have any escapes been reported in the area). Though rather unreliably reported for Trinidad hitherto (cf. ffrench 1973), this is the first corroborated record for the south Caribbean. This Arctic species was apparently formerly more common in the West Indies (A.O.U. Check-list 1957), and is recorded as a rare winter visitor to Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico; it winters mainly in U.S.A.

White-tailed Kite *Elanus leucurus*. On 7th June 1976 in company with M.D. England I watched four individuals of this species feeding over savannah at Caltoo Trace, northwest of the Nariva Swamp. On three occasions one bird caught prey, which it then carried off to a tree about one kilometre away, where another bird was sitting. The prey was then transferred to the mate or taken to a nest hidden about ten metres up in the crown of the tree. This constitutes the first breeding record in Trinidad for this species, which appears to be extending its range in other areas also.

Black-collared Hawk *Busarellus nigricollis*. An individual of this species was seen by Brian Harrington on 13th February 1976 at the 46th milepost on the Mayaro Road near the boat trail to Bush Bush Forest. A week later a pair was seen at the same place by an Audubon Society tour group led by Richard Paul. These are only the second firm records for this very conspicuous hawk in Trinidad.

Rufous Crab Hawk *Buteogallus aequinoctialis*. On 5th June 1976 an adult of this species flew low over a reservoir at Pointe-a-Pierre, closely pursued by mockingbirds and a tern *Phaetusa*. It was observed for the next 20 minutes as it soared overhead, and was clearly of this species, which resembles the Common Black Hawk *B. anthracinus*, but has rufous edges to the black feathers of the upperparts, with the flight feathers chestnut basally, and barred underparts. This is the first record for Trinidad of this species, which is known to inhabit mainly mangrove swamp from the Orinoco delta to the coast of Brazil.

Trinidad Piping-Guan *Pipile pipile*. R.G. Gibbs saw a bird of this very rare species in heavy forest in the Matura area on 5th April 1975. Near Cumaca in August and September 1975, Allan Rodriguez found young chicks already out of the nest, the first authentic breeding record for many years. An attempt to rear one of the chicks in captivity unfortunately failed.

Southern Lapwing *Vanellus chilensis*. The first breeding record for the species in Trinidad was made on 4th July 1976 when Jogie Ramlal and an American tour group led by John Bull found two very young chicks at the Government Stock Farm on Waller Field. Breeding had been suspected for some time, but is only now authenticated.

Baird's Sandpiper *Calidris bairdii*. An individual was seen well at Waller Field on 2 September 1976 by Arnold Small and Mr. and Mrs. George Venatta, all of whom know the species in U.S.A. This is the first record for Trinidad, though its similarity to other sandpipers may have precluded identification in the past. There is only one other West Indian record, from Barbados, of this North American migrant, which winters mainly on the western side of South America.

Stilt Sandpiper *Micropalama himantopus*. A group of ten birds was present with other migratory shorebirds from 27th to 30th August 1974 at Buccoo Bay, Tobago, observed by M. Archer, P. Wolstenholm and A. Winstanley from England. These are the first records of the species for Tobago, though its presence on passage through the area was already well-known.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*. An individual of this species was seen at close quarters with the Stilt Sandpipers mentioned above by the same trio of English ornithologists, who know this Old World species well, and who made careful field-notes at the time. This is also a first record for Tobago. Significantly these records were made a few days after the passing of tropical storm "Alma".

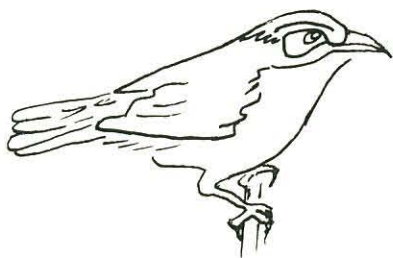
Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*. Several people, including J.D. Danzenbaker of U.S.A. and Winston Nanan, saw on 6th July 1975 in Caroni Swamp three birds of this species, which appeared from their white rumps to belong to the nominate Old World race, which can thus be distinguished from the American race *hudsonicus* commonly found in our area. The nominate race breeds in northern Europe and Asia, wintering south into Africa. Hitherto vagrants have been found in north-eastern U.S.A. but not in the Caribbean.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus*. An individual in immature second-year plumage was found on 3 October 1976 at Pointe-a-Pierre by D.J. Fisher, D. Gilbert, R. Harding and myself. It was still in the vicinity on 17 October. This is only the second record for Trinidad.

Ring-billed Gull *Larus delawarensis*. The occurrence of yet another immature bird of this species at Pointe-a-Pierre on 16th May 1976 leads me to the conclusion that it should be classified as a rare visitor to Trinidad, rather than a vagrant.

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*. Two birds of this species were found amidst many hundreds of Laughing Gulls at Pointe-a-Pierre on 3 October 1976 by D.J. Fisher, D. Gilbert, R. Harding and myself; one was still present on 26th October. These are the first records in Trinidad of this Old World species, though vagrants have been found on a number of occasions in the Lesser Antilles. Again, it is likely that confusion in identification of this species with the common Laughing Gull may have taken place, though with a good view the much whiter upper plumage of the Black-headed Gull is conspicuous.

Band-tailed Pigeon *Columba fasciata*. Individuals of this species, which is a rare resident in the Northern Range of Trini-

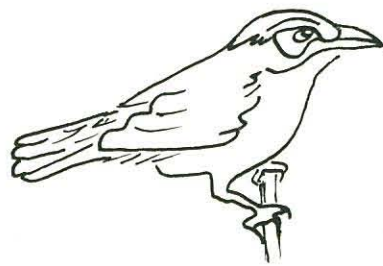


dad, were seen at Las Lapas by L. Calderon and J. Bull in June 1976.

Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlet *Touit huetii*. On 10th August 1975 a flock of 40 was seen flying over Aripo Savannah by R.G. Gibbs, who recorded in July 1974 at the same place the first observation of this species in Trinidad during this century.

Striped Owl *Asio clamator*. In July 1975 J.D. Danzenbaker was able to photograph two of these little known owls at Grafton Estate, Tobago; this is the first time to my knowledge that anyone has ever photographed the species in Tobago.

Oilbird *Steatornis caripensis*. During a routine count of nests of this species at the Asa Wright Nature Centre on 18th July 1976 I found an occupied nest situated on a ledge several metres away from the rest of the colony; it was remarkable in that the ledge was nearly underneath a point in the gorge open to the sky, and it is likely that direct sunlight might reach the nest



around midday, an unusual circumstance for this species that normally nests in complete darkness.

In May 1975 at the Oropouche Caves in Platanal I saw a large Tigre snake *Spilotes pullatus* emerging from the area of the Oilbird nesting colony, making its way gradually along the side of the cave about 6 metres up. A distended area in the middle of its body indicated it had probably been feeding on Oilbirds. There has often been speculation as to the cause of the disappearance of young birds from their comparatively inaccessible nests in caves. Apart from man, crabs have been suspected of predation, and now it seems that some snakes are capable of reaching the nests too.

White-collared Swift *Cypseloides zonaris*. On 26th August 1974 an individual of this spectacular and unmistakable species was watched for some minutes over the Parlatuvier Road, Main Ridge, Tobago by M. Archer, P. Wolstenholm and A. Winstanley. This is the first record for Tobago, though the species is common as an off-season visitor to Trinidad and has been recorded in Grenada.

White-tailed Sabrewing *Campylopterus curvipennis*. R.G. Gibbs saw one of these very rare hummingbirds on the Main Ridge of Tobago on 2nd March 1975. It appears that a very gradual recovery of the species since the 1963 hurricane is now beginning to take place.

Blue-chinned Sapphire *Chlorestes notatus*. On 21st February 1976 Brian Harrington found a nest of this species being completed beside the Bloody Bay River, Tobago. Nearby he watched a male at extremely close quarters. The species has been doubtfully recorded from Tobago in the past, and is certainly very rare.

Scaled Antpitta *Grallaria guatemalensis*. The call-notes of this species were heard in January 1976 in the Matura Forest by John Terborgh of Princeton University, who is familiar with the species on the mainland. This antbird is extremely elusive, and there are very few records of what is considered to be an endemic race on Trinidad.

Hepatic Tanager *Piranga flava*. Two nests of this rather uncommon species were found at Las Lapas in the Northern Range during February 1975 and February 1976. As the female was trapped and banded on the first occasion, it was possible to be certain that the same bird was involved, and the nest, situated about 6 metres up in a bamboo fork at the roadside, was in exactly the same place each year, even though the first nest disappeared after nesting.

Dickcissel *Spiza americana*. No birds of this species have been recorded in Trinidad during 1975 and 1976, which confirms the theory (French 1967) that this migratory species fluctuates widely in its winter range. During the early 1960's it was extremely common in southwestern and eastern Trinidad.

## REFERENCES

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