
Brief notes on birds

By Richard French St. Peter's School, Pointe-a-Pierre

1. What is the relationship between the Blue-gray Tanager and the Palm Tanager?

These two species, the Blue-gray Tanager *Thraupis episcopus* and the Palm Tanager *T. palmarum*, are extremely common and well-known in suburban gardens and around human habitation. They are evidently closely related in form, voice and behaviour; but in appearance one is not likely to confuse them. The vivid blue of the wing coverts of the "Blue Jean" is a sight few naturalists would mistake. The duller "Palmiste" is generally olive green and has blackish outer wing feathers, contrasting with the pale yellowish green inner feathers, showing up as a pale wing-bar in flight.

Both species habitually feed at rotten bananas on my garden feeding-table. Often as many as ten individuals of the two species congregate there. Recently I have noticed one bird which resembles the Palmiste in general pattern, with the wing-bar and the blackish outer primaries. But it is distinctly blue in tinge, not olive green like the other Palmistes with which it associates. I am assuming that this individual is a hybrid, as such have been known to occur in the wild between the two species in Suriname (Haverschmidt). But for hybrids to occur in the wild an extremely close relationship must obtain. Could it be that we have here one species, in spite of the apparent morphological difference? It would be most interesting to follow up the life-history of a known hybrid, to see, for example, whether it was fertile.

Certainly the two species are ecologically close. Food, and breeding habits are almost identical. Their squeaky songs, too, are very similar; I certainly find it difficult to identify them correctly, though sometimes I can pick out the Palmiste's notes as shorter and more staccato. I believe also that the latter's toes have longer claws, which help to control movement on the slippery surfaces of palm leaves which they frequent.

There does seem to be enough evidence to support an investigation into the relationship of these two common species. Maybe someone at U.W.I. will attempt it one day.

2. The success of the Mockingbird in Trinidad.

The Tropical Mockingbird *Mimus gilvus* is a comparatively recent arrival in Trinidad; or at least it has spread remarkably since 1931 when apparently it was restricted to the St. Augustine area (R. Roberts). The bird evidently thrives in suburban gardens and near human habitation, for it is now one of the most abundant and successful species around Port of Spain, San Fernando and my own home at Pointe-a-Pierre.

One reason for its success may be its aggressive attitude towards other species; at the feeding table it usually drives away the other, mostly smaller, species. But it also seems to breed with remarkable success; possibly this too can be attributed to the zeal

with which it defends its territory, nest and young.

In my garden a pair built a nest in a small mango tree in March 1980. The three eggs produced two flying young; by late May the pair had another clutch of eggs under incubation, and again two young successfully fledged. The main adult moulting process must have followed at this stage, during which few species breed. But by early October in the same year another three eggs had been laid. Although I cannot prove that the same pair used the nest, I have no reason to believe any change had taken place. Certainly if another mate had intervened there would have been no end of chasing and squabbling, possibly even ending in the death of one bird. But I saw none of this.

Thus the pair produced at least six young that successfully flew during one year. I doubt if this is an isolated instance; indeed similar cases have been reported before. Maybe the favourable environment of a housing estate provides protection from some predators (but not from cats or mongooses), also an assured food supply from fruit-bearing trees and well-cut lawns. A conservative estimate would grant to the Mockingbird an adult reproductive period of three or four years. Thus this pair of mine could reproduce themselves ten times over. No wonder the species is doing well!

3. The recovery of Tobago forest birds from Hurricane Flora.

It happened that I spent some time in Tobago's rain forest in the Pigeon Peak area in April 1963, some five months before Hurricane Flora struck the island and devastated the Main Ridge. Thus I was able to make suitable comparisons when I returned in January 1964 to examine the hurricane's effect on the bird life of the forest.

At that time destruction seemed comprehensive. On Pigeon Peak hardly a tree remained standing, and those that did were mutilated seemingly beyond recovery. It was difficult to walk on the ground, covered as it was with fallen tree trunks, already beginning after three months to be covered with vine creepers. The typical bird life of the Tobago rain forest was sadly depleted. I saw no Collared Trogons, Yellow-legged or White-necked Thrushes, no Plain Antvireos or Blue-backed Manakins. But perhaps the most disturbing disappearance was that of the White-tailed Sabrewing, a typically montane hummingbird not known in Trinidad. I wondered whether the species had been able to withstand the effects of the desiccating blast of the wind, which would have removed for a time all the blossom and other sources of nectar in the area.

A series of visits and studies carried out at intervals between 1964 and 1979 revealed a very gradual recovery of most of these species. Some, like the manakin, are equally at home in second growth, so did not take long to recover their numbers. The others remained rare for years. One problem was that the forest regenerated very slowly. On the top of the ridge new growth of

the most adaptable trees reached a height of ten metres within 15 years, but the isolated skeletons of partially stricken trees soaring ten metres higher bore eloquent witness of what the original forest had been. And nowhere could I find a sizeable patch of forest which had escaped the devastation of the hurricane.

It was not until 1974 that Sabrewing hummingbirds were seen again, and then in very small numbers, at one locality on the Main Ridge. But at least it proved that the species had survived. Over the last six years a few more individuals have been seen.

Then in April 1980 I was fortunate enough to accompany Todd Keeler-Wolf to one of his study sites on the Main Ridge, where he and his wife have been carrying out comparative ecological studies. Here at last I came across an almost untouched

patch of rain-forest. In the deep ravines and valleys large trees growing to 30 metres could still be found; the undergrowth was comparatively sparse, with a mainly unbroken canopy above, as I had known 17 years earlier on Pigeon Peak. And here, appropriately, I found Sabrewings, Trogons, Antvireos and White-necked Thrushes, along with most of the other forest species. Todd, whose comprehensive survey will be published elsewhere in due course, said that this was the best patch of rain-forest he had located in a thorough search of Tobago.

The rest of the Tobago Main Ridge forest may take a long time to recover to the pre-1963 stage — 100 years was the estimate of some foresters — but at least an element of the original has remained. I hope it is allowed to survive.