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## Notes on Some Birds of Trinidad Wetlands

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LITTLE attention has been paid to the ornithology of swamp-lands in Trinidad during the last fifty years, apart from the collections of Plowden-Wardlaw in 1950-51 and the fieldwork of ffrench on the Scarlet Ibis, mostly in 1963-66 (ffrench & Haverschmidt 1970), both in the Caroni Swamp. The following observations update the status of twenty-two species of birds frequenting the wetlands of Trinidad, especially the Caroni, Nariva and south Oropouche swamps. One species is recorded for the first time in Trinidad, while another is recorded breeding in Trinidad for the first time.

One of us (R. ff) was engaged from June 1981 to June 1982 in fieldwork on the wetlands avifauna of Trinidad (Ramcharan, de Souza & ffrench, 1982), under the auspices of the Institute of Marine Affairs, Chaguaramas, who provided valuable logistic support. The other (T.M.) was carrying out a research project for the University of Colorado concerning the host relationships of the Shiny Cowbird *Molothrus bonariensis*, mostly during the rainy seasons of 1979 and 1980.

Since some of these status changes may have occurred as a result of recent ecological development, it may be worthwhile mentioning here the broad outlines of some of this development.

In the Caroni Swamp, following the initiation of the Cipriani Reclamation Scheme about 60 years ago, tidal water from the Gulf of Paria was largely excluded from the savannahs and marsh land east of the North-South Drain and bank, which were constructed between the Blue River and the Madame Espagnole River (Bacon 1970). Gradually the vegetation changed as the brackish conditions gave way to a freshwater environment, with sedges and grasses becoming dominant. However, the bank was allowed to deteriorate so much by 1968 that in numerous places salt water was flooding through and conditions have been returning once again to something akin to those of the early twentieth century. At the time of writing the extensive marsh immediately south of the No. 9 Drain (where excursions by boat leave the Princess Margaret Highway) has been almost completely changed by the salt water, with mangroves once again predominating.

Certain changes have taken place too in the south Oropouche Lagoon, affecting the freshwater marshes and environs. In spite of, or possibly because of, attempts by the authorities to provide some sort of irrigation works to drain the lagoon, with its recurrent flooding problems, the situation has not improved and salt water contamination continues. However, it has not occurred on the scale of the Caroni experience, and large areas of reed and sedge still extend southwest of the main mangrove belt which borders the coast. Eventually there is still a plentiful supply of fresh water to support this vegetation. All the same, farmers' complaints support our own observation that the entire area is more waterlogged than it was twenty-five years ago.

### THE SPECIES LIST

Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*. Though the species was seen in some numbers during the 1960s (ffrench 1980), the only recent records appear to be a few birds seen in Nariva during February 1979 (Bacon et al. 1980), and a single bird seen by Graham White near Cacandee in June 1982.

Tree-Ducks *Dendrocygna* spp. There has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of these ducks in Trinidad. T.M. found only one pair of Fulvous Tree-Ducks *D. bicolor* in the Caroni marshes during 1979, but in mid 1980, 1981 and 1982 both this species and the Black-bellied *D. autumnalis* were seen in some numbers, with flocks up to 25 birds. In the south Oropouche Lagoon Fulvous numbers in 1981 and 1982 reached perhaps 400 birds, with a few Black-bellied. In Nariva a flock of about 200 Black-bellied was reported in February 1982, and a few of this species was also seen in the Icacos swamp. Clearly conditions have improved for these ducks, for breeding has also been recorded recently in the Oropouche Lagoon. It is just possible that the improvement has stemmed from the captive breeding programme at the Pointe-à-Pierre Wildfowl Trust which released nearly 350 young birds during the years 1967 to 1981.

White tailed Kite *Elanus leucurus*. Following the 1976 breeding in the northern Nariva Swamp (ffrench 1980), birds have been recorded during 1981 and 1982 in circumstances suggesting breeding at Oropouche Lagoon and the southern Nariva Swamp. Then in April 1982 a pair of kites were seen at a nest in a mango tree in the Caroni marshes; subsequently the nest was deserted, and it is presumed that these very conspicuous birds suffered from human disturbance.

White tailed Hawk *Buteo albicaudatus*. There are very few records of this savannah species in Trinidad. One individual was seen on two occasions near Bush-Bush island, Nariva in early 1982.

Black-collared Hawk *Busarellus nigricollis*. The species has been seen several times in the Bush-Bush area of Nariva since the first record in 1963. R. ff along with Mr. and Mrs. Bob Kennedy had a good view of an adult in Bush-Bush on 13 June 1982. It was sitting, fairly low down, on a moriche palm leaf, eating a fish. Several times it uttered low-pitched calls resembling a snarling rattle.

Rufous Crab-Hawk *Buteogallus aequinoctialis*. Only one record of this extremely sedentary species has been made before in Trinidad (ffrench 1977), so it is very interesting that another bird has recently been observed in the mangrove belt east of Bush-Bush island. First seen by Jogie Ramlal, the Nature Centre guide, it was confirmed on 27 February 1982 by C. Petrow and K. Rees of U.K. The bird appeared remarkably tame and allowed a close approach.

Long-winged Harrier *Circus buffoni*. Though considered earlier "a rather rare breeding species" (ffrench 1980), these birds have been seen quite commonly in the marshes bordering the Caroni Swamp and at Oropouche Lagoon. Up to four birds have been seen together, and on some occasions birds have been observed crossing the Princess Margaret Highway at no great height. A recent study on harriers (Rice 1982) showed that much of their prey, in the form of small, concealed rodents, is located acoustically, a technique for which their owl-like facial ruff is a clear adaptation.

Plomado Falcon *Falco femoralis*. This rare falcon was

seen for only the fourth time in Trinidad over the last 50 years when T.M. saw an adult on 17 Jul 1980, catching a small bird over the Caroni marshes.

Limpkin *Aramus guarana*. This species has hitherto been found most frequently in the Nariva Swamp, and this is still its most favoured habitat. But it has also been found recently to be not uncommon in the Caroni marshes, up to four being seen in a morning. A few individuals have also been seen at Oropouche Lagoon, and on isolated occasions near the Carapo River, and at Pointe-à-Pierre.

Spotted Rail *Rallus maculatus*. This "rare and local resident" (ffrench 1980) was observed in the Caroni marshes on four occasions between 23 June and 4 August 1980, also once at Oropouche on 11 October 1981. It is probably a fairly common species, but difficult to see owing to its skulking habits.

Yellow-breasted Crake *Prozana albiventer*. This is another rail that is extremely hard to see, there being very few records, all hitherto confined to Caroni marshes (ffrench 1980). During our recent fieldwork the call-note was eventually identified as a high-pitched double note, accented on the first syllable, *tee-di*, somewhat resembling the vocalisation of a frog. Once this call was effectively recognised, we found this species to be well distributed in freshwater areas of Oropouche Lagoon. But being a tiny bird and like many rails not venturing into the open, it is hardly ever seen.

Gray-breasted Crake *Laterallus exilis*. T.M. had a similar experience to the above with this species, also hitherto considered rather uncommon. Its call was finally isolated in July 1980 as a rapid high pitched piping series of five or six notes, the last pitched a little lower, *pee-pee-pee-pee-pee-pi*. Thenceforth it was found to be quite common in the Caroni marshes east of the highway, and to occur in patchy distribution at Nariva, Oropouche Lagoon, and in a sedge marsh at Icacos. The species seems to prefer marshes dominated by dense *Eleocharis mutata* or *E. interstincta*.

Azure Gallinule *Porphyrola flavirostris*. Following the first record of this species for Trinidad in 1978, referred to in the last issue of this journal (ffrench 1981), several more observations have been made in the Bush-Bush and neighbouring areas of the Nariva Swamp. Decidedly smaller than the congeneric Purple Gallinule, the adult has a pale blue breast and neck, quite different from the striking dark violet blue of the larger bird. The frontal shield is yellow, not blue, a feature also noted in the brown immature plumage. On the early morning of 13 June 1982 four of these birds were seen in the marshy area east of Bush-Bush, perched on the tops of grass tufts and occasionally flying short distances. It is quite possible that this rather conspicuous species is truly a new arrival into Trinidad from neighbouring Venezuela. If so, one might also expect to see it in the Icacos and Los Blanquizaes swamps.

Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*. This Old World sandpiper has only twice been recorded before in Trinidad (ffrench 1980). Another bird was seen in off-season plumage, very brownish with upperparts and breast mottled black, in the Caroni marshes near No. 9 Drain early on 1 May 1982. It is of interest that the first record, in 1965, was also in early May.

Black Swift *Cypseloides niger*. This species is notoriously difficult to identify in the field, and in fact has never been recorded with absolute certainty in Trinidad (ffrench 1980). However, on 13 June 1982 a flock of twelve black swifts, which were certainly not *C. rutilus* and seemingly too large for any *Chaetura* species, was seen at close range by R. ff and Mr. and Mrs. Bob Kennedy over the marshes east of Bush-Bush. They were feeding over the area and gradually drifted to the south. Tentatively they were identified as this species, which migrates from the Lesser Antilles to South America at about this time.

Fork-tailed Palm-Swift *Reinarda squamata*. Recorded earlier as a "rare and local resident" mainly of eastern Trinidad, and always in the vicinity of moriche palms, birds of this species have also been seen in small flocks near Icacos feeding over cat-tail marshes amidst coconut palms. No moriche palms could be found, so it could be that other palms are also used for nesting or

roosting.

Silvered Antbird *Sclateria naevia*. This species has always been found commonly in swamp forest bordering Nariva Swamp, also alongside streams in parts of the Northern Range. It has now also been found to frequent Los Blanquizaes lagoon. Clearly the somewhat patchy distribution of this antbird warrants further study.

Spotted Tody-Flycatcher *Todirostrum maculatum*. Herk-lots (1961) recorded the discovery of this small flycatcher in a Cedros swamp in mid 1957. Specimens were taken but apparently not preserved. Since that time R. ff has occasionally looked for the species in that area, but in vain. So it was with great interest that investigations were re-opened when Bob Richardson found the species in the Icacos mangroves in September 1981. Since that time several birds have been located in the area, also at Los Blanquizaes lagoon. The bird is quite confiding and in addition the call-note, a suprisingly loud and piercing note, single or double, *chee* or *ti-dee*, cannot be mistaken, once learnt. Further success was achieved when R. and M. ffrench found an occupied nest of the species, with both adults present, near Icacos on 23 May 1982. It was an elliptical pouch, made of dry grasses, leaves and down, and was slung from a thin mangrove branch about 2½ metres above ground. This is the first breeding record for Trinidad.

Carib Grackle *Quiscalus lugubris*. This well known species has recently established a very large roosting site just south of No. 9 Drain in the Caroni marshes. It is located in the young mangroves which have grown up as a result of the infiltration of salt water into the previously fresh water marsh and reed beds. The roost is shared with Yellow-hooded Blackbirds *Agelaius* and Shiny Cowbirds *Molothrus*. Many thousands of grackles commute daily to this roost, moving in groups of 30 to 50 birds from the surrounding countryside to north, east and south. As a daily migration, it rivals in scope even the more spectacular movements of the Cattle Egret *Bubulcus*.

Red-winged Blackbird *Agelaius phoeniceus*. A male of this northern species was found by T.M. in an area of freshwater marsh and rice-fields near Caroni Swamp on 26 June 1980. It was singing and apparently holding a territory; it was still present on 1 September, but disappeared soon afterwards. However, the following year it turned up again in the same place during the middle months of the year. Though associating with its congener *A. icterocephalus*, it again sang repeatedly in an established territory. This is the first record for Trinidad, and probably for the South American region. The bird was seen by various observers, and allowed a fairly close approach, but was clearly not an escaped cagebird. It may, however, have been brought here by a ship (J. Bond, pers. comm.). The nearest population of this species is on Cuba, but the large size of this bird and the extent of the yellow borders of the red epaulets indicate that it probably came from a more northern, migratory population. The nominate race winters south to Texas and California, while another race is known as far south as northwestern Costa Rica. At all events this record is most extraordinary.

Moriche Oriole *Icterus chrysiocephalus*. Records of this beautiful icterid have become increasingly rare, probably due to the continued trapping of the species. However, two pairs were seen at Bush-Bush, Nariva on 12 April 1982 by R. ff and Dr. and Mrs. Geoff Gibbs. The circumstances suggested possible nesting.

Dickcissel *Spiza americana*. One of the most extraordinary phenomena among the avifauna of Trinidad is the status of this species. Apparently absent for many years early in this century it occurred in vast numbers, mainly in the Oropouche Lagoon, during the late 1950s and 1960s (ffrench 1967). During the majority of the 1970s it seems to have been almost entirely absent. However, on 17 January 1982 a flock of about 50 birds was seen south of Bush Bush, Nariva, in marshland. But no other record has been reported.

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