

Further Notes on the Avifauna of Trinidad & Tobago

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THERE is no sign yet of any slowing down in the rate of reports of interesting bird records. Although this is the fifth consecutive issue of this journal in which I have collated such reports, the list of species treated is as long as ever. In addition, more reports are coming in from local naturalists, which is a promising sign for the future.

The value of sight records of birds is disputed by some ornithologists (e.g. Bond, 1962) on the grounds that mistakes can be (and frequently are) made, and that such ambiguities have no place in a scientific publication. It is argued that doubts about the occurrence of rare species can only be dispelled by the collection of specimens or possibly adequate photographic evidence. To a certain extent I concur with this, but it is clear that some sight records, for example of a conspicuous species seen under good conditions by several competent observers, are practically indisputable, so should not be discounted.

I think that the important thing is to ensure that sight-records are evaluated by rigorous standards at all times. The ideal sight record should follow careful field-notes made at the time of observation, giving full details of plumage, size, shape, soft parts, flight pattern, call note, behaviour and environment. Details of light conditions and distance from observer should be recorded, and ideally the observer should be familiar with the species and other similar species. Wherever possible, corroboration by other competent observers should be obtained. If all the above conditions can be met, I see no reason to discount sight-records. But of course they will always remain just sight-records — with the element of doubt present — and must be treated as such. In addition, there are some species of birds which resemble others so closely that they can only be adequately identified under perfect conditions, preferably in the hand.

The following list of twenty-nine species includes three new records for Trinidad, seven new for Tobago, and two possible new breeding records, one for each island.

THE SPECIES LIST

GREAT SHEARWATER *Puffinus gravis*

Varying numbers of this species have been recorded dead or dying on east coast beaches during June in most years since 1971 (ffrench 1977, 1980). In 1982 Dick Raby kept a careful watch on seabirds at the "Blue Waters" drilling rig about fifteen miles off Point Galeota during the middle of June. Small numbers of these shearwaters were seen each day from June 14 to 17, but not before or after. It seems that the northward passage of this austral breeder past Trinidad may be confined to just a few days.

LEACH'S STORM-PETREL *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*

During 1982 individuals were seen in offshore Trinidad waters on several occasions between February 7 and June 20. A fair number were found dead or dying on Cocal beach on April

22. One of these was collected by Wendy Wood, it had been banded on October 25 1981 in Nova Scotia, when less than one year old. This is the first banding recovery of the species in Trinidad.

KING VULTURE *Sarcorampus papa*

There are very few records of this rare visitor to Trinidad. On May 23, 1982 Bob Kennedy and others on a Club excursion saw one high over forest north of Brasso Seco.

PEARL KITE *Gampsonyx swainsoni*

David Rooks found a bird building a nest in an immortelle tree beside the Princess Margaret Highway near Chaguanas in early March 1982. By March 20 the birds were incubating, and two large young were seen there on May 15. All other nests of this species in Trinidad have been found at Pointe-a-Pierre (ffrench 1982), where an immature bird was found dying of apparent starvation on June 21, 1982. The specimen has been lodged at the Carec collection (formerly Virus Lab.) at Federation Park, Port of Spain.

GRAY-HEADED KITE *Leptodon cayanensis*

Two individuals were occasionally seen in lowland swamp and riparian forest near Carapo during July and August 1980.

Two adults have been seen also by B. Mohan of the Forestry Division in the Central Range Wildlife Sanctuary from time to time. The species may be more widespread than was hitherto thought (ffrench 1980).

PLUMBEOUS KITE *Ictinia plumbea*

On April 2, 1982 Geoff Gibbs saw a bird of this species near Ravin Anglais. There are very few records from the Northern Range, though the species is common over southern forests.

GREAT BLACK HAWK *Buteogallus urubitinga*

There is some doubt as to whether this species, easily confused in the field with the commoner *B. anthracinus*, has ever bred locally. So it was with interest that on March 30, 1981, in company with George Reid, I saw an adult carrying nesting material at Bloody Bay River, Tobago. The nest, however, was not found, so successful breeding remains to be proved.

ORNATE HAWK-EAGLE *Spizaetus ornatus*

The breeding of this beautiful raptor in Trinidad has also not been confirmed, though suspected (ffrench 1980). However, Allan Rodriguez found a bird at what appeared to be a nest high in a forest tree near Platanal in May 1982. Further confirmation is still needed.

RUFF *Philomachus pugnax*

Two birds seen at Buccoo from December 1 — 10, 1981 by J.M. Wunderle constitute only the second record for Tobago (cf. ffrench 1977).

SOUTH POLAR SKUA *Catharacta maccormicki*

On July 13, 1980 this large seabird was seen by Tim Manolis and Shahid Mohammed at Icos Point under excellent conditions. The diagnostic field characters were generally sooty brown plumage with striking white patches at the base of the primaries, and offwhite head and neck. This is the first record for Trinidad and the south Caribbean of this Antarctic breeder, which however is known to wander regularly as far north as

U.S.A. in the austral winter.

POMARINE JAEGER - *Stercorarius pomarinus*

Several birds were seen by Dick Raby off Galeota Point in early March 1982. The species is distinctly larger and heavier than its congener, *S. parasiticus*, four of which were well seen by the Club party returning from Soldado Rock on March 28, 1982; *pomarinus* has rarely been identified before off Trinidad.

HERRING GULL - *Larus argentatus*

A second-year bird seen at Pointe-a-Pierre foreshore, in company with hundreds of Laughing Gulls *L. atricilla*, on February 19, 1982, is only the third record for Trinidad.

RING-BILLED GULL - *Larus delawarensis*

A second winter immature bird was well seen at close range by Bob Richardson off Pigeon Point, Tobago on December 27, 1981. Though recorded on several occasions at Pointe-a-Pierre (ffrench 1980), this is the first record for Tobago.

LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL - *Larus fuscus*

Following observations of three birds during 1978 and 1979, reported in the last issue of this journal (ffrench 1981), another bird in adult plumage was found at Pointe-a-Pierre on October 11, 1981. Sightings of this Old World species in the region have been occurring with some frequency during the last four years, the most recent being at Panama.

SABINE'S GULL - *Xema sabini*

An immature bird of this species was seen on many occasions by Dick Raby at the "Blue Waters" rig off Galeota Point between March 2 and March 21, 1982. Careful descriptions were recorded and the bird was photographed in flight. Diagnostic features of this small gull included conspicuously contrasting black and white plumage of upperparts and wings, and black bill with pale tip. This is the first record for Trinidad and the entire region of this Arctic breeder which migrates south mainly in the Pacific. Atlantic records are rare, and the nearest previous record appears to be of a bird off Cuba in December 1954.

SCARLET-SHOULDERED PARROTLET - *Touit huetii*

A flock of up to 40 of these birds was seen on March 18, 1980 by Tim Manolis and his wife near Carapo. Diagnostic features included the vivid green of the back and upper tail coverts, and the soft "wick, wick" call-notes, occasionally uttered; very different from the harsh screaming of the congener *T. batavica*. Apart from two sightings of flocks by R.G. Gibbs, this constitutes the only record of this parrotlet in recent years. But of course similarity to *batavica* might well have led to confusion in identification in the past.

MANGROVE CUCKOO - *Coccyzus minor*

J.M. Wunderle, who is well acquainted with the species, had an excellent view of a bird at a distance of seven metres in mangroves west of Buccoo, Tobago on December 2, 1981. There is only one other record of the species from Tobago, by C.F. Belcher at Lowlands on September 20, 1934, which I have hitherto held as suspect. Wunderle points out that on the Antillean islands the species rarely inhabits mangrove, which, however, is its preferred habitat on Trinidad.

BLACK SWIFT - *Cypseloides niger*

On August 15, 1980 at Terry Hill near Hillsborough Dam, Tobago, Tim and Annette Manolis saw a swift larger than *Chaetura brachyura* with which it was associating; from above it appeared all dark, and certainly did not seem large enough for *C. zonaris*. Although swifts are notoriously difficult to identify in the field, it seems most probable that this bird was in fact a Black Swift in the course of migration southwards. If authentic, this record would be a first for Tobago.

RUFIOUS SHAFTED WOODSTAR - *Chaetocercus jourdani*

Previous sight-records of this tiny hummingbird have frequently been unsatisfactory or uncorroborated. However, an immature bird, apparently of this species, has been seen by many people at the Asa Wright Nature Centre during the early months of 1982 (fide Ian Lambie and David Rooks). I personally have yet to identify this species.

VARIEGATED FLYCATCHER - *Empidonomus varius*

Recent reports from the Nature Centre indicate that several birds of this species were present at Springhill during June and July 1982. It is significant that the only previous authentic records are of collected specimens (ffrench 1980). The species is in fact rather similar to the much commoner Piratic Flycatcher. Here is a typical case where full field-notes are essential, in order to minimise the risk of error.

PIRATIC FLYCATCHER - *Legatus leucophaeus*

In our last journal (ffrench 1981) I reported the near certainty of Tobago records of this species. Thereafter, in company with George Reid, on March 30, 1981 I located several individuals at Bloody Bay River. The characteristic song was being uttered, and unmistakable views were obtained at close quarters. This confirms its status in Tobago.

STREAKED FLYCATCHER - *Myiodynastes maculatus*

In early June 1982 Dick Raby found a bird of this species resting on the "Blue Waters" rig about fifteen miles east of Galeota Point. It seems more than likely that it was of the race *solitarius*, a migrant from Argentina, similar to the record F. Haverschmidt obtained of this race at sea in mid-April (ffrench 1980).

VEERY - *Catharus fuscescens*

The single previous record of this northern migrant in Trinidad (ffrench 1980) was augmented by another bird found at the Nature Centre on October 15, 1982 by Bob Behrstock, who has wide experience of the species in U.S.A.

NORTHERN ORIOLE - *Icterus galbula*

A third record for Trinidad was obtained on March 13, 1981 by Mr. and Mrs. H.S. Archer, who saw a male at Maraval. It was still present on March 31.

BOBOLINK - *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*

On October 31, 1982 a bird in female plumage was seen at Pigeon Point, Tobago by R. and M. ffrench at very close quarters. It may well have been in the course of migration, as a passage of Blackpoll Warblers was observed in the same place on that day. This is only the second record for Tobago of this northern migrant.

BLACKBURNIAN WARBLER - *Dendroica fusca*

While trapping birds for a lecture demonstration near Andrews Trace on the Blanchisseuse Road on April 24, 1982 Bob Kennedy, Graham White and I found a female of this species in low trees beside the road. We just missed trapping her. This is only the third record for Trinidad, and quite late in the season for a northern migrant.

PALM TANAGER - *Thraupis palmarum*

This extremely well-known species from Trinidad has recently (1982) been found at several locations in Tobago by David Rooks in company with others. These are the first records for Tobago. I confess that it seems to me almost incredible that such a common species should have escaped notice before. Possibly it is a genuine new arrival, or perhaps more likely, the present birds are representatives or descendants of birds that have been artificially imported by man from Trinidad, as has happened in the case of the Kiskadee. If the latter, it is a great shame, for it is impossible to foresee the ecological developments — whether for competing native species, which may succumb, or for farmers, if the birds should attack crops.

At all events, as naturalists we must deplore attempts, however well-meaning, to interfere with the natural balance of species.

GRAYISH SALTATOR — *Saltator coerulescens*

A reprot made at the Nature Centre states that on August 14 1980 a bird of this species was seen at Grafton, Tobago. If correct, this would be the first record for the island; but the report requires corroboration.

ROSE-BREASTED GROSBEAK — *Pheucticus ludovicianus*

This northern migrant was found at Crown Point, Tobago on December 5, 1981 by J.M. Wunderle, who knows the species well in U.S.A., and another was seen on April 20, 1982 at the Nature Centre by S. Higginbotham of Massachusetts, in company with twelve other observers. These are the first records for Tobago and Trinidad respectively. Wunderle comments that he is surprised to find no previous records here, since the species migrates regularly to northern Venezuela and Curacao. I know also of records from Barbados.

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