

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Birds of Trinidad & Tobago: A Photographic Atlas.**

**Russell Barrow. 1994**

Media and Editorial Products Ltd., Port of Spain, Trinidad.

121 pp 131 colour plates, 2 maps, 1 line drawing.

Although Trinidad and Tobago has a long tradition of interest in natural history - the Field Naturalists' Club having recently celebrated its centenary - for some unaccountable reason there has for most of this century been a lack of expertise and interest in ornithology amongst those born and bred here. It is therefore with the greatest of pleasure that I welcome the appearance of Dr. Russell Barrow's book, a truly local production in every sense. Hearty congratulations are in order, principally of course to the author/photographer, but also to the publishers, printers and corporate sponsors for their belief, courage and determination in bringing the work to fruition. I know only too well the many frustrations that can attend such an enterprise, and it is greatly to the credit of all concerned that all obstacles were so successfully overcome. The outcome is an attractive, well-produced volume, which will not only give much pleasure in itself, but will also serve to promote environmental awareness in this country.

The book presents photographic portraits, in "coffee-table" format, of 81 species of birds found on Trinidad and Tobago (less than one-fifth of those recorded). Each species is represented

by one or two pictures, many of these in close-up, and often depicting male and female (and sometimes immature) plumage. The pictures are accompanied by a short note, explaining where the birds may be found, some points of identification, or some detail of behaviour. Each species is designated by the definitive English name, the scientific name, and an approximate measurement of length. In his Introduction the author disclaims a scientific approach, describing the book as primarily a photographic atlas. The species were selected for their attractive colour, as well as to cover a broad range of habitats.

The Introduction also includes detailed advice on photographic equipment and techniques, clearly a speciality of the author. Two diagrams depict Tobago and northern Trinidad, with 3-letter acronyms to pinpoint certain localities favoured by the author in his studies, with brief notes relating to each. Three of these acronyms are general, indicating a species is widespread throughout either island or both. Finally, an index gives page references for all species mentioned in the book.

The prime purpose of the book is photographic portraiture, and in this it generally succeeds with distinction. The

great majority of pictures are very well exposed and accurately focused, with beautiful colours true to life. One of the hardest colours to reproduce photographically is blue, and the picture of the Blue-gray Tanager on page 113 is less successful than the others, appearing as rather intense greenish turquoise instead of the delicate greyish blue of real life. A more serious error appears on page 49, where the right-hand bird facing the Green Hermit is mis-identified a Little Hermit, when it is actually a Rufus-breasted Hermit. In some other pictures the attitudes and habitat appear contrived rather than natural. It may be intriguing to see birds caught in the act of taking off or landing, but it can also look decidedly odd. In addition, quite a few pictures show unmistakable signs (e.g. unnatural poses or extreme close-ups) of having been taken in studio conditions with captive birds, which might properly have been mentioned in the Introduction. This in no way detracts from their value as beautiful and interesting pictures.

Since the author makes it plain that this is not a scientific treatise, it seems inappropriate to be critical of the text on points of taxonomic or behavioural detail. The species accounts convey

vividly the author's sense of excitement and wonder at the natural world, which he communicates successfully to the general reader. I will, however, comment briefly on a few errors. On the Tobago map (p.10) both Speyside and Blue Waters Inn seem to have slipped a few miles to the south. (I am reminded of a film made many years ago by a British television company on Trinidad's wildlife. The makers clearly felt that any map of Trinidad should show the Pitch Lake, but not knowing their geography they situated it several miles north-east of Arima !!)

Among the species accounts it is stated (p.36) that the Willet is "resident at the Beetham ponds, implying that this species breeds there (when it does not actually breed at all in Trinidad). A more serious implication (p.56) is that parents in the Long-billed Starthroat both feed the young. In reality, there are no known cases of any male hummingbird building a nest, incubating, brooding or feeding young birds. There is thus no pair bond in hummingbirds and no pair as such.. A small point on p.116: the two tanager species would have been more clearly distinguished if the

length of the White-shouldered had been correctly given as 5 or 6 inches (not 7).

The above reservations do not detract in any significant way from the overall value of this book, which while fairly expensive, remains an outstanding contribution to the natural history of the area. It certainly belongs in the library of anyone truly interested in the wildlife of Trinidad and Tobago, and would be a most worthy souvenir for anyone visiting or living temporarily in the area.

Richard ffrench