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## Ornithology in Trinidad During the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century - A Retrospective View

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### ABSTRACT

A review of the evidence in the earliest Journals published by the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club reveals the paucity of serious ornithological endeavour amongst the members of the Club at that time. Some interest was shown in a measure to protect local birds from the plume trade and at Club meetings specimens of spectacular birds were occasionally displayed. Oilbirds elicited some interest, but members seemed equally ready to eat them. Naturalists also enjoyed hunting expeditions, but with no ornithological purpose. Most of the early serious collecting was done by visiting scientists.

The interests and practice of the early members of the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club are intriguingly revealed in the articles published in the Club's Journal during the period 1892 – 1896. My copy of those publications (very shabby and much damaged by termites) unfortunately lacks the first six issues, but the next eighteen, covering the period from 1893 onwards, contains no less than 490 pages and makes very interesting reading. Evidently the Club got off to a flying start from its inauguration in 1891, but it is clear that within only a few years things were already beginning to wind down, partly owing to the death of some key members and the departure from Trinidad of others. Membership remained fairly stable in numbers, however, and the meetings were regularly attended and fully documented in print every other month.

As an ornithologist, I am struck by the lack of a scientific approach towards the subject shown in most of the references to birds, starkly contrasted by the careful and well documented work produced by those writing about entomology, herpetology and botany. In fact, during this period there are very few signs of any serious study of local bird-life, other than copies of papers produced by the American collectors Brewster and Chapman (1895) who worked in various parts of the island during this period. Of course, the publication of Leotaud's fine work (1866) meant that there was at hand a reference work, which might be used as a basis for any future work on the local birds. But nothing more appeared apart from isolated scraps of information.

This is not to say that birds were not appreciated by those early members. S. Devenish had presented a short Report for the Ordinance for Protection of Trinidad's wild birds in 1875, and this was reprinted in the Club's Journal for 1894. The principal subject of concern was the killing of birds "of rich plumage", whose skins

and feathers were used for decoration, mainly of women's hats and clothing in other parts of the world. It was claimed that many thousands of these specimens were exported every year. Devenish also lamented the increase in harmful insect life resulting from the disappearance of their bird predators, but of course there was no scientific research to back up this claim. Apart from these colourful birds, Devenish mentions "table birds", i.e. edible species, such as pigeons of several species, and any kind of water bird. He evidently thought it was all right to hunt these species.

Ornithology at that time was of course heavily oriented towards collecting, and very little else seemed to interest those early members. Several times stuffed specimens were exhibited at Club meetings, but they were almost always the more spectacular species, such as owls, the potoo, motmot, etc. Two exceptions to this were an observation of a Great Kiskadee *Pitangus* swooping on a beetle, and the description of an unusual nest (probably of a Slaty-capped Flycatcher *Leptopogon*). Two species that did catch the imagination of those pioneers were the Potoo *Nyctibius* and the Oilbird *Steatornis*. The potoo was first identified as the creature uttering its especially unusual song by A. B. Carr, who lived near Caparo, and seems to have been the foremost member of the Club in his knowledge of birds. Carr proved that the call of the "Poor-me-one" came from this bird and not from the Pygmy Anteater as was believed by most country folk at that time. But of course Carr went on to shoot the bird, as was the custom then.

The Oilbird and its unusual life style and habits seemed to have intrigued people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as much as in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Expeditions were made, usually to the Oropouche caves, but also to others in Trinidad, which in those days involved several days trekking from Port of Spain, with a retinue of servants to carry

equipment! But in spite of the fascination people felt for this bird, it was not enough to prevent them from hunting it. F. W. Urich tells of how one of his men obtained two young birds from a nest with a long pole, but sadly they were “too young for the table”. In his Report, Devenish even reveals that he had himself with his own hands taken 175 young Oilbirds from the caves, but claims that “had I not done so, they would in all probability have been taken next day by a party of greedy Spaniards”, whom he had met at the foot of the mountains! Clearly, even by those charged with legislative input, Oilbirds were considered to be not much different from chickens when it came to food.

Whenever naturalists of that time, such as Carr, Devenish and Mole, went out into the bush, they expected to take with them their guns. Constant reference is made in their accounts to the danger of snakes, but it seems that the main reason for the guns was that they expected and hoped for some sport. The descriptions of the expeditions include many references to the beauty of the forests and the exhilaration of the chase. If they came across any likely bird quarries, the gunners were not slow to react, and the maxim seems to have been “Shoot first and identify later”. In fact, one could say that for many early naturalists the “bird in the hand” rather than “in the bush” was truly the rule. Ornithology would have to develop for another fifty years or more before anyone thought seriously about how birds lived.

The collections made by Leotaud and Chapman were the

cornerstone of early ornithology in Trinidad, and these were followed very soon by Andre and others in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (ffrench 1991). There were further collections right up to the early 1950s, ending with those by Mees (1958), with very few attempts at work on the ecology, behaviour or nesting of birds, other than those of Williams (1922) and Belcher & Smooker (1934 – 1937), which dealt with nesting, but were concerned principally with making further collections of material. Ironically, such collections are supposed to produce tangible proof of biological facts, but, as I hope to show in a future publication, even such tangible proof can sometimes turn out to be faulty.

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