

# Past and present thoughts of a Trinidad Field Naturalist 1934 – 1990

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I first saw the Royal Victoria Institute in July 1934. A small museum occupied part of the ground floor. You could tell that it was a museum by the glass jars of pickled specimens of animals that lined some shelves. I was impressed by the large bushmaster, giant centipedes and the different kinds of bats. I had come to Trinidad with Dr. Raymond Ditmars to collect these animals for the Bronx Zoo and American Museum of Natural History in New York City. We had met Prof. F.W. Urich, Government Entomologist at the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture and Ludolf Wehekind, Government Hydrologist, both ardent field naturalists. These two people probably knew more about the natural history of Trinidad than any living person. The museum was the place to talk about these things. We sat at a table next to the shelves with the pickled specimens. Wehekind mentioned that it was almost 43 years ago that the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club was formed in July 1891. About a dozen people, mostly amateur naturalists, regularly met around this very table to talk about what they had seen on their field trips. Sometimes they brought in specimens of interest, some of which were preserved in the glass museum jars. Plants and animals were sent to London for identification. Some new species had been named after members who collected them, for example the bats that had been named after Hart and Caracciolo.

Prof. Urich told me of the work that he and Wehekind were doing with other Government officers on vampire bats that were transmitting rabies to people and livestock all over Trinidad, but not Tobago. "I am sure we can collect some of the "bloody little beasts" for you and Dr. Ditmars and perhaps a 'mapapire z'anana'. There will be plenty of copy for your journalist companion William Bridges" who sent daily stories to the New York Sun in New York. Bridges and Ditmars later wrote their book "Snake Hunter's Holiday."

Thus our first field work in Trinidad began and first impressions were profound. Before setting off it was protocol and essential to have one of Prof's traditional rum punches that nearly flattened me. Since I admired the white starched linen suit worn by Urich and the pith helmet worn by Wehekind our first stop was at Salvatori's where I was fitted for a suit to be delivered in 24 hours — cost five U.S. dollars each. I ordered three! I used the pith helmet for years. But my prize was a Sheffield steel doubled-edge machet that sounded a beautiful metallic

ring when used and a hand-tooled scabbard — total cost two dollars!

As we drove around the countryside from Chaguaramas to Mayaro we collected giant centipedes and fish-eating bats on Gasparee, vampire bats in Diego Martin and macajuels in Santa Cruz, saw Guacharo birds at Spring Hill, mapipire balcin in Maraval, giant spear-nosed bats and giant cockroaches in the Heights of Guanapo, and paradox frogs at Mayaro, and looked for huillia in the Nariva Swamp. Ludolf shared his extensive knowledge of natural history and also introduced me to the colorful folklore of Trinidad especially, Papa Bois, Dwens and Soucouyant.

What impressed me were the unspoiled mountain and lowland rainforests; cocoa, citrus and other fruit plantations that barely impinged or threatened nature; rivers and streams with water safe to swim in and drink; unique fresh-water and mangrove swamps each with special fauna and flora all playing out their roles; tiny ecosystems such as Aripo Savannah, elfin forests topping El Tucuche and Mt. Aripo, the unique Tamana Caves, Pitch Lake, mud volcanos, Mora forests — all part of the larger Venezuelan mainland, all fragile because of the tiny land mass of Trinidad.

In 1953 my wife and I returned to Trinidad. Ludolf had persuaded Government that the R.V.I. museum needed a curator and the newly formed zoo was foundering. The recently arrived Trinidad Regional Virus Laboratory of the Rockefeller Foundation selected me as Consultant, complete with laboratory and equipment. Then, in 1954 another severe outbreak of bat-transmitted rabies occurred and I was appointed Government Zoologist in charge of the anti-rabies bat crews. I seriously studied the unusual bat fauna of Trinidad and Tobago. I traveled extensively over Trinidad and Tobago, talked with many people and became interested in their various cultures. I was privileged to observe the political evolution of the country: self government, almost part of a West Indian Federation and finally Independence. For reasons beyond our control we left Trinidad. We have kept in close touch over the years with regular visits.

Great changes have taken place, many affecting the basic philosophy of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club. The majestic forests are being destroyed, mountainsides and caves have been quarried for gravel, the water tables have dropped to dangerous



levels, the waterways are polluted, even the bottom-loving scavenger fishes are being exported for the foreign pet trade. World famous Caroni and Nariva Swamps are being replaced by pollutants, even the mangroves, natural filters, are fast disappearing for land development. Excellent hunting and conservation regulations have been passed but never seriously accepted and therefore either ignored or not enforced or both.

All the above is taking place as you watch. As long as I have known Trinidad and Tobago, the Field Naturalists' Club was the single non-government group actively concerned with the abuses of their natural

heritage and acted to stop them. The objectives of the club are to bring together persons interested in the study of natural history, the diffusion of knowledge thereof and the conservation of nature. While the club's publications the Field Naturalist and Living World admirably fulfill the diffusion of knowledge I do not believe that the present membership adequately meets the other objective. In the October 1990 issue of the Field Naturalist I sadly read the following about a field trip from Matelot to Blanchisseuse: "It was a great hike, but there was not much time to stop and stare at Nature; however, there was much to see."