
BOOK REVIEWS

Studies in Trinidad and Tobago Ornithology Honouring Richard French.

Edited by Floyd E. Hayes and Stanley A. Temple.

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Studies in Trinidad and Tobago Ornithology (known affectionately amongst the birding fraternity in Trinidad and Tobago as “the French Monograph”). It is not a “coffee table book”, nor was it ever intended to be. It does, however, merit prominent display on our bookshelves. This is a major addition to our knowledge of the avifauna of the twin island republic and outlines some real threats to its survival. After a short biography of Richard, the book contains a total of 18 papers, some anecdotal, some technical, together with six shorter works. The variety appeals to both layman and scientist alike and contains a wealth of previously unpublished information.

The first eight pages of Section One are about Richard. Most who are familiar with his name and reputation will know of his 27 years at Pointe-a-Pierre. Some will know that he was awarded not only the Chaconia Medal, but also the Order of Member of the British Empire (MBE) for his services to both education in Trinidad and his work in Life Sciences. However, few will have appreciated the extent of his written contribution to the Ornithology of Trinidad and Tobago.

The next article (and perhaps the most enjoyable “read”) is an extract from C. Brooke Worth’s “A Naturalist in Trinidad”. Here Brooke relates tales of various expeditions to Soldado Rock with Richard and Staff of the Trinidad Regional Virus Laboratory banding terns and analysing the parasitic ticks that infest them. They noted that “each young Sooty Tern dropped almost 1000 (ticks) during the next five days”. The hardships they endured were obviously tempered by night-time liquid imbibing - “once again, I failed to pull my weight, except that I passed the rum bottle”, yet the data gleaned adds to our knowledge both of the breeding ecology of Sooty Terns and Brown Noddies, and to the virus borne by the ticks.

Section Two contains three papers concerning various aspects of taxonomy. Firstly, a short yet highly technical paper by Charles T. Collins and Tamara Araya examines a selection of natal downs of Gray-throated Leaf-tosser and Yellow-chinned Spinetail and assesses the distribution of such down, in comparison with other members of the ovenbird family.

There follows a study by Floyd Hayes of one of our most endangered species, the White-tailed Sabrewing. This globally threatened hummingbird occurs in just three populations: two in Venezuela and the third in Tobago. The paper assesses population trends in Tobago, and puts forward theories as to the value and purpose of the “sabre” or bent outermost primary feather in adult males.

No less than a generation ago, the Picoplat and its presumed

variant subspecies the Ringneck, were common birds of our lowlands. Now, due in no small part to the cage bird trade, they are (almost) certainly locally extirpated. Thankfully, both still occur widely in Venezuela and Colombia. In the final paper of this segment, Robin Restall looks at the taxonomy of the two forms; considers consistent plumage and bill colour differences, and suggests that they are two separate species. This paper provides the beautiful illustration for the book’s front cover.

Section Three deals with species distribution not only in Trinidad and Tobago but in the surrounding seas and nearby islands. The first paper, by Gail Cuffy documents the changes in one of our best known birdwatching areas - the Caroni Swamp. Gail highlights the adverse effect on species density brought about by the ingress of salt water into former freshwater marshes and tabulates species sightings both “before and after”. Looking at the species list found no more than thirty years ago, and realising what has been lost, is a real clarion call for the implementation of the much talked about joint restoration project.

“Avifauna of Laventille Marsh” by Michael Gochfeld is a poignant reminder of “what used to be” and clearly illustrates the fragility of the remaining freshwater marshland of Trinidad and Tobago. Michael provides quantifiable data for 125 species from studies during the period 1959-1967. (The importance of this data is not lost on today’s birdwatcher - no less than five of the species recorded during the studies have not been documented in Trinidad or Tobago since at least 1995). This marsh is no more: bowing to reclamation for industrial and residential development, and the need for agricultural land. Indeed, the social problems affecting access to neighbouring wetlands bordering Port of Spain currently prevents any feasible study of what marshland is left in this portion of Trinidad, and what it may/may not contain

By contrast, the Bocas Is. have remained relatively undisturbed in recent years. The next paper, by Floyd Hayes and Ishmael Samad summarises both historical knowledge and recent survey work, tabulating the 135 species of birds seen on the major islands. *Ad hoc* census work is still undertaken (primarily on Chacachacare). Hopefully this paper will be the catalyst for further published works in an effort to protect from development these unspoilt areas of littoral and deciduous seasonal forest.

“Ground based Nearctic-Neotropic landbird migration during autumn in the Eastern Caribbean” is an extensive study by Douglas McNair *et al.* based at two mist netting sites on Barbados and Guana Is., BVI. Using both sight and mist netting data, the paper tabulates the occurrence of 36 migrant species, all of which breed in eastern North America. It further considers which of the two traditionally accepted migratory routes used to reach South American wintering grounds (“island hopping” from the tip of Florida vs over oceanic flight direct from north eastern USA), is used by which species. Undoubtedly, many of these migrants pass through our forests - however, relatively few are ever seen. Far be it from me to suggest that we have too much forest!

“The status of pelagic seabirds wintering in the south eastern Caribbean is poorly known...” is the first line of a paper by Bill

Murphy. Indeed, in Trinidad and Tobago to date, very little systematic "seawatching" has been done either from our headlands or on our coastal waters. This study documents the avifauna seen "from ship" during three cruises between Curacao and the Orinoco River. Each cruise sailed through our territorial waters. Of the species tallied, Cory's Shearwater and Wilson's Petrel are currently considered extremely rare in T&T waters and Long tailed Jaeger is yet to be recorded. The continual threat, by human activities, to seabird nesting colonies in the region amplifies the need for further quantitative studies of both wintering and migrant species.

Like our coastal waters, there is currently little ornithological study undertaken in "south Trinidad" This makes "A mist netting study in Guayaguayare and the Victoria Mayaro Forest Reserve" by Stewart White all the more important. Four different forest types were studied during summer 1999: pristine virgin forest, a mixed area of virgin and disturbed secondary forest and two sites where different logging methods had been used. The paper compares bird density in these different sites.

Section Four comprises 8 papers studying bird behaviour. Despite it being our only endemic species, little is known about the ecology of the Trinidad Piping-guan. Gavin Alexander's paper describes daily behaviour of "Pawi" at the well-known study site at Montevideo in both 1989 and 1991. Both vocalisations and feeding habits are described as is the attitude to the birds displayed by residents in the area.

A bird behavioural pattern known to many is the "lekking" of manakins. Mark Berres' paper "Long term persistence of White-bearded manakin leks in the Arima Valley" documents his search for leks first described in 1962, some of which were still active some 38 yrs later. It further details the make up of a male manakin's "court" and describes a manakin's behaviour when an existing lek becomes dissolved and the resultant effect on local manakin populations.

"Notes on the Biology of Band rumped Swifts" by Charles T Collins summarises the paucity of existing knowledge about the geographical distribution and possible breeding ecology of the species. It then suggests distinction from other *Chaetura* swifts in feeding pattern, documents a different moult timetable and fields the possibility of this species having a biannual breeding cycle (previously unknown in Neotropical swifts).

We all marvel at the structure of "cornbird" nests. "Weaving techniques in Yellow Oriole and Crested Oropendola" by Mykela Heath and Mike Hansell illustrates the construction strategy employed and the complexity and variety of "stitches" used by both species, drawing comparison with the weaverbird family of Africa and Asia.

It is said that what a bird loses in physical appearance is more than compensated for by its intriguing behaviour. Such is the case with the Shiny Cowbird, a host parasite. With good cause it is known locally as "Lazy Bird". The next paper by Tim Manolis and Alexander Cruz illustrates the differing strategies used by Cowbirds in selecting host species and suggests that the degree (or lack thereof) of their sexual fidelity is directly related to the identity of the foster species.

Few in T&T can emulate the attention to detail that is Victor Quesnel at work. His topic, and the next paper in the Section, the breeding biology of the Black-throated Mango. It is rather a common hummingbird, yet little had been historically published. No less than 30 Black-throated Mango nests, constructed within the

greenhouses at his home, were studied over a nine-year period. In this work, Victor considers the reasons for nest site selection and provides the first lengthy analysis of their breeding timetable.

The penultimate paper is Stan Temple's early warning call "Extinct prone birds of Trinidad and Tobago". Whilst I do not pretend to understand the complex mathematics used in determining the results, his down-to-earth approach in describing "threat factors" make this an essential read for all who enjoy watching birds. Separate tables are considered for each of the twin islands. A total of 272 species of landbirds were analysed; results from the criteria employed suggest that there are 63 threatened species in Trinidad and 23 in Tobago.

The subject of the final "behavioural" paper, by Graham White and Stan Temple, considers one of Richard's own "study subjects" - the Dickcissel, and its impact on rice production. The damage done to growing rice by overwintering swarms of Dickcissels in Venezuela is well documented. Trinidad is at the edge of the species winter range, however we witness huge flocks (in one instance considered to be in excess of 100,000 birds), spending the latter part of their winter in Trinidad before embarking on northward migration. The analysis measures the estimated rice content consumed per bird per day, against both flock population and, more importantly, duration of stay.

Section Five is devoted to six short communications. The first documents unusual behaviour displayed by a Common Blackhawk. Next we learn of the first occurrence in our islands of Franklin's Gull, Wood Sandpiper, White eyed Vireo and Slaty Elaenia - truly rare sightings; only Franklin's Gull has been seen subsequently.

Finally, there is a short article by Graham White highlighting the danger of birds becoming trapped in grass panicles and cites examples of both Bananaquit and Green Hermit suffering this hazard. Perhaps this is my only criticism of the book - I am in no way being critical of the article itself, it poses valid concerns - just its placement within the context of the book. I just feel that to end this monograph on a "downbeat" is itself an anti-climax. Nevertheless, the criticism is minor in the overall context of a book which I wholeheartedly recommend.

Perhaps the greatest pleasure I personally obtained from the book was the knowledge that Richard was totally unaware of its preparation, and that the postal delivery to his home in Scotland came as a complete surprise. The two editors should be roundly applauded for putting together a wealth of invaluable studies under one umbrella and the authors can be rightly proud of their contributions. Richard, I know, is honoured to have such a work linked to his name.

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