

# Seventeenth Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Birds Status and Distribution Committee Records Submitted During 2019

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The Trinidad and Tobago Rare Birds Committee was established in 1995 to assess, document and archive the occurrence of rare or unusual bird sightings in Trinidad and Tobago and thus provide reliable long-term monitoring of our rarer species. Now renamed the Birds Status and Distribution Committee, we have assessed all records submitted during 2019. In all, 95 records were adjudged, representing 56 different species. During 2019 no less than six new species were recorded for the country and one new species for Tobago. As in previous years, we wish to commend the quality of photographic submissions by so many observers.

Of the submissions assessed, in only two cases were we satisfied that an error in identification had occurred. Additionally in four cases the Committee found the identification inconclusive. One further submission is still under review. Records presented below follow the revised nomenclature and taxonomic order of the South American Classification Committee as at December 2019 (Remsen *et al.* 2019).

The Committee comprises the following members: Martyn Kenefick (Secretary), Faraaz Abdool, Geoffrey Gomes, Nigel Lallsingh, Bill Murphy, Kris Sookdeo and Graham White. There are instances where we have benefited from supporting international expert knowledge to assist us with certain identification issues. We wish to acknowledge the valuable assistance provided by Bob Flood, Keith Hansen, Steve Howell, Tom Johnson, James Smith and Sheri Williamson,

Archived records including photographic submissions number 1,571 at the end of 2019. Reports are published in *Living World*; the first in 2000, and annually since 2007.

Species considered by the TTBSDC (TTRBC), together with the Official List of the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago and details of all accepted records by the Committee can be accessed, from our website at <http://rbc.tfn.org>. We urge finders to document and report their sightings. All documented sightings summarised below occurred in 2019 unless otherwise stated.

## Records accepted

Two **White-faced Whistling-Duck** *Dendrocygna viduata* were found along Rahamut Trace on 23 July (DG) and a group of five was photographed at Caroni Rice Project on 20 August (NL) This is a scarce but annual visitor to Trinidad's freshwater swamps with most sightings occurring between the end of May and the end of August.

Initially two **Muscovy Duck** *Cairina moschata* were photographed in flooded agricultural fields at Aranguez on 25 January. This increased to seven birds by 9 March (MK, RJ, SR). All appeared to be un-ringed and were exceedingly wary. Whilst their provenance will always remain in doubt, it is likely that these were wild birds wandering from mainland South America.

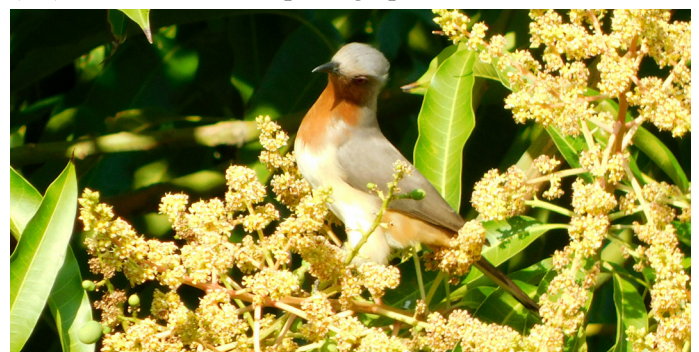
A female **Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* was found amongst a flock of White-cheeked Pintail at Bon Accord sewage ponds, Tobago on 20 November (MKe) remaining until 30 November at least. This is just the fourth documented sighting of this migrant duck and the first since 2004.

An adult male and two immature/female plumaged **Ring-necked Ducks** *Aythya collaris* were photographed at Bon Accord sewage ponds, Tobago on 14 November (NG, JR *et al.*). One remained at least until 16 December. In total, 26 birds have been recorded over the last 24 years, all from south west Tobago and all occurring between 14 November and 3 March.

A flock of 14 **American Flamingos** *Phoenicopterus ruber* were photographed over Crown Pt., Tobago on 22 September in the aftermath of a tropical storm (AM). This is the first documented record for Tobago. Elsewhere the large flock within Caroni Swamp were present year round with numbers reaching in excess of 100 birds on many occasions (many observers).

Totally unexpected was a photographed sighting of a **Dwarf Cuckoo** *Coccyz pumila* in gardens of a residential area in La Brea on 13 February (TG-M, Fig.1.). Little is known of its distribution within South America, almost all sightings are in northern Columbia and Venezuela and there is one record from Brazil.

Two **Dark-billed Cuckoos** *Coccyzus melacoryphus* were well documented from Pt. Gourde on 27 July (ES). Two more were photographed at Carlsen Field on



**Fig.1.** Dwarf Cuckoo, La Brea, February 2019. Photo Tricia Ganness-Moses.

15 August, remaining in the area until 24 August at least (Bd'A). These sightings fall into the now expected pattern of, what is suspected to be, post-breeding dispersal from the mainland with all ten documented records occurring between 12 July- 31 August.

An **Amethyst Woodstar** *Calliphlox amethystina* was seen briefly and photographed feeding on flowering Vervain at Asa Wright Nature Centre on 12 May (MR). Since the first record in Trinidad in 2015, all 11 documented sightings have been between 28 April-26 July.

For the third year in a row, (presumably the same) **Double-striped Thick-Knee** *Burhinus bistriatus* was found day roosting in the Queens Park Savanna, Port of Spain on 2 September (Bd'A).

An **Upland Sandpiper** *Bartramia longicauda* was found in a rough grassy field at Orange Valley on 7 October, where it was present until at least 15 October (NL, Fig. 2). Of the 14 documented records in the last 24 years, all but one have been southbound migrants occurring between 31 August and 26 October.

An extremely confiding **Paint-billed Crake** *Mustelirallus erythropus* was photographed on the roadside leading to Carli Bay on 29 June (NL, Fig. 3). This is just the eighth documented record, six of which have occurred between 29 June and 9 August.

An adult **Franklin's Gull** *Leucophaeus pipixcan*, beginning to moult into basic plumage was photographed at Orange Valley on 26 July (NL). This is the earliest ever documented date for a southbound migrant and may well represent a 'failed breeder'.

A first-winter plumaged **Great Black-backed Gull** *Larus marinus* was found amongst the gull flock on the mudflats at Orange Valley on 23 January, remaining until 2 February at least (NL). This is just the fourth documented record for Trinidad, all three other birds were from the same location in 2009 (Kenefick 2010).

An adult **Kelp Gull** *Larus dominicanus* was photographed south of Carli Bay on 12 December (EC, JC). This is the fourth documented record of this South American gull, three of which have occurred during December.

A first-winter plumaged **Lesser Black-backed Gull** *Larus fuscus* was well documented from Milford Bay, Tobago on 20 November (MKe). Whilst several birds are present year round on the west coast of Trinidad, this is just the ninth documented sighting for Tobago.

An **Arctic Tern** *Sterna paradisaea* in first-summer plumage was carefully studied on the tidal mudflats at Brickfield amongst a large gathering of Common Terns, *S hirundo* between 26-31 May (NL, Fig. 4). Whilst seen on several occasions in Cuba, Virgin Is, Guadeloupe and once from Barbados, this is the first documented record for Trinidad & Tobago. The complex identification issues



Fig. 2. Upland Sandpiper, Orange Valley, October 2019. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.



Fig. 3. Paint-billed Crake, Carli Bay, June 2019. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.



Fig. 4. Arctic Tern, Orange Valley mudflats, May 2019. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

surrounding *Sterna* terns may well obscure its true status.

A **Cory's Shearwater** *Calonectris diomedea* was photographed sitting on the sea close to Little Tobago island on 3 December (ZF). Whilst occasional tide-line corpses have been found, usually on the east coast of Trinidad, this is just the sixth documented sighting of a live bird in the last 24 years.

A **Cape Verde Shearwater** *Calonectris edwardsii* was found and photographed swimming just offshore Speyside, Tobago on 18 October. (ZF, MH *et al.* Fig. 5). Unsurprisingly, this is the first documented record for Trinidad & Tobago as the breeding range is restricted to the Cape Verde Islands and sightings within the region are



usually limited to offshore Brazil.

An adult **Fasciated Tiger-Heron** *Tigrisoma fasciatum* was photographed perched beside the river at Grande Riviere on 3 May 2014 (WS, Fig. 6). This is just the second



**Fig. 5.** Cape Verde Shearwater, Speyside, October 2019. Photo Marcia Horman.

documented sighting of this species, both coming from forested streams in north east Trinidad.

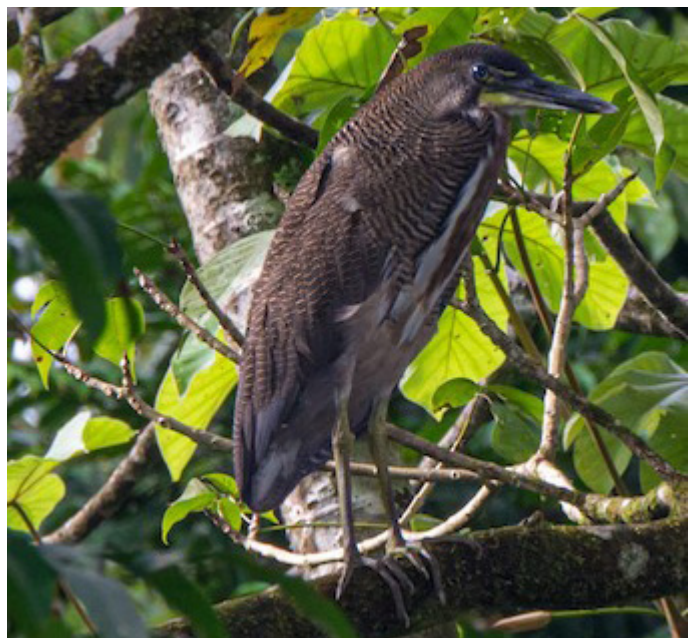
A **Squacco Heron** *Ardeola ralloides* was photographed close to Bon Accord sewage ponds, Tobago for much of the afternoon on 23 May 2019 (JR, Fig. 7). It could not be relocated on subsequent days. This is the first documented sighting of this Old World heron, whose normal distribution ranges from southern Europe and throughout Africa. Within the region there is a single documented record from Guadeloupe and several sightings from the island of Fernando de Noronha, Brazil.

The **Gray Heron** *Ardea cinerea*, first found on the west coast tidal mudflats in 2016 remained all year (many observers). The only other documented sighting was of an immature photographed at Kings Bay, Tobago on 2 January and again at Louis d'Or on 17 January (JR).

A **Stygian Owl** *Asio stygius* was photographed late at night close to the Caroni Swamp Visitor Centre on 13 December 2018. (RD, Fig. 8). Whilst nowhere common, the species is distributed widely through both Central and South America and this represents the first documented record of the species for Trinidad & Tobago. Further details on this record are provided by Deo *et al.* (2020).

At least two **Snail Kites** *Rostrhamus sociabilis* frequented Nariva swamp during the year. A bird in immature/female plumage was found on 26 January (SGr, SG, MR) and an adult male on 18 February (JS). Both were present until mid-April (many observers). A male photographed at the same location on 21 September. (MG, DH) may have been the earlier individual. Elsewhere a male was seen at Aranguez farmland on 16 March (CC).

An adult and an immature **Plumbeous Kite** *Ictinia plumbea* were photographed soaring over Cuffie River Nature Retreat on 12 December (LH, SW). This is just the second documented record for Tobago. Whilst a common breeding visitor to Trinidad from mainland South America, present from February to late September, that the two



**Fig. 6.** Fasciated Tiger-Heron, Grande Riviere, May 2014. Photo William Stephens.



**Fig. 7.** Squacco Heron, Bon Accord, May 2019. Photo Jason Radix.



**Fig. 8.** Stygian Owl, Caroni Swamp, December 2018. Photo Rainer Deo.



Tobago records occurred in December and January is most unexpected.

An adult and a sub-adult **Great Black Hawk** *Buteogallus urubitinga* were carefully studied and photographed, flying over Nariva Swamp on 20 February (DL, MRa *et al.*). Whilst still considered a rare resident species in Trinidad, its true status and abundance may be obscured by its visible similarity to the much more widespread Common Black Hawk *B. anthracinus*.

A **Roadside Hawk** *Rupornis magnirostris* was photographed beside Cascadoux Trace, Kernaham settlement on 2 January (SGr, JH *et al.*) (Fig. 9). It remained faithful to the area until 23 April at least. This is the first, and long awaited, documented record of this medium-sized raptor which is commonly found throughout Central and much of South America.



**Fig. 9.** Roadside Hawk, Cascadoux Trace, Nariva, February 2019. Photo Richard Lakhan.

As in previous years, numbers of **Small-billed Elaenia** *Elaenia parvirostris* were documented during the mid-summer months. Of most significance were at least 12 birds found along the boundary of Caroni Rice Project on 28 July (NL), far and away the largest number ever found in Trinidad. Elsewhere a minimum of two birds were seen in differing areas of Carlsen Field between 24 July and 29 August (JFo, NL) and one was found on the coast at Brickfield on 27 August (NL).

An adult male **Scarlet Tanager** *Piranga olivacea* was photographed close to Brasso Seco village on 4 May (JF, BO'C). Most Scarlet Tanagers overwinter in northern South America, following a western route through Central America. With one exception all previous records of this species are in April and presumably northbound. The sighting on 16 April 2018 was also at Brasso Seco and could be the same individual.

An adult male **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** *Pheucticus ludovicianus* was found feeding in a bay-leaf tree, *Pimenta racemosa* at Morne le Croix on 10 February (MK, HS, GW). This species is a rare winter visitor to Trinidad & Tobago with only 16 documented sightings in the last 24 years.

An adult male **Saffron Finch** *Sicalis flaveola* was photographed in the grass at Crown Pt. Airport, Tobago on 11 October 2015 (SO'R, Fig. 10). This species was introduced into Tobago over 60 years ago (French 2012), however this is the first documented record for many years.



**Fig. 10.** Saffron Finch, Crown Point, October 2015. Photo Suzanne O'Rourke.

An adult female **Black-and-white Warbler** *Mniotilta varia* was photographed in coastal scrub at Waterloo on 15 September (NL *et al.*). This is an extremely early date, most southbound migrants are found from mid-October to mid-November.

The female **Cerulean Warbler** *Setophaga cerulea* which was first seen on 4 December 2017, returned in 2018, where it remained in the same samaan tree until 14 March at least. Incredibly, it returned on 28 October (NL) and was present until the year end.

Single **Bay-breasted Warblers** *Setophaga castanea* were documented from Gran Couva on 27 December 2018 (NL) and at Las Lapas on 26 December (MK *et al.*). Once considered an extremely rare winter visitor to Trinidad, they have now been found in each of the last seven years, all between 9 December and 30 March.

A **Chestnut-sided Warbler** *Setophaga pensylvanica* was described from Cuffie River Nature Retreat on 1 January (BJ-S). This is just the second documented record from Tobago in the last 24 years. In Trinidad, a winter plumaged individual photographed at Chaguaramas on 24 February remained at the site for at least two days (Bd'A, JFo).

On 30 September a flock of five **Bobolink** *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* were found along Rahamut Trace. (KF, JG). Over the next week or so, this increased to at least 200 birds representing the largest flock ever recorded in Trinidad. Belatedly, one was reported, documented and photographed close to Blue Waters Inn, Tobago on 14 October 2015 (SO'R, LT). October remains the key month to find this southbound migrant.

#### Escaped cage and aviary species

A Venezuelan Troupial *Icterus icterus* was seen at Pt. Fortin and Village Weavers *Ploceus cucullatus* were inside Caroni Swamp.

The provenance of seedeater and seed-finch species continues to pose a challenge. The Committee has taken a decision that, unless there is supporting evidence to the contrary, all sightings will be considered under this category and that assessment will be based on identification alone.

#### Additional records

Acceptable records were also received for a further 41 sightings of the following species whose status has been established but whose distribution continues to be monitored by the Committee. Scaled Dove *Columbina squammata*, Blue Ground Dove *Claravis pretiosa*, Rufous-necked Wood-Rail *Aramides axillaris*, Black Skimmer *Rynchops niger* (Tobago only), Rufescent Tiger-Heron *Tigrisoma lineatum*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Glossy Ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*, Hook-billed Kite *Chondrohierax uncinatus*, Black Hawk-Eagle *Spizaetus tyrannus*, Double-toothed Kite *Harpagus bidentatus*, Crane Hawk *Geranospiza caerulescens*, Rufous Crab Hawk *Buteogallus aequinoctialis*, Crested Caracara *Caracara cheriway*, Aplomado Falcon *Falco femoralis*, White-eyed Parakeet *Psittacara leucophthalmus*, Variegated Flycatcher *Empidonomus varius*, Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*, Ruddy-breasted Seedeater *Sporophila minuta*.

#### Inconclusive records

Submissions of the following species were deemed inconclusive: Azure Gallinule *Porphyrio flavirostris*, Lesser Black-backed Gull *Larus fuscus*, Black-collared Hawk *Busarellus nigricollis*, Lesser Elaenia *Elaenia chiriquiensis*, Black-whiskered Vireo *Vireo altiloquus*, Summer Tanager *Piranga rubra*.

#### Nomenclature changes

Part of the mission of the South American Classification Committee is to create a standard classification, with English names, for the birds of South America. This is subject to constant revision by the proposal system to allow incorporation of new data. The following changes were made in 2019 : American Comb-Duck *Sarkidiornis sylvicola* is now deemed a separate species from Comb Duck *Sarkidiornis melanotos* of Africa. Trilling Gnatwren *Ramphocaenus melanurus*, formerly Long-billed Gnatwren,

is now renamed and treated as a separate species from Chattering Gnatwren of southern South America.

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