

Eighteenth Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Birds Status and Distribution Committee, Records Submitted during 2020

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The Trinidad and Tobago Birds Status and Distribution Committee (TTBSDC) was established in 1995 to assess, document and archive the occurrence of rare or unusual birds in Trinidad and Tobago and thus provide reliable long-term monitoring of our rarer species. We have assessed all records submitted during 2020. A total of 95 records were assessed, representing 48 different species, in a year where fieldwork was seriously impeded by the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. One species was added to the National Official List and a further two species were found in Tobago for the first time. As in previous years, we commend the quality of photographic submissions by so many observers. Of the submissions assessed, in only five cases did we find the identification inconclusive.

The Committee is comprised of 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 acknowledge with thanks the invaluable assistance provided by Pete Clement, Dave Cooper, Bob Flood, Keith Hansen, Steve Howell, Tom Johnson, Chris Rimmer, David Sibley, James Smith, Sheri Williamson and Joe Wunderle.

Archived records including photographic submissions number 1,666 at the end of 2020. This report is the eighteenth report of this committee. All reports were published in Living World and are available at <https://ttfnc.org/livingworld/index.php/lwj/issue/archive>.

The list of species considered by the TTBSDC, 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.ttfnc.org>. We urge finders to document and report their sightings to us.

Records presented below follow the revised nomenclature and taxonomic order of the South American Classification Committee as at December 2020 (Remsen *et al.* (2021). All sightings occurred in 2020 unless otherwise stated.

Records accepted

A female **Comb Duck** *Sarkidiornis sylvicola* was found in Caroni Rice Project on 24 June (JMM, DN). The bird remained for several days but elusive. Whilst widespread throughout much of South America, it is a rare austral wanderer to Trinidad. This is the first documented sighting for ten years.

A male **Northern Shoveler** *Spatula clypeata* in non-breeding plumage was found in a flooded field at Caroni Rice Project on 20 October (RJ, MK). With just five documented records in the last 20 years, this remains a very rare visitor from the north with sightings from October-February.

An immature **Lesser Scaup** *Aythya affinis* was photographed in flooded fields and lakes at Caroni Rice Project on 28 November (CC, MK, NL). Altogether, 17 birds have been found in the last ten years, nine of which have occurred during the last week of November.

A pair of **Masked Ducks** *Nomonyx dominicus* were found in a flooded weedy field within Caroni Rice Project on 31 October (NL). This is a rarely seen, extremely shy resident of both Trinidad and Tobago which usually remains hidden in well-vegetated stands of water.

A pair of **Eurasian Collared Doves** *Streptopelia decaocto* were photographed in a residential area of Chaguanas on 24 May (KF) (Fig. 1). Elsewhere, one was seen along Rahamut Trace on 16 August (FA). Having been introduced initially into the USA and subsequently The Bahamas, this species is now spreading through the Antilles island chain south to at least St. Lucia and Barbados.



Fig. 1 Eurasian Collared Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto*. Chaguanas, 24 May 2020. Photo Kevin Foster .

Single **Dark-billed Cuckoos** *Coccyzus melacoryphus* were found adjacent to Caroni Rice Project on 2 August (DH, NL) and at Orange Grove on 11 October (DH). There is now a pattern emerging of mid-year sightings of this austral cuckoo with 16 documented records in the last 16 years; all but one during the period 12 July to 31 August.

A male **Amethyst Woodstar** *Calliphlox amethystina* in non-breeding plumage, was found feeding on Vervain bushes at Asa Wright Nature Centre on 16 May (JMM, DN, MK) and seen intermittently in the grounds until 26 May. There have now been sightings in each of the last six years ranging from the end of April to the end of July.

For the fourth year running a **Double-striped Thick-Knee** *Burhinus bistriatus* was found day-roosting within the Queens Park Savannah, Port of Spain. First observed on 29 August, it remained until 26 September at least (Bd'A). Of the 17 documented sightings in the last 25 years, all but two have occurred between 6 July and 7 September.

Two **Upland Sandpipers** *Bartramia longicauda* were found in a wet grassy field within the Caroni Rice Project on 31 October (NL). Of the 16 birds found in T&T during the last 20 years, all but one occurred on southbound migration between 29 August and 31 October.

A “**Eurasian**” **Whimbrel** *Numenius phaeopus phaeopus* was carefully studied and photographed in Bon Accord, Tobago on 14 February (TJ *et al.*). This nominate form is visually separable from the *hudsonicus* subspecies found throughout the New World by colder plumaged tones, whitish underwing coverts and a white wedge from rump to mid mantle. This is just our second documented record, previously only seen at Turtle Beach, Tobago in February 2001.

The year 2020 was a “bumper year” for sightings of **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** *Calidris subruficollis* with a total of 18 birds present between 16 September and 10 October. Records were as follows: two at Rahamut Trace (JMM); 12 on Caroni Rice Project (MK, NL) and four in Orange Grove farmland (MK, RJ). This species is a “high Arctic” breeder which winters on southern South American grasslands. It is considered “near threatened” by IUCN. Over 80 birds have been found in T&T during the last 20 years with 88% occurring during the southbound migration window of 16 September to 28 October.

An immature **Ring-billed Gull** *Larus delawarensis* was found flying along the shoreline at Carli Bay on 1 January (TJ *et al.*). This remains a very scarce visitor to the west coast of Trinidad from continental North America and is the first documented sighting since 2016.

An exhausted **Great Shearwater** *Ardenna gravis* was rescued from the tide line at Mayaro beach on 7 June (RP, SP) (Fig. 2) It did not survive the night. This was the first documented report for 16 years. This species breeds on

islands in the South Atlantic, then undertakes a migration loop via the eastern seaboard of North America. Almost all sightings in T&T have been during June and July.



Fig. 2 Great Shearwater *Ardenna gravis*, Manzanilla Beach, 7 June 2020. Photo Raymond Parkinson.

A **Gray Heron** *Ardea cinerea*, first found on the west coast tidal mudflats in 2016 was seen intermittently all year by many observers.

An adult **Capped Heron** *Pilherodius pileatus* flew out of a small ravine close to the shore at Granville on 16 May. It was photographed heading into a heavily forested area and not seen subsequently (RG) (Fig. 3). This is the first documented record for T&T. It is a secretive and generally scarce resident throughout much of South America.



Fig. 3 Capped Heron *Pilherodius pileatus*, Granville, 16 May 2020. Photo Rishi Goordial.

A juvenile **Roseate Spoonbill** *Platalea ajaja* was found feeding in a wet, grassy field within Caroni Rice Project on 5 September (NL). This is just the fifth documented record in the last 25 years with all previous sightings being from the same geographic area.

An adult male **Snail Kite** *Rostrhamus sociabilis* was photographed inside Aranguez farmland on 13 June (CC) and a female was found there on 22 October, remaining until the 30th at least (RJ, MK). Elsewhere one, possibly two, were present on Caroni Rice Project from 1 August until the end of the year (NL *et al.*).

What is presumed to be the same **Roadside Hawk** *Rupornis magnirostris* that frequented the Cascadoux Trace, Kernaham settlement area during the early part of 2019 was once again photographed on 22 January (FB, MR). Its whereabouts in the intervening nine months remains a mystery.

An immature **White-tailed Hawk** *Geranoaetus albicaudatus* was photographed perched on a coconut tree stump along Fullerton Rd., Icacos on 8 November (KF, RAR)(Fig. 4). Of the nine documented records during the last 20 years, this is the first sighting from the south-west peninsula.



Fig. 4 White-tailed Hawk, *Geranoaetus albicaudatus*, Fullerton Rd. Icacos, 8 November 2000. Photo Kevin Foster.

An adult **Zone-tailed Hawk** *Buteo albonotatus* was photographed flying along the leeward coast of Tobago on 22 February (KF, DHu). Whilst there have been several anecdotal reports, this was the first documented record for the island.

Whilst **Crested Caracara** *Caracara plancus* is now established throughout much of Trinidad, with several confirmed breeding sites, two birds were found on 25 October in the Mt. Irvine area of Tobago, constituting the first documented record of the species for the island (KT).

There now appears to be regular post-breeding dispersal of **Small-billed Elaenias** *Elaenia parvirostris* northwards to Trinidad during the austral winter. First to show were two birds at Millennium Golf Course on 8 June (RJ) followed by two more at Orange Valley on 17 July (NL). Up to six birds were present along the borders of Caroni Rice Project from 23 July to 29 August (NL, MK) whilst three birds were present at Carlsen Field on 15-16 August (DH, VR). Finally, one was photographed along Tortuga Shortcut Road on 27 September (FA).

A **Lesser Elaenia** *Elaenia chiriquensis* was carefully studied and photographed at Carli Bay on 22 March (NL). This is an

infrequently identified resident species in lowland Trinidad, however our understanding of its status and distribution may be distorted by its very close visual resemblance to the larger and common Yellow-bellied Elaenia.

A **Yellow-throated Vireo** *Vireo flavifrons* was found foraging in the canopy along Gilpin Trace, Tobago on 16 February (TJ *et al.*). This is an extremely rare migrant visitor from continental North America with just two records over the last 30 years.

Single **Black-whiskered Vireos** *Vireo altiloquus* were photographed at Chaguaramas on both 26 December 2019 and 19 July (BdA) whilst another was found on Morne Blue on 6 June (JMM, DN). Whilst this species is a fairly widespread resident throughout much of the Lesser Antilles, it has historically been considered a non-breeding winter visitor to T&T. These sightings may reflect a gradual change in status.

A **Cliff Swallow** *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota* was found hawking for insects over Caroni Rice Project on 26 September (NL, MK). Whilst found almost annually, this remains an uncommon passage migrant to both islands.

A 1st winter plumaged **Gray-cheeked Thrush** *Catharus minimus* was photographed along the Blanchisseuse Rd. on 22 November (JMM)(Fig. 5). This was the first documented sighting in Trinidad since 1989 of this migrant thrush which predominantly winters in north-eastern Colombia.



Fig. 5 Gray-cheeked Thrush *Catharus minimus*, Blanchisseuse Road. 22 November 2020. Photo Jason-Marc Mohamed.

Eight **Bobolinks** *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* were found feeding in grassy fields along Rahamut Trace on 16 October (FA, JMM) (Fig. 6) shortly followed by a flock at the Caroni Rice Project. Initially 80 birds were sighted but this increased to at least 200 birds by the end of the month (NL *et al.*). October is the traditional month to find Bobolink in T&T with 20 of the last 26 documented sightings occurring in this month.



Fig. 6 Bobolink *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*, Caroni Rice Project, 24 October 2020. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

An adult female **Great-tailed Grackle** *Quiscalus mexicanus* was photographed at La Brea on 12 December (KF). This is just the second documented sighting in Trinidad. While this species is commonly found in north-western South America and is gradually spreading eastwards along the coast, there seems to be no recent sightings east of Caracas.

A female **Black-and-White Warbler** *Mniotilta varia* was found on Lalaja Trace during the Christmas Bird Count on 27 December (NL, RJ). This migrant from the north remains a rare visitor to T&T, found almost annually between October - March.

An immature female **Common Yellowthroat** *Geothlypis trichas* was photographed at Carli Bay on 22 March (NL) (Fig 7). This is the first sighting in over 50 years of this migrant North American warbler which mainly winters in Central America and north-western South America.



Fig. 7 Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*, Carli Bay, 22 March 2020. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

A female **Cerulean Warbler** *Setophaga cerulea* was found in the forested hills above Gran Couva on 4 December 2017. What is assumed to be the same individual returned to over-winter in the same Samaan tree in both 2018 and 2019. After

presumably migrating north once more in March 2020, it returned yet again on 28 October (NL) and was present until the year's end.

A female **Indigo Bunting** *Passerina cyanea* was carefully studied at Carli Bay on 22 March (NL). This extremely rare migrant from North America has only previously been documented once in Trinidad: an adult male in March 1977.

Escaped cage and aviary species

A **Black-headed Parrot** *Pionites melanocephalus* was photographed in Princes Town and a **Festive Parrot** *Amazona festiva* in Port of Spain. **Red-and-Green Macaws** *Ara chloropterus* continue to be regularly reported from the south-west peninsula and north coast of Trinidad plus sightings near Chaguanas. **Village Weavers** *Ploceus cucullatus* are frequently seen inside Caroni Rice Project and a known "ship assisted" **Hooded Crow** *Corvus cornix* made landfall near Pt. Fortin (having travelled aboard ship from Israel).

The provenance of most seedeater and seed-finch species continues to be a problem. 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 or submitted to eBird for a further 42 sightings of the following species for which status has been established but their distribution continues to be monitored by the Committee. **White-faced Whistling-Duck** *Dendrocygna viduata*; **Scaled Dove** *Columbina squammata*; **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*; **Aplomado Falcon** *Falco femoralis*; **Variegated Flycatcher** *Empidonomus varius*; **Summer Tanager** *Piranga rubra* and **Yellow-bellied Seedeater** *Sporophila nigricollis*.

Inconclusive records

Submissions of the following species were deemed inconclusive :- **Gray Heron**, *Ardea cinerea*; **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus*; **Great Black Hawk** *Buteogallus urubitinga*; **Small-billed Elaenia** *Elaenia parvirostris* and **Indigo Bunting** *Passerina cyanea*.

Nomenclature changes

Part of the mission statement 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 2020 (Remsen *et al.* 2021):-

Comb-Duck *Sarkidiornis sylvicola* following a further review, the previous English name has been reinstated (proposed as American Comb Duck in 2019). It remains a separate species from **Knob-billed Duck** *Sarkidiornis melanotos* of Africa.

Additionally, the Committee maintains an ongoing review of individual and genera scientific nomenclature. During 2020 the following changes were made:

Leach's Storm Petrel :- now *Hydrobates leucorhous*

Red-rumped Woodpecker :- now *Dryobates kirkii*

Copper-rumped Hummingbird :- now *Saucerottia tobaci*

White-chested Emerald :- now *Chrysuronia brevirostris*

Crested Caracara :- now *Caracara plancus*

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