

Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Birds Status and Distribution Committee, Records Submitted during 2021

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The Trinidad and Tobago Birds Status and Distribution Committee (TTBSDC) (established in 1995 as the T&T Rare Birds Committee) serves 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 less common species. In 2021, the second year during which fieldwork was seriously impeded by the ongoing pandemic, 80 records were submitted to the Committee, representing 55 different species. One species was added to the National Official List. As in previous years, we wish to commend the quality of photographs by so many observers. Of the submissions assessed, in only two cases did we find the identification inconclusive.

Records presented below follow the revised nomenclature and taxonomic order of the South American Classification Committee as of April 2022 (Remsen *et al.* 2022).

The Committee comprises the following members: Martyn Kenefick (Secretary), Faraaz Abdool, Geoffrey Gomes, Nigel Lallsingh, Bill Murphy, Kris Sookdeo and Graham White. The Committee has benefited from supporting international expert knowledge to assist us with certain identification issues. We wish to acknowledge the valuable assistance provided by Dave Cooper and James Smith. Archived records, including photographic submissions, number 1,746 at the end of 2021. Reports are published annually 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://ttbsdc.ttfnc.org>. We urge finders to document and report their sightings to us.

All documented sightings summarized below occurred in 2021 unless otherwise stated.

Records accepted

The Committee has decided to assess and monitor the spread of **Trinidad Piping-Guan** *Pipile pipile* sightings away from their established forested sites south of Grande Riviere and on Morne Bleu. On 10 May, two birds were photographed on the road to Morne Catherine, Chaguaramas (TA) and on 23 June, one was in forest south of Blanchisseuse village (GW).

An early wandering **Dark-billed Cuckoo** *Coccyzus*

melacoryphus was photographed along Covigne Rd, Chaguaramas on 13 May (Bd'A). We continue to document the post-breeding dispersal of this species from its South American breeding grounds. All but one of the previous 13 sightings in Trinidad have been during the period July to August.

On 19 April an adult male **Amethyst Woodstar** *Calliphlox amethystine* was photographed along Gomez Trace, Brasso Seco (JMM, KK *et al.*) and from 21 April to 6 May, an immature was seen on several occasions feeding on Antigua Heath in Surrey Village (GW). Following its initial identification in Trinidad in 2015, this wanderer from mainland South America has been found annually between late April and late July.

The corpse of a **Paint-billed Crake** *Mustelirallus erythrops* was retrieved along Freeman Road, Caroni on 17 July (NL). Of the nine records to date, in the last 26 years, seven have been found between 29 June and 8 August. Sadly, of these four individuals have been found dead.

A **Killdeer** *Charadrius vociferus* was found in a wet, grassy field in Caroni Rice Project on 27 December, remaining at least until the end of the year (NL, LN) (Fig. 1). This species remains an extremely rare migrant shorebird from continental North America and is just the fifth documented record this century; the last being in 2012. All sightings have been between December and March.



Fig. 1 Killdeer *Charadrius vociferus* Caroni Rice Project, December 2021. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

For the fifth year in succession, a **Double-striped Thick-Knee** *Burhinus bistriatus* was discovered within the Queens Park Savannah, Port of Spain. It was first observed on 4 August (Bd'A), and joined by a second more furtive individual the following day. At least one remained until 11 September. Over in Tobago, one was photographed on Lowlands Golf Course on 28 August (KT). Of the 19 documented records in the last 26 years, all but two have occurred between 6 July and 7 September.

On 18 May, a basic plumaged male **Ruff** *Calidris pugnax* was photographed feeding in a ploughed field at Caroni Rice Project (NL) (Fig. 2). Whilst there have been 12 documented records this century, this is the first Spring sighting of this "Old World" shorebird which normally migrates from its wintering grounds in Africa and south-east Asia to its northern European breeding grounds



Fig. 2 Ruff *Calidris pugnax*, Caroni Rice Project, 18 May 2021. Photo Nigel Lalsingh. .

An **Upland Sandpiper** *Bartramia longicauda* was photographed in long grass within Queens Park Savannah, Port of Spain on 11 September (Bd'A). There have been 14 documented sightings this century and all but one have been on southbound migration between 31 August and 31 October.

A lone **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** *Calidris subruficollis* was found in a wet, grassy field in Caroni Rice Project on 14 October (MH, AS). This sighting comes within the classic southbound migration window of 16 September to 28 October which accounts for 84% of all sightings this century.

A first-winter plumaged **Franklin's Gull** *Leucophaeus pipixcan* was found roosting on the fishing boats at Orange Valley in the company of many Laughing Gulls, *L atricilla* on 27 November (NL). Whilst this migrant from continental North America has been found in all but one of the last

11 years, it is still a rare visitor to our shores.

A **Jabiru** *Jabiru mycteria* was photographed in the unlikely setting of a roof-top in Bejucal village on 27 May (per AR). Historically this was an extremely rare visitor from the mainland, however they have now been found in nine out of the last 12 years, all between the end of May and early September.

An adult **Fasciated Tiger-Heron** *Tigrisoma fasciatum* was photographed in the atypical location of Techier Village, Pt. Fortin on 3 November (LB per DHu). Whilst the chosen site included a small stream and grassy banks within a residential area, this is far removed from the forested river settings of the only other two sightings in Trinidad at Shark River and Grand Riviere.

An adult **Green Heron** *Butorides virescens* was photographed in Nariva swamp on 24 November 2017 (LMA). It's distribution within the region is a bit complex. Green Herons are abundant from Canada south to Tobago, and to our west, from Mexico through Central America and into Colombia. However there have only been two documented records from Trinidad in the last 26 years. This status may be slightly distorted as immature birds are visually extremely similar to Striated Heron.

An adult **Striated Heron** *Butorides striata* was photographed and carefully studied at Bon Accord, Tobago on 17 February 2020 (MKe, AA). Whilst abundant throughout Trinidad and continental South America, this is just the third documented record from Tobago this century. Within the region, wandering birds have been found as far north as Puerto Rico. Elsewhere Striated Herons are common throughout sub-Saharan Africa and Asia.

A **Gray Heron** *Ardea cinerea* on the west coast mud-flats at Carli Bay was photographed on 31 December (NL). This "Old World" heron is still a rare visitor to T&T, however there are now small resident populations on both Barbados and Guadeloupe.

An adult **Cocoi Heron** *Ardea cocoi* was found at Bon Accord, Tobago on 15 June (KF). This is a fairly common seasonal wanderer to Trinidad's freshwater wetlands from mainland South America, however this is only the fifth sighting for Tobago this century.

A sub-adult **Purple Heron** *Ardea purpurea* was found within the freshwater marsh along Rahamut Trace on 16 January 2020 (KF). This is just the fourth documented record for the country of this Old World heron, whose wintering grounds are sub-Saharan Africa and south-east Asia.

A **Whistling Heron** *Syrigma sibilatrix* was photographed flying over the Aripo Livestock Farm on 27 December (RL). This is just the second documented sighting of this native to South American freshwater wetlands; the first being from similar habitat, just seven kilometers to the south-east at Turure back in 2013.

Whilst the status of **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* in the freshwater marshes of Trinidad and Tobago is now well understood, two flocks, totalling some 35 birds, flying south towards Caroni Swamp on 30 December (NL *et al.*) are by far the highest total ever documented in the country.

Two **Buff-necked Ibis** *Theristicus caudatus* were photographed within private farmland south of Pasea on 9 July, remaining until 13 July at least (NK, JK, ASi) (Fig. 3). This constitutes the first documented record of this South American ibis for T&T.



Fig. 3 Buff-necked Ibis *Theristicus caudatus* Pasea, 9 July 2021. Photo Annuradha Singh.

A **Roseate Spoonbill** *Platalea ajaja* was photographed in flight over Caroni Rice Project on 30 December (NL, RJ). There have now been just six documented sightings in the last 26 years. This remains an extremely rare visitor from mainland South America.

A **Black Vulture** *Coragyps atratus* was photographed over Speyside, Tobago on 25 April (DHu). Given the abundance of this species in Trinidad and their aerial habits, it is surprising that such wanderings are not more common.

An adult female **Snail Kite** *Rostrhamus sociabilis* was found at Caroni Rice Project on 14 May (NL) and an immature in Aranguez farmland on 20 October (Bd'A). Once a rare visitor from the mainland, 22 birds have now been documented in the last six years feeding in wet arable farmland or freshwater marshes.

A **Black Kite** *Milvus migrans* was photographed soaring over Claxton Bay on 22 November 2020 (SR). The only previous documented sighting of this Old World raptor was at Gasparillo, back in December 2014. Given the proximity of the two locations and that this species, thought to be the most numerous raptor in the world, can live for 24-28 years, one cannot rule out the possibility of the same individual being involved. Within the region in recent years, there have been documented reports from nearby Barbados, Dominica and Guadeloupe.

An adult **White-tailed Hawk** *Geranoaetus albicaudatus* was seen and photographed in the unlikely setting flying over Queens Park Savannah, Port of Spain on 25 October (LN) (Fig 4.) and an immature was photographed perched on a dead tree at Icacos on 19 November (DHu). Whilst historically the species has been considered an extremely rare wanderer from the mainland, there have now been five documented sightings in the last five years, all between October and January.



Fig. 4 White-tailed Hawk *Geranoaetus albicaudatus* Queen's Park Savannah, Port of Spain, January 2022. Photo Kevin Foster.

The spread of **Crested Caracaras** *Caracara plancus* throughout much of Trinidad over the last 20 years is well documented. This has now extended to the northwest peninsula with the sighting of a pair photographed in Tucker Valley, Chaguaramas National Park on 9 December (SR).

Continuing the well documented trend of post-breeding dispersal from mainland South America, up to six **Small-billed Elaenias** *Elaenia parvirostris* were recorded along the southern border of Caroni Rice Project on 2 May with at least one remaining until 1 August (NL *et al.*). Also on 2 May, three were photographed within Orange Grove farmland (DH).

A **Lesser Elaenia** *Elaenia chiriquensis* was photographed and carefully studied in scrubland within Orange Grove agricultural fields on 11 April (MK, RJ). Several Yellow-bellied Elaenias, *E. flavogaster* were observed close by. This made the visual separation of these two very similar species straightforward.

A very vocal **Yellow-throated Vireo** *Vireo flavifrons* was photographed inside a Cocoa plantation along Tortuga Shortcut Rd. on 5 January (MK, NL) (Fig. 5). It remained until at least the 16 January. This is the first documented sighting for Trinidad of this migrant North American vireo. There have been two previous records from Tobago.



Fig. 5 Yellow-throated vireo *Vireo flavifrons* Tortuga, 5 January 2021. Photo Nigel Lalsingh.

A **Black-whiskered Vireo** *Vireo altiloquus* was found at Chaguaramas National Park on 22 August (Bd'A). There is the possibility of this being the same individual as found at this same site in both December 2019 and July 2020. The species is resident throughout the Lesser Antilles, yet historically considered a winter month visitor to T&T. The Committee will continue to monitor this possible change of status.

During southbound migration a **Cliff Swallow** *Petrochelidon pyrrhonota* was found amongst many Barn Swallows, all hawking for flying insects, at Caroni Rice Project on 12 September (NL). In similar circumstances, at least two were photographed amongst both Barn, *Hirundo* and Bank Swallows, *R. riparia* along Rahamut Trace on 7 November (FA). This is now a scarce but anticipated visitor to both islands with 14 documented sightings in the last seven years.

An adult male **Lesser Goldfinch** *Spinus psaltria* was photographed inside Caroni Rice Project on 2 May (NL). This is the first documented record since a small population was present on Mt St Benedict between 2005-2013. Coincidentally this observation is just several kilometers due south of the initial sightings. Could there be a remnant population existing in the arable land in between?

A **Bobolink** *Dolichonyx oryzivorus* was photographed amongst a group of Yellow-hooded Blackbirds, *C. icterocephalus* at Caroni Rice Project on 5 December (MH, AS). Whilst found annually on southbound migration, often in large flocks, this is the lowest return in the last seven years.

The adult female **Cerulean Warbler** *Setophaga cerulea* found in Gran Couva, having returned for its fourth winter, on 28 October 2020 remained faithful to its favoured Samaan tree until 8 February at least (many observers). On 7 December, an adult male was found feeding in a Mango tree along Tortuga Shortcut Rd (FA, LN) (Fig. 6), remaining until the year's end. Remarkably this sighting is in almost exactly the same place as a male photographed back in February 2020. This is most likely the same bird and is another example of winter site fidelity in migrant North American passerines.



Fig. 6 Cerulean Warbler *Setophaga cerulea*, Tortuga, 22 February 2022. Photo Graham White.

A **Bay-breasted Warbler** *Setophaga castanea* was photographed in a Palmiste garden on 24 November (FA). The population of this migrant North American warbler may be governed by the relative abundance of Spruce Budworm on their breeding grounds. During the period 2013-2018, 18 birds were documented in Trinidad. Since then, just two.

A **Blackburnian Warbler** *Setophaga fusca* was found in forest along Mrs Mills Trace, Englishman's Bay, Tobago on 21 November (MKe). This remains a rare passage migrant from continental North America with just nine documented sightings this century, all between November and March.

An immature/female plumaged **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** *Pheucticus ludovicianus* was photographed at Roussilac on 9 March (DH) (Fig. 7). There have now been 18 documented records of this North American migrant over the last 26 years, 11 of which have been during March and April.



Fig. 7 Rose-breasted Grosbeak *Pheucticus ludovicianus*, Roussilac, 9 March 2021. Photo Darryl Hernandez.

Two adult male and one female **Lesson's Seedeater** *Sporophila bouvronides* were found feeding in roadside sedges and grasses along Rahamut Trace, Oropouche on 6 November (MK, LN) (Fig. 8.) A second female was seen later that day (NL) and up to three birds were present until at least 20 November. This species, together with *S lineola*, are known to have a post-breeding dispersal from their South American breeding grounds.



Fig. 8 Lesson's Seedeater *Sporophila bouvronides*, Rahamut Trace, Oropouche, 6 November 2021. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

An adult male **Lined Seedeater** *Sporophila lineola* was seen along Rahamut Trace on 8 October (MK, LN) (Fig. 9); by mid-afternoon, three males and two females were found. At least one male remained until 21 October.



Fig. 9 Lined Seedeater *Sporophila lineola*, Rahamut Trace, October 2021. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

Escaped cage and aviary species

We are aware of a reintroduction project involving **Muscovy Ducks** *Cairina moschata* from Point a Pierre Wildfowl Trust. e-Bird Sightings of this species from the south-west peninsula of Trinidad may involve birds from this scheme.

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 and a **Scarlet Macaw** *Ara macao* was photographed at Pt Fortin. **Village Weavers** *Ploceus cucullatus* are frequently

seen inside Caroni Rice Project. A **Vermilion Cardinal** *Cardinalis phoeniceus* was seen in La Romaine, **Java Sparrow** *Padda oryzivora* at Carli Bay and both **Black-headed Parrot** *Pionites melanocephalus* and **White-throated Toucan** *Ramphastos tucanus* at Palmiste.

The provenance of most native 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. To illustrate this issue, an adult male **Lined Seedeater** *Sporophila lineola*, photographed close to Charlotteville, Tobago on 27 June (ZF), was not added to the Tobago list due to doubt as to whether the bird reached Tobago naturally.

Additional records

Acceptable records were also received or submitted for a further 26 sightings of the following species whose status has been established but whose distribution continues to be monitored by the Committee: **Scaled Dove** *Columbina squammata*, **Yellow-billed Cuckoo** *Coccyzus americanus*, **Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta*, **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus*, **Hook-billed Kite** *Chondrohierax uncinatus*, **Black Hawk-Eagle** *Spizaetus tyrannus*, **Crane Hawk** *Geranospiza caerulescens*, **Rufous Crab Hawk** *Buteogallus aequinoctialis*, **Great Black Hawk** *Buteogallus urubitinga*, **Aplomado Falcon** *Falco femoralis*, **White-eyed Parakeet** *Psittacara leucophthalmus*, **Variegated Flycatcher** *Empidonomus varius*, **Summer Tanager** *Piranga rubra* and **Yellow-bellied Seedeater** *Sporophila nigricollis*.

In early June 2021, an **Atlantic Yellow-nosed Albatross** *Thalassarche chlororhynchos* was taken into care at El Socorro CWC, but died a few days later. Whilst the identification was confirmed, how this bird came to be found in someone's back yard in South Trinidad and whether it arrived within Trinidad & Tobago territorial waters in a free/wild state has not been established. The Committee deems that there are insufficient grounds to add the species to the Official List.

Inconclusive records

Submissions of the following species were deemed inconclusive :- **Scaled Antpitta** *Grallaria guatemalensis* and **Black-and-White Warbler** *Mniotilta varia*.

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



Fig. 10 Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus*, Waterloo, October 2021 Photo Vishal Rangersammy.



Fig. 11 Aplomado Falcon *Falco femoralis*, Caroni Rice Project July 2021. Photo Nigel Lallsingh.

allow incorporation of new data. The following changes were made in 2021.

Large-billed Seed-Finch :- a recent DNA study of all six museum skin specimens of birds originating from Trinidad has concluded that they are all, in fact, **Great-billed Seed-Finch**, *Sporophila maximiliani parkesi* (Dyer 2021). Whilst the species is believed to be locally extirpated, and is indeed globally endangered; and in the absence of any alternative evidence, TTBSDC has amended the nomenclature on our Official List.

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