

A Naturalist's Year

Richard ffrench

Port of Spain: Prospect Press. 173 p. 2007. TT\$120.

Richard ffrench was born in 1929 and spent his earliest years in India. His schooling was in England, where he qualified as a teacher. Although he is today the foremost authority on the birds of Trinidad and Tobago, Richard was a latecomer to natural history, when his wife, Margaret, and her family introduced him to bird-watching. This set him on the course that produced the monumental *A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad & Tobago* (2nd ed. 1991, Cornell Univ. Press).

Richard's first teaching post was in Barbados, from which he made occasional visits to other islands. He "found Trinidad utterly fascinating, big enough to be quite wild in places ... and most exciting in the opportunities open to a birdwatcher." After three years in Barbados, he was very happy to move to Trinidad to teach in Pointe-à-Pierre from 1958 until retirement in 1984. He emigrated to England in 1985, from which he worked as a birdwatching tour guide for many years.

A Naturalist's Year is a selection from his column "Nature Notes", which appeared in the *Trinidad Guardian* newspaper during his last three years here, with a few new pieces written especially for the book. The 52 chapters -- mostly of one or two pages -- are arranged according to

month.

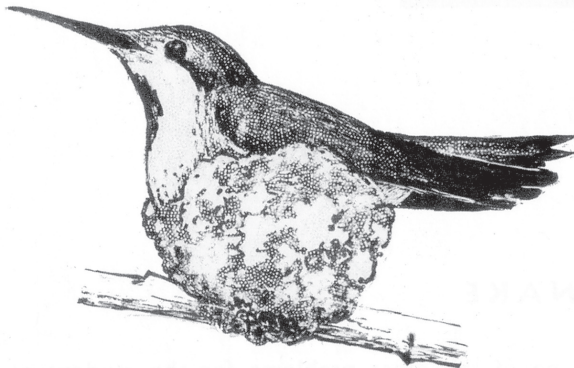
Despite his late start, Richard ffrench is a hard-core naturalist. Here we find an unswerving love of wild things and their habitat, a constant curiosity about how they live, and a concern for their survival in perilous times. Not surprisingly, more than half of the chapters are about birds, but this is no narrow-focus book. Among the many themes treated are ecological succession, mud volcanoes, the naked-Indian tree, leaf-cutter ants, fiddler crabs, the unlovely marine toad, a stalking mongoose, the blue-and-yellow macaw (a conservation success story), and what it must have been like to be the last bird-of-paradise on Little Tobago. Original illustrations by Margaret ffrench add a fine polish to the text. I especially appreciate those of the pawi, a hummingbird on her nest, and a bemused prehensile-tailed porcupine.

In short, this is a book to be welcomed by naturalists interested in the New World tropics.

That said, I must remark on some serious shortcomings. This will require a bit of perspective. The key problem facing book publishing in the English-speaking Caribbean is distribution. With a population of only about six million, the market is small and very fragmented, so that books published in one island territory often do not reach others.



Trinidad piping-guan or pawi



A ruby-topaz hummingbird on its nest



Prehensile-tailed porcupine

This comes forcefully to one's attention on stepping into the Front Line Bookstore in Dominica, for example, where one finds a wealth of local books and booklets that deserve to get around but don't. Other islands present a repetition of this experience. One might expect the region's publishers to form a distribution association to overcome this shared problem, but I am not aware that this has ever been attempted. In the case of *A Naturalist's Year*, the print run (1000) is quite generous, but distribution is limited to Trinidad and Tobago.

Regrettably, this book is stamped with just such a narrow geographic outlook. Its origin in a local newspaper column introduces limitations that the author and publisher have made little attempt to overcome. Many local terms and references will be quite opaque to readers elsewhere. And, despite the title, there is usually no particular mention of the time of year, so that seasonal references are lost on readers beyond our shores. The 12 pages of chapter notes are a recognition of this problem, but far from a solution. It would have been well worth the trouble to integrate these and much more supporting information -- including the scientific name of every species mentioned -- into the chapters, along with explanations of such things as where and what the Caroni Swamp is.

Beyond this, two other features could have given the book some welcome heft and reach. First, it opens with a "biography" and a foreword, each of less than one page. This will not do. A book of this nature calls for a substantial account of the author's life and the motivation behind the writing. Second, seasonality is not well integrated into the framework of the book. An opening chapter on the climate and biota of Trinidad & Tobago, with at least one full-page map, would have strengthened the framework.

A Naturalist's Year is an admirable book. I wish many more naturalists would write the books that are in them. At the same time, it is important to recognize the broader readership that is out there if we can reach it.

Christopher K. Starr

Dept. of Life Sciences,
University of the West Indies,
St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.
ckstarr@gmail.com