

Tribute to Richard ffrench

1929 - 2010

It is with sadness that we learnt that Richard ffrench died on 10 May, 2010. The contribution that Richard, together with his wife Margaret, made to the Club and to natural history in Trinidad and Tobago is well known and documented. He was loved and respected as a friend, teacher, opera singer, father and husband. This short tribute to Richard highlights his contribution to natural history in Trinidad and Tobago.

Richard and Margaret moved to Trinidad in 1958 after a brief residence in Barbados. He was employed teaching English, Latin, History and Music at the St. Peter's School, Pointe-a-Pierre. His true love (in addition to his wife), was however the birds of Trinidad and Tobago.

Richard joined the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club, later to be called The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club (TTFNC) shortly after his arrival in Trinidad and immediately started his work. In 1961, he published an account of the Red-billed Tropicbird in the Journal of the Trinidad Field Naturalists' Club. He was committed to the publication of observations on natural history in Trinidad and Tobago and continuously encouraged others to do so. In 1965, he served as President of the Club, but probably more important from his point of view was his efforts with the Journal. He served as the Editor of the Club's Journal from 1965 to 1971, served on the editorial committee from 1975 to 1986 and continued to function as a reviewer until 2006. Richard followed his own advice and together with co-authors contributed some 55 articles to the Club's Journal. He has also published 22 articles to the popular magazine 'Trinidad Naturalist' and many other articles to regional or international publications.

His knowledge and interest in birds led to his book "The Birds of Trinidad and Tobago" in 1973. He managed to capture the enthusiasm of an amateur and the scholarship of a professional. His book was an encyclopaedic effort which included practically every reference to the birds of Trinidad and Tobago. As such, the book will hardly be superseded as a reference source, except by subsequent editions. There is probably not a single publication on the birds of Trinidad and Tobago post



1973 in which the book has not been cited.

In addition to being the established authority on birds of Trinidad and Tobago, he has participated in other matters involving wildlife management at the level of research, policy and legislation for Trinidad and Tobago. He was a founding member of the Asa Wright Nature Centre and the Point-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust.

As a result of his efforts he has received several honours and awards. In 1984 he was awarded the Chaconia Medal by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for his achievements in the field

of natural history and was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (M.B.E.) by her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II for Cultural and Educational work in Trinidad. The 1986 issue of the Living World was dedicated to Richard and later the Society for Caribbean Ornithology honoured him with an award of distinction for his contribution to ornithology in the region. These honours were followed in 2002 by the publication of the monograph "Studies in Trinidad and Tobago Ornithology Honouring Richard ffrench" by the University of the West Indies.

Richard was always willing to help and encourage young persons who shared his interests. There was always great excitement when he was present on Club field trips as the young bird watchers eagerly asked questions, myself included. He would answer most straight away but on occasions, like when we came across Black Vulture chicks at North Manzanilla, he would reserve his advice until after the chicks demonstrated their usual defence mechanism. The attached photo shows Richard in 1985 demonstrating the virtues of a Green Honeycreeper to several young or not so young bird watchers.

On a more personal note, Richard has served as a friend and inspiration to myself and several members of the Club. I first met Richard on the beach at Store Bay when I was 13. My sister and I had seen our first 'good bird' (one which was not in his book), and when "Mr. ffrench" appeared on the beach, my sister and I felt duty bound to tell him about it. He questioned us carefully and requested a written description. He accepted the record, but to my chagrin he credited it to my sister, (her handwriting was better). Looking back, I think that being



Breakfast on Soldado Rock, a seabird sanctuary off southwestern Trinidad. Foreground: Margaret and Richard ffrench. Background: Elisha Tikasingh and Arthur E. Green.

taken seriously by “Mr. ffrench” fostered my interest in birds.

Richard left Trinidad in April, 1985 but never lost interest in Trinidad and Tobago and the TTFNC. He completed a second edition of his book in 1991. In 1996, with his encouragement and guidance the Trinidad and Tobago Rare Birds Committee was established, essentially to succeed him as a provider of authoritative information on the status of birds of Trinidad and Tobago. In the first instance it took six persons to fill his shoes. Richard

remained a member of the Rare Birds Committee until 2008. He also ensured that his book was kept up-to-date. Readers will be glad to know that before his death he was able to complete his third edition to the “Birds of Trinidad and Tobago” which will be published (in the near future) posthumously.

Graham L. White
g.whitett@gmail.com