

# THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

MONTHLY MEETING - APRIL 1978

Dear Member,

You are invited to attend the Montly Meeting of the Club to be held in the Audio-Visual Room of St. Mary's College on Thursday 13th April, 1978 at 5.30 p.m. Dr. Peter Bacon is now unavailable on that date and Mr. Prem Nandlal will be our lecturer.

## A G E N D A

1. Confirmation of Minutes
2. Business Arising out of Minutes
3. Announcements
4. Lecture -
5. Exhibits and Miscellaneous Notes
6. Other Business.

## FIELD EXCURSIONS

The next Field Excursion of The Club will be held on Sunday 30th April to the Aripo Caves. We will be leaving St. Mary's College, Pembroke Street, at 7.00 a.m. and a short stop will be made at the Curepe Round-about on the Churchill-Roosevelt Highway at 7.20 a.m. This is a long hike taking at least two hours from the cars. Bring flashlights.

## TRIP TO TOBAGO

The Club will be visiting Tobago during the Labour Day Weekend (Friday 16th - Monday 19th June), leaving Piarco on the 5.30 p.m. flight (Friday) and returning by the 5.00 p.m. flight (Monday) from Crown Point.

Our Travel Agent has already reserved 30 return passages on T & TAS and six cars have been booked on the Coastal Steamer. We will be camping on the Grafton Estate. Please let the Honorary Secretary know early whether you will be making the trip. The subscription of \$60.00 to cover air fare, freight for cars, gas, trip to reef and gift to Mrs. Alefounder should be paid to the Hon. Secretary or Hon. Treasurer not later than 15th May.

## TURTLE PROJECT

Beach Patrols have begun and persons wishing to participate are advised to contact the PRESIDENT, DAVID ROCKS, at 62/36512 (office) or HON. SECRETARY, IAN LAMBIE, at 62/23694 (home).

This is the 14th year of our Turtle Project and all members are invited to assist in making it a successful year.

## PHOTOGRAPHY GROUP

A meeting of the Photography Group will be held at 4.45 on 13th April (before the Monthly Meeting). All members interested in Nature Photography are invited to attend.

## SEMINAR/WORKSHOPS

The 1978 Programme of NATURAL History Seminar Workshops at the ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE has been released. It is as follows:

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JUNE 14 - JUNE 26	DRAWING & PAINTING FROM NATURE
JUNE 28 - JULY 12	ORNITHOLOGY
JULY 12 - JULY 26	ENTOMOLOGY
JULY 26 - AUG. 9	ECOLOGY
AUG. 10 - AUG. 23	NATURE PHOTOGRAPHY

A qualified and experienced professional will lead each seminar group.

The Registration Fee is T.T. \$500.00 (U.S. \$500.00 for non-residents) payable to the Manager of the Nature Centre not later than 30 days before the commencement of the Seminar. This Fee covers Tuition, Boarding, Lodging and Transportation.

#### SCHOLARSHIPS

In pursuance of its educational commitments, the NATURE CENTRE is offering four (4) Scholarships in each category to suitably qualified teachers and students ('O' Levels in ART or BIOLOGY) but preference will be given to students pursuing these subjects at "A" Level.

Applications should reach the President, ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE, 64 Roberts Street, Woodbrook, not later than 15th May, 1978.

#### FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB ACTIVITIES

##### Victor Quesnel

##### Field Trip to the Navet Dam

On the 22nd January, 1978 the club visited the Navet Dam. Newspaper reports had stated that the water level was the lowest ever recorded at the beginning of the dry season and we found it to be 18 ft. below maximum. WASA's public relations officer was on hand to give an account of the process of collecting and testing the water and act as a guide on our tour of the plant. Afterwards, members dispersed to the lakeside to pursue their own particular interests. With Frankie Farrel, I made a short excursion into the forest to have a look at the vegetation which seemed slightly different from that of the Northern Range. Neither of us could identify any of the trees apart from pois doux (inga spp.) and bois mullatre (Pentaclethra macroloba) but in the undergrowth we found some familiar plants, the balisier (Heliconia bihai) and two of its relatives and some members of the Rubiaceae and the Melastomataceae. There was no sign of Niaure (Calliandra guildingii) which is a very common understory tree of the Northern Range. On the drive out of the enclosure we enjoyed once again the fine sight of many specimens of the ringworm bush (Cassia alata) in full bloom at the roadside and remarked on the abundance of wild hops (Flemingia strobilifera), a weed from the East Indies which is now widespread in Trinidad.



### Field Trip to Fig Walk

The name Fig Walk does not appear on any map of Trinidad and we do not really know if that is the correct name, for it is a name used mainly by hunters and some of them call the spot Fig Wharf. But we may as well stick to Fig Walk and explain that the name comes from the stands of wild bananas that Caribs are supposed to have planted in what now seems to us to be virgin forest near the headwaters of the Matura River. This was the location of the club's field trip for February.

Two parties of approximately 25 persons each participated. The first departed from St. Mary's College on Saturday 25th February, and after leaving the cars on the Salibea Matura Trace hiked to Fig Walk with the help of a guide, arriving there at about 2.00 p.m. Here is David Rooks's report of the trip.

#### David's Report

"We made camp at the old hunters' "ranch" which consists of a clearing planted with chataigne, bananas, dasheen and other convenient food plants and a leafroofed shed fitted with stretcher-like hammocks. The rivers and streams nearby were sparkling clear and full. Freshwater sardines, Rivulus, and guppies were plentiful. The elusive bell bird "tenked" from every corner, parrots screeched overhead and insects clicked and chirped making a beautiful, peaceful cacophony of natural sound.

After setting up camp many of us set out up the Matura River to look for the wild bananas that give the place its name and we found two clumps about  $\frac{1}{2}$  km upstream. The bananas are deliciously edible as attested to by Al Akong and Paul Rooks who between them, ate almost a whole bunch. After dinner the more youthful and adventurous went upstream and caught a bagful of large crayfish which made a truly gourmet breakfast the following morning. It should be noted here that despite the fact that we are at the height of the driest seasons for many years, the forest floor was very damp. We had great difficulty in finding dry wood with which to make fires. In many places the forest floor was quite spongy and saturated, forcibly demonstrating the relationship of forest cover to water resources.

In the early part of the morning we were entertained by the roaring of the red howlers and a medley of bird sounds. We broke camp and started back at about 10.30 a.m. on Sunday to meet the second party on the Rio Seco. During our stay in the Forest, Frankie Farrel, and I found a plant that he could not identify which he thinks may be an unreported species and Scott Alston-Smith captured a rare butterfly."

The second party left on Sunday morning and on reaching the Rio Seco split into two. One group proceeded up the river to a nearby waterfall. The second, comprising six persons including myself, set out to meet the overnight party on its way back and to map as much of the trail as was possible in the limited time. I had made the trip once before and knew the approximate location of the trail. Once found, it was easy to follow and with almost perfect timing we met the returning party just before we reached the "outer camp" which is simply a little open spot higher up the Rio Seco.

we explored the river up past the Outer Camp and discovered that the Rio Seco is not idly named. At this point the water disappeared underground and we walked along a dry river bed. But time was pressing so we soon rejoined the group that had remained by the waterfall. However, from our explorations and compass readings we are now able to locate the outer camp accurately on the map and to draw in the trail as well.

Although for much of the trip we were primarily interested in geography there was still time to notice the plants as we passed by, especially Ceochaelis tomentosa and Psychotria uliginosa both of which never seem to stop flowering. The first is a small straggling shrub with hairy leaves and a pair of bright scarlet bracts enveloping the crowded, small, tubular, yellow flowers at the tip of each stem. The second is a compact little shrub with deep green, shining leaves and small white flowers almost hidden away in clusters of crimson berries. These two plants occur widely and plentifully in the Northern Range. Look out for them on your next field trip there.

#### Activities of the Botany Group

Last year a decision was taken to make a field study of the orchid Cyrtopodium Broadwayi. This is an endemic orchid which has been collected in many different localities in Trinidad but is perhaps most abundant in the Aripo Savannah. Last year we had selected a suitable site and made a preliminary count. Then access to the site was cut off and we made several fruitless attempts to find an alternative route in. This year on 15th January, we were able to visit the site again and found some of the plants of our previous survey, but without new growth. On our next visit in February we labelled 15 plants, four of which were in bloom, and counted the number of leaves and flowers on each plant. On our visit in March we labelled 35 more plants and again counted leaves and flowers. By continuing this process through the years we hope to get a good idea of the plant's seasonal behaviour and reproductive effort.

The plant geography project is being actively planned. A list of about 80 plants for possible study has been prepared and participants will soon have a chance to discuss the project together and select plants for study from the list. Forms and maps for recording the data on, are also being prepared, and hopefully, by the club's meeting in April all will be ready.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Lambie  
Honorary Secretary



REPORT OF THE FIELD NATURALIST CLUB TRIP TO ARIPO CAVES

ON 30TH APRIL, 1978

BY HANS E.A. BOOS

Our convoy of cars wound its way up the dusty Mt. Aripo Village Road and arriving at the 6½ mile post, there was the usual melee to find parking, that would allow the early leavers space to go.

Soon we were all geared up and many old familiar faces were counted, faces that had decided to come on this trip, for few had ever been to the fabled Aripo Cave.

We gathered around our President, Mr. David Rooks who after a brief talk and head-count introduced us to our guide, a man of Morne Pou, hired for the occasion - Mr. John Mathews - better known as "Daddy."

We then set out at a brisk pace, all 89 members and visitors, up the steep path-way turning left into a logging chute that led off even steeper up into the mountainside, clothed in the lush jungle of the Northern Range.

The effects of the severe dry season could be seen here, as the earth, generally damp all year round in these regions, was baked dry and the carpet of leaves on the jungle floor was sere and crumbled under our boots.

The line of walkers soon strung out, the hardy and eager forging ahead behind the silent back of "Daddy" who with true bush man's style walked steadily and at one speed up through a jungle trail that soon got narrower and wound through stands of bamboo and balisier. The path rose and fell crossing a small stream which only had small pools of still water to mark its presence.

Bell-birds could be heard "tonking" in the trees above and I heard the piping "peep-pee-pee-peep" of a King of the Woods. I whistled a reply and for a while he accompanied us, until he faded into a deep ravine and was gone.

A tiny worm snake, Leptotyphlops was bagged to be sent to the Museum of Comparative Zoology in Harvard Massachusetts for identification, as we went on, up and up in a steady climb. The jungle became more lush, and we began to see the huge limestone boulders protruding from the earth, evidence of what the core of the Mountains contained. These outcroppings were often split by the buttress roots of gigantic jungle trees, and as we climbed higher and higher, mosses and ferns were abundant on the trees and rocks, competing with giant anthuriums, bromeliads, and vines, all twined and tangled and laden with thick pads of fallen leaves. The ground under foot was very dry, earth crumbly and rich with humus.

In several places where rock and tree roots formed dark, dry, hidden places, I peered in hoping to see the fabled Bushmaster Lachesis muta, for in these high remote limestone haunts this snake makes its home.

The party strung out after some 1½ hours could be heard calling to one another, the ones behind asking the ones ahead to slow down, and the leaders calling to hurry up.



Coming to a steep ridge we plunged over, clinging to roots and finding foot holds in the limestone fissures and made our way down to a babbling river where many paused to cool their feet, before climbing up the other side, equally steep, through thickening stands of tree ferns, feathery dwarf bamboo and balisier.

I had worked my way up to the lead group. They were stalled behind a searching "Daddy" who had been momentarily baffled by a false track cut by some other adventurers and he told us to wait while he reconnoitred to find the right trail. He left us, disappearing over the very broken and jumbled terrain.

To my dismay I suddenly heard a radio or tape cassette player begin to desecrate the jungle, playing a top hit on the charts-Samantha Sam singing about "emotion". We shouted to turn it off, to grumbles of "lack of taste" and "spoil sport" which prompted the explanation that if we were in the Jungle, one of the deepest in Trinidad, we should be aware of our surroundings and listen to them, not blot them out as we do in the city. In the bush one has to be aware, awake and careful, I explained for those behind may be calling, being in trouble. As it was, the jungle had fallen silent at the first electronic screech. I little knew how prophetic my warnings were to prove. In the silence then, one lone Eleutherodactylus urichi began to call, the clear "tink" ringing in the awakening buzz of the jungle.

After a while Colin Agostini and myself set off to find how far "Daddy" had progressed, only to find him sitting on a rock outcropping 30 yards along the trail waiting for us to catch up. He then led off again as we called for the group behind to come ahead. Cutting as he went "Daddy" led us up and up over rocks and under fallen branches, as I followed immediately behind widening the cut path, hacking down vines and leaves, making it easier and more comfortable to follow.

As we breasted the last 3 feet of the hill, and "Daddy" stepped up over the last boulder up on to the ridge I froze, my alarm signals going off, for above the hum of following people and the crash and rustle of feet, I heard the distinctive "tic-tic-tic-tic-tic-tic-tic-tic" just ahead of me.

I called to "Daddy", "Listen, snake," as I scanned the tangle of bush and vines ahead where he had just passed and from where the noise had seemed to originate. It was as if my senses had become razor sharp in an instant, for the noise had stopped, and as I moved forward again I heard the first "tic" of a new series, saw a flicker of movement in the leaves, and recognised strung across the path, four feet of dull green and yellow Mapepire Balsain Bothrops atrox. His tail twitched "tic-tic-tic" and he looked at the approaching column of people. Quickly I unhooked the snake bags at my belt and asked "Daddy" to clear a spot on top the ridge and taking my tongs grasped the snake at mid-body and lifted it free of the tangle of bushes. It struck once showing the whitish insides of his mouth, but it was defensive and ineffectual. I asked Colin to hand me a bag, and placing the snake in the quickly made clearing, loosened the tongs to get a grip on its head. After a brief but game struggle the snake was bagged.



Even in the bag the flutter of his tail could be seen. I breathed a very contented sigh. For years I had listened to stories of hunters and bush-walkers that told of events exactly like the ones I had just experienced and I knew how, whenever stories of either fish or snakes are told they become embellished along the way. But now it had happened to me. Not yesterday. Not forty feet up the track. Not one mile behind. I often asked myself why it never happened to me. Well it had finally. After all the miles in the Jungles of the Northern Range that I was assured were crawling with snakes, the years of receiving snakes as gifts from other people who just happened to be on the spot at the time. People who were incredulous when I told them I had never seen a Mapepire Balsain in the wild in Trinidad. Well now I had. And caught it unharmed too.

After the usual chit-chat that arises over snakes we set out again and going only 20 or 30 yards, we felt the first strong refreshing breeze on our faces for the day and "Daddy said "that is cave breeze, we nearly there!"

He led us unerringly then, down the other side of the ridge, Mapepire Ridge it will remain for me, and into a small almost-dry river-bed choked with mosses and Selaginella, and going down it we came upon a mass of great broken stones. Climbing over and down them, we saw the great black hole, leading down into the bowels of the earth - Aripo Cave.

There was a distinct drop in temperature and the smell and sound of bats and the Diablotins - the Oil Birds, Steatornis caripensis - could be heard coming out of the throat of the cave. Little Dendrobates frogs called between the damp rocks and large crickets could be seen in the cracks in the limestone.

The main party now began to gather at the cave mouth and Dr. Victor Quisnel and his son Gregory and friends arrived, carrying the equipment for exploration and mapping of the cave. We rigged the first rope and dropped into the first giant chamber where the screams and squawks of the birds grew in volume as our flashlights probed their ever almost pitch-black realm. Their protests and panicked flight raised clouds of bats as we passed beneath their nesting chamber and a light drizzle of urine and guano fell. This was only a fore runner of the trip, for we began to walk through thick spongy beds of guano, littered with palm seeds brought in by the birds as food. Here in the darkness, in the damp, these seeds have germinated and grow like miniature pale ghostly forests, doomed to eventually wither and die without the life-giving sunlight. Seemingly confused by the light, tiny pale white moths fluttered over the guano, flopping about, seemingly unable to take wing, confined forever to live and breed in those foul beds of bat and bird droppings. Swarms of flies clustered on the lenses of our torches, switching loyalties as the beams of light went on and off.

We stumbled and slipped further and further down and in, flashlights throwing weird and unusual shadows, but the darkness and spongy substrate seemed to suck up sound and light, and voices in the distance were indistinct and blended with the cries and sonar-clicks of the birds. Stepping in pools of noisome foul water we made our way to a narrowing passage which ended abruptly at the edge of a deep pit.



Over the lip the cave continued down. A steel ladder was broken out and after being secured to a rock first one and then another of the mapping party went over and down, the 25 feet or so, out of sight, tied to a lifeline paid out by Jack Kelly.

Then I too went over, asking myself, "Snakes are my speed-what am I doing here?" Colin followed me and we went on down, to come to a second hole. Here we looked over and saw what appeared to be a drop of several hundred feet, but past explorers had reported that there was a ledge about 12 feet down and over went a stout knotted rope and down we went again, following the clicks of one solitary Diablotin who had fled ahead of us from the nesting chamber above. We never saw it and it never went past us on its way out.

A way was found down from the ledge and we proceeded to the left, paying out a slender thread of known length. The remainder on the spool would be measured to determine the distance of our journey downward. Only a few bats marked our passing. The rock-falls of jumbled boulders grew greater and soon we came to running water. I found one spot when a small fountain spurted from the sheer wall to join the trickle at our feet. Formations of stalagmites and stalactites, like fangs in an open mouth were now more numerous and pristine, but a few here and there had been snapped off, telling of earlier and less concerned visitors.

We came to the first of the difficult passages and we squeezed and crawled through on our hands and knees in the swirling, gurgling water. Five of the six of our party came through into this the one before the last chamber, and we sat and rested. Gregory Quesnel and Jack Kelly went ahead then, crawling on their bellies under a great crack in the rock for a distance of 30 yards and their lights dimmed and disappeared, and we sat in the total darkness. This was so completely enveloping that one imagined one could see flashes of light as eyes were blinked, and we could not endure such complete sensual deprivation for long and we switched our torches on from time to time while we waited for the return of the two men who had gone on. While we waited we saw a large manioc crab and I wondered if it had grown there or got in there, or how it survived in a world bereft of light. It made no defence when I poked it with my torch light but made its way slowly over a rock and was gone.

I wonder what thoughts if any or reactions in its sensory systems were there at perhaps the first light it had ever seen. Could it in fact see? Then on one wall, clearly done in white paint were the letters "G.L." and some other hieroglyphs and we wondered at the person who would want to leave his mark so deep in the ground, and would trouble to bring paint that distance, at such difficulty to do so. In cracks in the rock were hung perfect webs of small spiders and their egg cases like white pebbles. Harvest men did rapid pushups as our light flashed over their perpetually dark world.

Soon we noted that it was 2.00 p.m. the time set for turning back and we soon saw the advance parties' flashing lights as they belly-crawled back out of the end of the cave.



They reported that they had emerged into a chamber which went downwards in steps, disappearing further into the earth. With more time and difficulty these fissures could be explored.

But time and millions of tons of rock seemed to press in on us and we started back. We climbed wearily upwards and met the mapping party busily measuring and taking compass readings some distance below the knotted rope.

This we reached and going up and onward soon climbed the steel ladder and saw the first rays of sunlight coming down the main shaft. Welcome was the view of shafts of sunlight and the suggestion of fresh breeze and the greenery of trees and bush. Looking upwards as we neared the exit it seemed as if we were under water, the bats swirling like strange winged fish in the shafts of filth-moted sunlight.

The cries and screams of the birds followed us out of the cave and dimmed as we sought fresh water upstream to wash ourselves free of the clinging, staining guano.

We started the hike back at 3.15 p.m. and arrived after a swift walk through fading light at 4.15 p.m. came to the cars. Never were cool drinks more welcome as we rested and watched the rest of the party come in, all swapping tales and impressions of what was one of the most memorable of hikes of the Field Naturalist Club.