

THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALISTS CLUB

MEETINGS - FEBRUARY 1980

Dear Member,

You are invited to attend the Annual General Meeting which will reconvene at 5.30 p.m. on Thursday, 14th Feb. 1980 in the Audio-Visual Room of St Mary's College.

AGENDA

1. Confirmation of Minutes
2. Hon Treasurer's Report
3. Voting on motions to increase subscription and entrance fee.

According to rule 23 the annual subscription must be fixed by the Management Committee and confirmed by the Annual General Meeting. The Management Committee now gives notice that it has fixed the subscription at \$20.00 per annum. A change of entrance fee requires a change of rule 22. The Management Committee now proposes that rule 22 read as follows: There shall be an entrance fee of \$20.00.

Immediately following the completion of the Annual General Meeting the monthly meeting for February will be held.

AGENDA

1. Confirmation of minutes
2. Business arising from the minutes
3. Announcements
4. LECTURE : "Coastal Zone Management" by Dr. Clem Lewsey.
5. Exhibits and Miscellaneous Notes
6. Other business.

FIELD TRIPS

The field trip for February will be to the Moruga Bouffe. We will leave St Mary's College (Pembroke St.) at 7.00 a.m. on Sun. 24th Feb. The field trip for March will be to El Tucuche. We will leave St Mary's College (Pembroke St.) at 6.00 a.m. on Sun 30th March. If the road to Moruga is still impassable by mid February the two field trips will be interchanged so that we will go to Tucuche in Feb. and Moruga in March. We will try to get a notice in the press. For the convenience of out-of-town members we will stop briefly on the way to Moruga at the National Brewery at 7.20 a.m. and at the roundabout near the San Fernando fire station at about 8.00 a.m. On the way to Tucuche we will stop briefly at George Earl Park, St Joseph, at 6.30 a.m.

LECTURES

13th March 1980. "Some Trinidad butterflies" by Julius Boos

St. Mary's College, A-V Room 5.30 p.m.

10th April 1980. "Life in the worlds of Bromeliads" by Dr. Julian Kenny.

Botany Ground. Aripo trip 10th Feb. 7.00 a.m. at St. Mary's College V.Q. H. Sec.

TRIP TO ST. LUCIA - APRIL 14-20TH 1980

BY

HANS E.A. BOOS

The LIAT Avro 748 banked left and I got my second glimpse of St. Lucia. I had been there almost exactly 5 years ago in April 1975, my visit that time reptile-oriented for I had gone to collect the St. Lucian version of the Fer-de-Lance, Bothrops caribbaeus, and the Boa Constrictor, Boa constrictor orophias.

My trip then was successful and though my interest in the unique reptilian fauna of St. Lucia had not diminished in the intervening years, I was visiting the newly independant country as a representative of the Field Naturalist Club of Trinidad and Tobago to the Conference of the International Council for Bird Preservation, World Working Group for Parrots, hosted by the St. Lucian Government, the Naturalist Society of St. Lucia, the Caribbean Conservation Association and the St. Lucia National Trust.

This conference was to host members of Bird Preservation and Conservation Research Organizations and interested and professional individuals from all over the world, and was being used to highlight the plight of the endangered St. Lucian Amazon Parrot, Amazona versicolor in particular and other endangered species of Antillian Amazon Parrots in general, so that there would be a greater awareness by the Government and People of St. Lucia and other West Indian Islands for the need to conserve these rapidly vanishing, unique birds.

I was met by my hosts, John and Vivian Northridge who had been roped in to help with the conference, by Doctor Joe and her husband John Rickards, co-organisers of the Conference, at whose invitation I had come to St. Lucia.

Needless to say I was not to receive my baggage until later that night as it had been left in Barbados as I was told the plane had been "too full." I was understandably worried as 7 years of work in the form of a collection of 35 mm colour slides for a show to the St. Lucia Nat. Society were tucked between my clothes in the "lost" suitcase. But with the baggage delivered, albeit later that night, and with the slides safe and changes of clothes for my wife, Martha and myself, the first event of the Conference got under way the next day with a trip to the southern end of the island to visit one of two off-shore islets there. On one of them, called Maria Island, the reptilian fauna is unique, also there are several colonies of sea birds nesting and feeding, and which are often first sightings for visitors from colder regions.

We rattled south in the small truck of Gregor Williams, one of the moving forces in St. Lucian Natural History interest and on arriving at Vieux Fort he arranged for the boat and got things rolling in quick order.

There were 8 or 9 of us to be ferried over to the island and I went on the second trip the small boat moving slowly through a light swell, the coral reefs and bits of weed showing clearly through the crystal water. Maria Island is one of two small islands about 250 meters east of the southern tip of St. Lucia and we made a landing on a small steep beach on the leeward side. Waves ponding in from the Atlantic buffet the windward cliffs, and sweep around both sides of the island and through the channel between the two islands to create cross-currents and strange eddys in the gap of water which separates them from the Mainland.

As soon as we landed on the beach we put back on our trousers and shoes which had been doffed for the trip across for the island is covered with coarse scrub vegetation, grass and cactus. Interspersed with this were several large trees with multiple convoluted trunks and stilt-roots coming down from branches to form props for their outstretched arms.

We followed Gregor up the steep beach and into the bush. I was greeted by one of the first group across, Dr. Don Bruning the Curator of Birds from the Bronx Park Zoo in New York, who told me that they had already seen one of the unique ground lizards found only on this Island, and I was anxious to get into the bush to see them too.

Climbing up the rocks that flank the top rim of the beach I saw the movement of a lizard on the root of a tree and identified it as one of the lizards listed for the island as well as on the mainland, Anolis luciae. It was a large light olive-green male and I caught it with a quick grab. In doing this I saw another movement in a crack in the rocks, close by, and looking in, spotted one of the three geckos on the island.

This one, the Turnip Tailed Gecko or as it is called in Trinidad the Woodsleeve, Thecadactylus rapicauda is only found on Maria Island and not on mainland St. Lucia.

It is quite common on Trinidad & Tobago and is also found on mainland South America. This too I caught and after a good look at both lizards to see if they were in any way different to the ones with which I was familiar I released them to their respective perches of the tree root and rock crevice.

We pressed on up into the hillside bush, where the lack of breeze on the leeward side of the island was soon being felt and we wished we had thought to bring along some water, but in the excitement of this unique trip it was quite forgotten.

A rustling in the dry leaves underfoot drew my attention and I got a glimpse of one of the tiny Teeid lizards Gymnophthalmus pleei leutkeni an unique subspecies of the one from the mainland. But it was gone before a grab could be made or a shutter clicked. Grabbing to capture it in the loose leaves seemed a foolhardy practice anyway, as there were many small sprouting cacti and shards of dead ones, all armed with the sharpest spines, with which more than one member of our party became acquainted before the trip was over.

Gregor, turning stones, uncovered a scorpion and we all had a look before he returned the stone to restore the creature's hiding place. On and up we went, our party splitting up to look at this or that as interest demanded or nature presented.

Another rustling, and between the tangled ground bushes I saw my first Maria Island Ground Lizard Cnemidophorus vanzoi. I was a bit disappointed in my first sighting of this lizard, for it was a female, and they, though beautiful in their own right have not the amazing array of colours of the males. She slowly made her way between the roots and fallen twigs of the bushes and it was impossible to get a photograph as she took her own cool time, paying me little attention as I tried to part the bushes to get a clear field for my camera. I gave up the thought of a photograph and just observed her brown striped form as she made her way off into the bush and disappeared.

I pressed on finding myself alone, left behind by the others. There was a sort of a path upwards, and hearing the voices of the others ahead I moved towards them. Loose rocks and dried leaves made going a little rough on the steep hillside and I had to be careful to avoid long trunks of cactus, and not to grab hold of them during my many stumbles and slips. Other trees and saplings were aplenty and I used them to make my way along. There were Anolis lizards everywhere now, the males, sometimes up to 6 or 8 on the trunk of one tree, perched in their relaxed head-down posture, and the females foraging on the ground for insects. These leapt out of my way as I went along and scurried up nearby small trees and into low bushes. They must form a major source of food for the small snake Leimadophis ornatus found only on the island as well, but now extinct on the mainland. It was this little snake I hoped to catch and photograph as well, but I saw not so much as a scale or a disappearing tail of one.

Then suddenly there was a movement on the ground ahead, and in a patch of sunlight lying nochalantly on a warm stone was a male Cnemidophorus. All I can say is that he was beautiful and he knew it. I only hope the pictures that I took in the next half hour or so do justice to his beauty, for any description in words certainly falls short. Then he moved off to join a female that wandered in to his territory and I lost them in the tangle of low bush and cactus. I saw several more males during the rest of the walk but none so advantageously as the first one, and none stayed around for too long to have their pictures taken. I saw them (they had probably seen and heard me long before) as I blundered and crashed through their small island world. We exchanged looks and with a shake of their sea-blue/green tail they slid off into the tangled grass.

I joined a small group of the expedition again and we fought and pushed our way out of the bushes to emerge onto a windswept grassy hillside, bisected by a path that led up to the low bluff on the north eastern edge of the island. The wind felt glorious as it cooled sweat soaked bodies, and allowed us to forget momentarily how thirsty we were.

A short climb up the path, and as we emerged on the crest we felt the full force of the Trade Winds sweeping off the Atlantic, making their first landfall after many hundreds of miles. The cliff fell away precipitously at our feet, and the great green rollers crashed in on the shelves of rocks, 100 feet below. Off to our right the ridge ran upwards to the top of Maria Island and several of the party set off to climb it.

I stayed where I could feel the full effect of the wind and caught my breath. Here the cacti were in great abundance, probing their long stems up like organ pipes and here and there these were adorned with bulbous purple fruit.

Out to sea, two snowy white Red Billed Tropic Birds Phaethon aethereus their twin tails streaming behind, rode the winds, and, far above, Frigate birds Fregata magnificens wheeled in the brassy sky.

A large flock of sooty Terns Sterna fuscata took flight from the rocks below us every time an extra large wave crashed in, sending up a great foaming spume. Into this white churning mass of flying water these little birds could be seen darting, and out and clean through, but it was difficult to see if in fact they were feeding in this mad cascade. The flock wheeled about and then darted back and disappeared into the space below the overhang on which we stood, to emerge again in a rush as the waves came in.

We made our way back down the hillside carefully picking our path. I became acquainted with a small pad of prickly-pear cactus which seemed to affix itself out of nowhere to my sock near my ankle and I felt cold sweat wash over me as the thorns stuck tight. It was a dilemma for a while, for to pull it off was to risk further thorn wounds in my hand. I flicked it away with a piece of stick and could feel the throb like a wasp sting for about an hour afterwards. I later found out that one of our party had sat on one up on the summit of Maria Island and had a rather uncomfortable time getting rid of the thorns that had been embedded.

Back on the beach, it was relief to strip down to bath suits and plunge into the calm, clear water where we watched and waited as the boat made its way from the mainland, coming to pick us up, threading its way carefully in the deeper channels between the dark reefs.

Knapsacks were packed and we tumbled abroad for the short ride back and not long after we were all gathered at Fred's Fish Pot Restaurant where we had left our transport. A short ride into the town of Vieux Fort and a cold drink at a local pub was a welcome prelude to the long drive up the East Coast Road back to Castries. There was a short stop to visit a Carib Settlement Site where Gregor pointed out the strange round holes in the volcanic rock on the level top of a bluff, holes that once held the poles for the houses and buildings of a thriving Carib tribe.

The next day I had arranged to go down the West Coast to the villages of Anse La Raye and Anse Gallet to try to capture the St. Lucian Fer de Lance, Bothrops caribbaeus. Dr. Earl Long, the author of the book on St. Lucia Herpetofauna "The Serpents Tale" had told me that there had been numerous bites recently from that area and that there had been two snake-bite associated deaths. Apparently these snakes were still common in the areas of St. Lucia where they were found.

On my previous trip in April 1975, I had caught four in Dennery on the East Coast and one near an old ruin of a sugar-mill in Anse Gallet, so I was anxious again to visit these areas and collect this unique snake.

Arriving at Anse Gallet after a torturous and bumpy ride in John's Land Rover, we turned into the estate road leading up into the valley and drove up to the estate house perched at the top of a steep winding road. I recognised the old sugar-mill ruin nearby.

The foreman of the estate, a Mr. La Montaigne was waiting for us and assured us that he would soon get us as many Fer-de-Lance as we required, as he had killed one only the night before at the road side below the house.

The valley of Anse Gallet is carved out between steep rugged volcanic mountains by a river, the banks of which form flat land not exceeding 50 metres on either side. On this land sheep and goats graze between coconut trees that provide the meagre crop of which the estate boasts. Under the discarded husks of the gathered coconuts is where the much feared St. Lucian Fer de Lance lurks, and the members of the party John Northridge, Dorsey Worthy an American Peace Corps worker, Earl Long and myself began to take apart these piles systematically.

Coconut shells flew as three pairs of hands took them from in front and piled them willy-nilly behind. Earl preferred using a stick to rake the husks down, something I had noted during my previous hunts being done by other native St. Lucians.

The first pile had been partially burnt, possibly to drive out and kill any lurking snakes and though it looked promising, and there was an abundant amphibian and insect fauna in it, no snakes were found. The numbers of the widespread West Indian frog Elytherodactylus johnstonei were amazing. Their clusters of eggs were everywhere, and I regretted so rudely disturbing their homes, but felt sure they would settle in again, little worse for wear in the reconstructed coconut pile 2 metres away. Hyla rubra were found in great numbers too, and Earl caught several specimens. We turned up several specimens of the St. Lucians Tarantula, the males with their orange/red abdomen and the females purplish grey. I caught several.

Then on to the next pile nearby and this one looked perfect for it had not been burnt and was the right age for a Fer-de-Lance to choose as a home. Again shells flew and the pile moved slowly. Frogs, crickets and spiders were ignored this -time as we sought that first sighting, and we did not have long to wait for almost simultaneously we all saw the swiftly dissolving, disappearing slither of a grey-green coil.

A flurry of careful activity to uncover the new hiding place into which the snake had retreated disclosed nothing. It had eluded us. A nearby rat hole was thought to have provided an emergency haven for the fleeing snake, but when probed and dug out proved to be empty.

We contemplated the pile we had built behind us; then set to again, for that was the only other place it could have gone, and soon we were down to the last hundred or so husks. More care was needed and as we slowed down, out the snake shot, into the open grass and I quickly grabbed its tail, and lifting it into the air I had it.

With great excitement it was photographed and sexed. Possibly a male. It was light olive-green with darker patches on the dorsum. Popping it into a snake bag we set off to the next pile. Mr. La Montaigne had long since deserted us, possibly feeling that our way of catching snakes was hard work compared to his, which consisted of idly turning over the odd fallen coconut leaf or pulling aside carelessly piled clumps of dried leaves and debris.

The next pile of husks, a small one, looked too fresh to house a snake, but Earl suggested that we had no way of telling if a snake had decided to take up residence the night before and agreeing whole-heartedly with him and feeling lucky, I set to again.

I had not taken off a dozen nuts when, in a dry little cul-de-sac I saw a light pinkish-brown coil, and I knew I had found another, a big one this time. Calling to the others I carefully removed the nuts and exposed the freshly-shed glistening coils and cameras began to click furiously. It looked like a large female and she lazily flicked her tongue, letting us know she was awake and aware that she was disturbed. A stick pushed between her coils and her tail grasped as she stretched out her full metre and a half in a vain attempt to escape, and she was caught.

She made a few half hearted attempts to bite but with hand hold on tail and a controlling stick at the head end they came to nothing. When I finally pinned her head preliminary to bagging her she seemed to take out her frustration on the pinning stick and turning her head she tried to sink her fangs into the wood. Pale yellow droplets of venom appeared as if by magic at the tips of her fangs which had failed to penetrate the tough wood. With no time lost in further aggravating her she too was bagged.

Several more piles of nuts were rummaged through and the only new occupant besides the others to which we had by now become accustomed was a large Marine toad, or crapaud, Bufo marinus.

Our time-table was calling to us and we left Anse Gallet, its vine covered ruins silent, and its coconut piles somewhat disturbed but emptier of their usual deadly but beautiful occupants.

A swift drive, hurried bath, delicious meal and it was off to the meeting of the St. Lucia Naturalists Society where Dr. Bruning and Dr. Forshaw all the way up from Australia, were to address the members. Unfortunately neither of these gentlemen were able to do full justice to their intended talks due to circumstances beyond their control and I was roped in to showing the carousel full of slides I had brought up from Trinidad in the hope that during the conference, they could fit me in somewhere in their busy schedule.

The Society were most gracious and showed their pleasure at my presentation and invited me back at a future dated.

The next day was the opening day of the Conference and in the St. Lucian Hotel Conference room we heard and saw the Minister of innumerable portfolios, Mr. Josie give the opening address.

With presentations of posters of the St. Lucian Parrot Amazona veisicolor back and forth between foreign and local St. Lucian bodies, the talks proper got under way, and we were regaled with an avalanche of information and slides of parrots from nearly all the West Indian Islands where they were holding their own in some places and seriously endangered in others such as in St. Lucia and Dominica. Conflicting views as to how to best and effectively ensure their survival were aired at length and opinions were batted back and forth through the day by the lecturers and speakers.

Unfortunately this day was marred by the failure of both the air condition and the microphone and by the end of the afternoon's session we came out of the room feeling like wet rags, supersaturated with parrot information.

The next day, after an hour or so of listening it promised to be no better, and the noise and clatter from the nearby hotel kitchens which had made hearing the day before difficult, had not abated. Rather it seemed worse and I was unable to stay very long in the stuffy room but came away feeling slightly stretched out.

The same was repeated the next day and I have nothing but absolute admiration for the delegates who managed to stick it out for the whole session. Dr. Joe Rickards is to be highly complimented for her fortitude in her efforts of organization and staying power. At the end of the last day the strain was beginning to show on her weary but ever smiling face. Her ever supportive husband, John, was there too, at times looking very much the worse for wear.

All the delegates got a series of posters and literature and by signing a register we were all promised a copy of the full proceedings of the Conference when they were printed.

I can only hope that all the organisation that had gone into, all the talk that was heard at this conference, all the effort that went into the research and picture and film making, all the time spent in the field observing and trying to understand the parrots, all this can be distilled into some positive action, not only in the Islands where the birds are making their last stand, but internationally, to quell and abolish the demand for these unique birds.

It was disheartening to see so few natives of the islands and countries where the parrots are found in attendance at the Conference. It can only be hoped that their absence was not an indication of their lack of interest. The majority of the delegates and organizers were all Foreigners to the West Indians; from countries where the demand and high prices paid for Parrots is largely responsible for the demise and in some cases extinction of the parrots.

It would seem at least that the present Government of St. Lucia has taken the first steps in the right direction, for they have declared the St. Lucian Parrot their national bird and other steps have been taken to try to ensure that the people of St. Lucia are aware of the problem and to ensure that the avenues for further depredation of the remaining wild population of birds are no longer open.

Conservation efforts of the environment, the registration of all captive birds on the island and the settling up of a breeding nucleus in Jersey Zoo in the Channel Islands point to a hope for a reversal of the downward trend of the survival chances of this bird.

If our West Indian Parrots are to survive, such measures and attitudes are sorely needed and are absolutely essential in both Dominica and St. Vincent and all other countries who seem to be understandably blind in the face of mounting economic and social problems and the need for space for a burgeoning population.

The last two days on St. Lucia, due to our extremely kind hosts, were spent exploring historic sites on Pigeon Island and Vigie where the British build incredible garrison buildings, gun emplacements, forts and water cisterns in the centuries past.

Now they are just grim reminders as to how important these little islands were in the quest for or in defence of empire and are lasting monuments to the struggles that made the West Indies what they are today.

Let us hope there will never be the need for the return of these machines and buildings of war which imprison everyone, soldier and civilian alike, and may St. Lucians and other West Indians be a free and alive, and ensured of a future as we would hope the Parrots to be.

The parrots can easily be seen (as they should be) as symbols of the aspirations of us all.