

# THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALIST CLUB

## MEETINGS - 1st QUARTER 1985

You are invited to attend the Annual General Meeting of the club to be held in the Audio-Visual Room of St. Mary's College on Thursday 10th January 1985 at 5.30 p.m.

### A G E N D A

1. Confirmation of Minutes of last A.G.M.
2. Business arising out of the Minutes
3. Hon. Secretary's report for 1984
4. Hon. Treasurer's report for 1984
5. Election of officers for 1985
6. Other Business

You are also invited to attend the monthly meetings to be held on Thursdays February 14th and March 14th at 5.30 p.m. at the Audio-Visual Room of St. Mary's College.

### A G E N D A

1. Confirmation of the Minutes
2. Business arising out of the Minutes
3. Lecture
4. Announcements
5. Exhibits and Miscellaneous notes
6. Other Business.

### PROPOSED LECTURES

- February 14, 1985 -- THE RUBIACEAE OF TRINIDAD by Dr. V. Quesnel  
March 14, 1985 -- (Title not available) lecturer Mr. P. Percharde

### FIELD TRIPS

- Jan. 27, 1985 - ABOVE MARACAS WATERFALL (Leave POS 7.00 a.m.)  
Feb. 24, 1985 - LAGOON BOUFFE (Leave POS 6. 00 a.m.)  
Mar. 31, 1985 - BOIS NEUF (Leave POS 7.00 a.m.)

### ESPECIALLY FOR NEW MEMBERS

What to expect from the Club and what the Club expects of you

1. The Club has monthly lectures/meetings and outings which you are invited to attend. When on outings members are required to observe the objectives of the Club, especially in the conservation of Nature and natural resources which of course demands that the surroundings be left as intact and as clean as possible. All garbage should be taken back with you to be disposed of and not left for other members to have to collect. No musical instruments should be brought on field trips to the forests - on these trips we want to listen to the music of nature. Young children will be allowed only if accompanied by parents or guardians. Every member should bring along his or her basic requirements for the day i.e. water and food.
2. Quarterly bulletins are sent to all financial members. The annual subscription becomes payable in January.
3. Biennially you will receive a copy of the Club's Journal "Living World".

A T T E N T I O N: TTT has obtained the rights to "The Making of a Continent" - a study of geology and natural history in three parts which will be shown on channels 9 and 14 for 3 Mondays starting Monday 7th January 1985 at 6.p.m. This series may be followed by the "Atlantic Realm".

Field Trip to Horne Bleu on September 30, 1984 (V. Quesnel)

The club had never before been to Horne Bleu but as Frankie Farrell and I had gone part way along the ridge from the Textel Station some five years ago we had a pretty good idea of the terrain and anticipated no problems. Although the trail is nothing like and well defined as that to Tucuche it was clear enough most of the way in spite of detours around fallen trees. As usual, I was at the end of the line with others of the Botany Group and nearing the top I particularly noted a bend in the trail where it would be easy to go wrong on the way back. At this point on our return I saw clear footprints going downhill as though some persons had in fact gone off the trail exactly as I had feared possible. Also we had not passed coming back some of the party that we knew were ahead of us. I suggested to the others with me that we call out just in case some people had got lost. After two or three calls we waited and thought there was a faint response from way down the hill. We called again this time louder. This time there were definite calls from below and we were able to guide back to the trail five or six persons that had strayed off downhill and had not been able to find their way back.

This incident shows how easy it is to get lost in the forest if you don't pay attention to where you are going and one of the ways to avoid getting lost in the first place is always to think of how the trail will look on the way back and in fact to look back at spots that may be difficult to recognize on the return. Breaking twigs of shrubs and putting blaze marks on trees also help.

I won't mention all the plants we identified but the botanists noted many of the common plants of montane forest. For instance, the two small palms Geonoma vaga (Anari) and Prestoea pubigera (no common name) which are rare or absent from lowland forest are abundant on this ridge. Likewise Psychotria uliginosa, the little herb with large shiny leaves and clusters of bright red berries which is common on the higher hills and was present here is rare in the lowlands and present only in wet areas. On the other hand, plants like Conocarpus spicatum (somewhat like topi tambo) and Ischnosiphon arouma (tirite) both of the Marantaceae (arrowroot family) seemed as common up here as in the forests around the Aripo savannas.

The northern range ridges are the home of Richeria grandis, one of the three trees called bois bande, and we saw several specimens. It is a tree that is easy to recognize from the bark which is soft and spongy reddish in colour and fairly closely fissured. Another tree that gives a certain character to the montane forest is Marila randiflora. The large leaves are similar to those of cacao and is the reason why the common name for the tree is wild cacao. Despite its name the flowers are not particularly large, 2 - 3 cm across but they are quite pretty and pure white, and on this trip we saw some trees in flower.

The ornithologists had a good day claiming sightings of 30 or 40 species. Apart from the many species that are common to the lowlands like blue jean painiste and corbeau, their list included highland birds such as the Speckled Tanager, the Hepatic Tanager and the Green Hermit.

The status of the Gray-headed Kite in Trinidad (V. Quesnel)

In A Guide to the birds of Trinidad and Tobago Richard French has this to say about the Gray-headed Kite, Leptodon cayanensis. 'Rather rare in the forests of Trinidad possibly resident. Most records are from November to April, almost all in the Northern Range.' I have been lucky enough to see the species many times since I came to live in Talparo two years ago and have kept notes of my observations so I can now add to Richard's observations. I had my first good look at one on 17th October 1982 when as I drove down Laetud trace one flew into a grapefruit tree from a spring at the side of the trace. I did not record another till June 1983. Then, from November 1983 to now, I have seen them regularly every month. The following is a list of sightings. Nov. '83 one, Dec. 6, Jan. '84 five, Feb. 12, March 3, Apr. 3, May 2, June 3, July 2, Aug. 2, Sept. 2, Oct. 2, and Nov. 1. This list establishes the fact the species is present year round. But more than that, there is evidence of breeding. Calling was first noted on Dec. 7, 1983 and heard regularly until June 23, 1984. There were no more calls until Dec. 10, 1984. Regularly all through this period (Nov. '83 - Dec. '84) pairs of birds were seen, sometimes three, and on Feb. 29, 1984 four. My notes record differences in colour in these four birds and raise the possibility that two darker ones were immature birds of different age. On March 3rd when three birds were seen circling together a call was heard that was not typical of the species and seemed to be that of an immature bird. Finally on July 1st 1984 and Oct. 15, 1984 the bird seen was clearly in moult. Taken together all these observations suggest a breeding period between December and May when some other hawks are known to breed.

Finally, this series of observations shows that the Grey-headed Kite is not confined to the Northern Range but occurs regularly in central Trinidad.

LIVING WORLD 1985 1986 (V. Quesnel)

Despite two calls for articles in the Quarterly Bulletins this year I have only four with promises of two more. These are not enough for an issue and if more are not forthcoming we will be forced to break our biennial publishing schedule. Please, can I have a few more? and isn't this a good year for me to have a report on the club's turtle project for which I have already waited eight years? My address is P.O. box 47 Port of Spain but authors can turn in manuscripts to the secretary or the president if more convenient.

HOW TO IDENTIFY BIRDS (by Richard French)

It has occurred to me that it might interest members to have before them some detailed notes on how to go about observing birds in the field and identifying them. Hopefully, by combining these notes with the use of a pair of binoculars and an adequate field guide to the birds of the area, people may succeed in their objective of identifying the correct species. Of course, a comprehensive knowledge of the birds is gradually built up over a long period, but you have got to start somewhere. When observing an unfamiliar species.

- (1) Note the size. Try to establish a comparison with a known species, e.g. Kiskadee; but remember that your distance from the bird may distort your estimate of its size.
- (2) Note the plumage colours. Look out for especially diagnostic features, such as eye-strips, wing-bars, rump patch, white outer tail feathers, collar or breast-band, spots or streaks on the underparts.
- (3) Note the shape and length of bill (beak) and legs. The bill often helps to indicate a family characteristic, e.g. long and thin for herons or sandpipers, short and stubby for seed-eating finches. Also the colour of the bill and/or legs may be significant.
- (4) Note the habitat. Since birds are usually found in their normal habitat, this will eliminate many species from the list of possibilities.
- (5) Note any habits or behaviour characteristics, e.g. what is it eating, is it on the ground, in a tree, in a flock, associating with others of its own or different species? Such factors often point to an individual species or family.
- (6) Note any call-note or song uttered by the bird. Decide if it is musical or not, if it has a distinct or repeated rhythm. It sometimes helps to note down a phonetic rendition of the sound, but this is not as helpful as an appreciation of the tone and rhythm.
- (7) Try first to identify the correct family from factors 3 to 5 above. Then work through the species within that family, looking for the characters which differentiate the various species.
- (8) Ideally, write or dictate notes while the bird is still in view, to avoid errors of memory or mis-judgement. After writing the note, try to recheck it against the bird if it is still in view.

In all this, you must beware of the following problems:-

- (a) Females and males often differ considerably in colour and size, though not always. Usually the female is less colourful than the male. However, if the pair are seen together, this may help identification.
- (b) Immature birds are often different from adults, in some cases resembling adult females. In some species, the immature plumage or phase may not even be properly described yet, so may not figure in a field guide. They are rarely illustrated, because of their great variety and for space considerations.
- (c) Avoid jumping to conclusions on insufficient evidence based on a poor view. If a bird cannot be identified at first try, it is probably better to shelve the problem pending another sighting or wider experience. This will have a way of working themselves out in time. Hasty guesses just confuse the issue.

(d) Remember that poor light conditions, or conversely bright early morning or late evening light, may well affect your ability to appreciate true plumage colours. I have known white Cattle Egrets thought to be flamingoes in brilliant twilight conditions.

(e) If you find that your identification indicates an extremely rare species, it is probably worth double checking for alternatives. After all, it is not very likely that you will encounter an extreme rarity. Still, you never know!

Report from the Bird Group on the field trip to Mt. St. Benedict on August 26, 1984  
(by Anne-Marie Kacal)

The trip up the hill was fairly uneventful as far as bird watchers were concerned. On the walk up the hill all that was seen was a golden headed manakin (*Pipra erythrocephala*) and several tanagers. Although we were plagued by several flitting shadows in the trees.

The climax of the day came as we were about to start on our walk back down the hill. A flock of about six turquoise tanagers (*tangara mexicana*) flew past, and then we saw a large white and black bird sitting in a tree. This bird baffled us for a while until we finally realised that it was a Fork tailed flycatcher (*Tyrannus savana*), without its long tail feathers. Apparently the birds can often be seen in molt at this time of the year. As soon as we had identified the flycatcher the rain started to fall and put an end to the bird watching for the day.

Outing of the Bird Group to the ASA WRIGHT Nature Center on October 16, 1984 (by A.M. Kacal)

Four members of the club got up early and arrived at the Center at about 6.15 a.m. These included myself, Sylvia Kacal, Paul Christopher and Kathlyn Russel. We spent the day bird watching from the veranda and walking around the estate. Later in the day we drove up to Las Lajas.

All together that day we saw about 49 species of birds. These included the channel-billed toucan (*Ramphastos vitellinus*), the black tailed tityra (*Tityra cayana*), the mot-mot (*Motmotus motmota*), the American redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), the tropical parula (*Parula pitayumi*) and the giant antshrike (*Taxaba major*).

Seven species of hummingbirds were seen, including the tufted coquette (*Lophornis ornata*), and the black throated mango (*Anthracoceros nigricollis*).

The Ornate Hawk Eagle (*Spizaornis ornatus*) was also seen near the house. Unfortunately all four of us were on the other side of the house at the time. Sounds like a true fisherman's story doesn't it.

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On the suggestion of Mr. Richard French the Management Committee has agreed to set up a Bird Records Committee under the chairmanship of Mr. French to monitor and document records of rare birds. Bird watchers will submit their records to the committee and all acceptable records will be published. Names of all committee members will be published later.

Luisa Zuniaga  
Honorary Secretary  
December 31, 1984.

A HAPPY NEW YEAR TO ALL