

# THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALIST CLUB

## THIRD QUARTER 1987

You are invited to attend the monthly meetings of the club to be held on Thursdays July 9th, August 13th and September 10th 1987 at 5.30 p.m. at the Audio Visual Room of St. Mary's College. Also the field trips as listed.

### A G E N D A

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

### L E C T U R E S

July 9th - Tropical Weather Systems as they affect us by Mr. Robin Maharaj  
Aug. 13th - Members Evening  
Sept 10th - Zoogeography of the Trinidad Fresh Water Fishes by Prof. Kenny

### F I E L D T R I P S

July 25/26th - Quarry Road Rest House/Erin Savannah (Camp)  
Aug. 22/23rd - Patos Island or Chacachacare (Camp)  
Sept 26/27th - Fig Walk (Camp)

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### Field Trip to Manzanilla Point on February 22, 1987 (V. Quesnel)

On this trip which attracted quite a fair crowd, we were happy to have Richard French who was spending a couple of weeks in Trinidad as a tour guide. He teamed up with the other birdwatchers and left us botanists behind to study the trees in a leisurely way. We were hoping to be able to recognize acurel (Trichilia oblanceolata) and moussara (Brosimum alicastrum) which were both supposed to be common in the area. We found nothing we could be sure was either of them but we did see a good many common trees that we knew well. One small tree, overhanging the cliff, that we had not seen before was a legume bare of leaves but covered with pretty lilac-coloured flowers. It was later identified as Coursetia arborea, a tree that seems to like coastal areas.

We reached the point long after all the others had turned back but we were glad we persevered - the view was magnificent with stands of royal palm (Roystonea Oleracea) in the foreground and an offshore islet like a jewel in a sparkling sea. I wished I had brought along my camera.

I do not have a list of the birds seen by the birdwatchers but they did draw my attention to two corbeau chicks at the base of a tree on the edge of the cliff that we had passed unnoticed on the way to the point. Richard thought that the chicks may have been about five weeks old. They were covered in a dirty white down and seemed a long way from fledging. It was my first view of young corbeaux. I saw three species of lizard, the zandolie, Ameiva ameiva, the whiptail, Cnemidophorus lemniscatus and the skink Mabuya mabouya, the last being more common here than I have seen it elsewhere.

All in all it was a pleasant and satisfying trip even though we failed in our attempt to find the trees of most interest to us.

Field Trip to Madamas Road on 29th March 1987 (V. Quesnel)

I had looked forward with eager anticipation to this field trip and it seemed that others had too because a large number of people turned up. However, for me it was a complete flop. The day was hot, there was nothing but common weeds along the road, the forest when we turned off the road produced nothing of any great interest and I reached the river too late for a trip upstream to the waterfall to be worthwhile. The only thing of interest was a group of bird catchers who were trapping bullfinch (*Oryzoborus angolensis*) and who, in answer to a question on their estimate of abundance replied "thousands". Not blooming likely since I have never seen one in the wild.

B U S H F I R E S - Exploratory trip to Mt. El Tucuche on April 22, 1987  
(Frankie Farrell)

The extraordinarily dry season of 1987 resulted in a spate of bush fires all over the country. The news came to our club of fires on Mt. El Tucuche. A group of volunteers was accordingly recruited to find out the extent and location of the fires. On the above date, a Wednesday, we went up the Maracas Valley to the region of the Maracas Falls. Going to the western side of the valley we went up a short way up an incline to a point where we could see the waterfall. We soon located a fire at a level above the waterfall.

We then crossed the valley and went along the road to the waterfall. We first tried to see whether we could view the fire from the waterfall itself, but could not. On the way to the fall, however, it was obvious that fires had been started by candles left burning on the rocks by the side of the road by the Baptist sect who as far as we know make an annual pilgrimage to the area to carry out a religious ceremony.

Coming back from the falls we decided to break off from the roadway at a selected point and climb up the mountainside with a view to reaching the fire site. The steep ascent was made easier by the fact that fires started at the roadside had crept up the mountain side and all the way up evidence of previous fires was found. But not before a shed was found with a store of marijuana seeds and a marijuana plantation nearby. The fire seemed to have originated from an area cleared of forest, quite possibly for further planting of marijuana, on which the vegetation had been burnt.

There was nothing much more that the group could do as it was not organized for putting out fires and as the day was fairly well advanced any attempt to explore the northern or Las Cuevas side of the mountain, which was also reported to be on fire was out of the question.

Report was made to Dr. Kenny, head of our Conservation Committee, who organized a group to put out the fire.

BUSH FIRES - Second Exploratory trip to El Tucuche on April 26, 1987 (Frankie Farrell)

Because of the Club's preoccupation with bush fires on Mt. El Tucuche the trip to Bush-Bush, programmed for the above date, was postponed to May in substitution for the El Tucuche trip which was brought forward to April.

As a much larger group than Wednesday's turned out two parties were formed, one to go to the waterfall area and one to explore the northern side of El Tucuche. The second group branched off to the right from the road leading to Ortinola Estate and eventually linked up with the long road starting from the Caura Valley Road and extending eleven miles up to the top of El Tucuche.

The walk started from the Caura Valley. Besides seeing active fires on the lower slopes of the valley many slash and burn areas were observed for a considerable distance along the pathway. It was not possible to estimate the damage accurately but a considerable acreage was involved.

When the pathway got into the forest proper there were to be observed from time to time little burnt out areas, but apparently there was no extensive damage.

After a fairly long walk the party arrived at the ridge between Piedra Blanca and Naranjo. It was difficult to get a good view of the northern slopes of the mountain through the forest trees and as a result no fires were observed. The inference was that if any fires were there they must have been small as a big fire obviously could not have been missed.

After the ridge the party went on till they reached a small waterfall which is a well-known stopping point for hikers going to the top of El Tucuche. It was observed that because of the dry season the fall was reduced to the merest trickle. As the party went no further no report could be made about the higher reaches of the mountain.

On the return journey a tree was seen looking like a Pawpaw, but on closer examination was seen to be definitely not Pawpaw. A sample was taken and sent to the Herbarium at U.W.I. The plant appears to be a rare find and the specimen has been sent to Kew for identification. We are awaiting the reply with great interest.

The other party did not have much to report. They got to the spot above the Maracas Fall where a fire was observed on Wednesday but found only smouldering remains.

#### Trip to Bush-Bush on Sunday May 23, 1987 - Frankie Farrell

This trip was programmed for April as it was thought that the dry season would be at its height and as a consequence the water in the swamp would be low enough to enable the party to walk instead of travelling by boat to Bush Bush, from the usual starting point, the 46 milepost on the Manzanilla-Mayaro Road. Although the trip was postponed to May for the reason given above in the report on bush fires on El Tucuche the season was still dry, it being the end of one of the severest dry seasons in the century. Yet Glen Wilkes reported that he had made a preliminary survey some days before and found that we could neither go by boat as there were two blockages along the way, nor could we walk because of the hazard of deep mud in some areas. However he found an alternative route some miles south of the 46th MP from which area we could walk. This enabled us to discover that Bush-Bush was not an island as we thought but rather like a promontory projecting into the swamp.

Both from the view of the botanist and the bird watcher this trip was a success. The butterfly catchers did not do so well but I have not received a list of what they caught.

Before entering Bush-Bush two weeds were collected from a watermelon plantation. One was Croton and the other Sweet broom (Scoparia dulcis). In this same area a Guatecare (Eschweilera subglandulosa) had been recently cut down. In fact in the whole area, which must have previously been forested, only a few trees were standing. Victor Quesnel speculated that it would not be long before the area would become a desert.

Bush-Bush is a forested area, but it is an altered forest. Some time ago woodcutters were allowed to operate in the area with the result that the forest was decimated. This resulted in a discontinuous canopy, a scarcity of epiphytes and an upsurge of secondary growth. However, the openness of the forest enabled the trees to be more easily seen in their entirety and recognised. The seasonal bush fires had not spared Bush-Bush and from time to time burnt out areas were observed. Quite a few of the trees were in flower, namely:-

Guatecare (Eschweilera subglandulosa); Serette (Byrsonima spicata)  
Cajuca (Viroia surinamensis); Hog Plum (Spondias monbin)  
Yellow mangue (Symphonia globulifera); Crappo (Carapa guianensis)  
Incense (Protium guianense); Cannon ball (Couroupita guianensis)

Other trees observed were :-

Puni (Pithecellobium jupunba); White Olivier (Terminalia obovata)  
Jereton (Didymopanax morototoni); Bois Canon (Cecropia peltata)  
Mahoe (Sterculia caribaea); Inga (Inga spp.) Honeywood (Alchornea glandulosa)  
L'Epinet (Zanthoxylum martinicense); Sandbox (Hura crepitans)  
Blackheart (Clathrotropis baachypetala); Bois mulatre (Pentaclethra macroloba)  
Silk cotton (Ceiba pentandra); Juniper (Genipa americana)

Three palms were seen, namely:- Cocorite (Maximiliana caribaea);  
Carat (Sabal mauritiiformis) and Roseau (Bactris spp.)

Other plants observed were:- Rynia spp., Amaouia spp. (Rubiaceae), Pisonia spp.,  
Solanum nigrum, the climbing palm; Camwell (Desmoncus spp.) and  
Cuchape (Coccoloba latifolia).

Three reptiles were seen:- the Matte (Tupinambis negropunctatus); the Zandolie -  
(Ameiva Ameiva) and the Whip snake (Oxybelis aeneus).

The Red Howler Monkeys (Alouatta seniculus insularis) apparently disturbed by the presence in the forest of a large number of humans, howled in their peculiar and noisy way almost continuously. They appeared up in the trees from time to time. A few capuchins (Cebus albierons trinitatis) were also seen. A squirrel (Sciurus granatensis chapmani) also appeared scampering up a tree. The peculiar noises of the Cicada was heard all the time, heralding rain as the popular saying goes and some were seen and caught.

Birds were fairly plentiful and varied as the following list shows:-

Silver-beaked Tanager- RAMPHOCELUS CARBO; Palm Tanager- THRAUPIS PALMARUM  
Turquoise Tanager- TANGARA MEXICANA; Rufous-tailed Jacamar GALBULA RUFICAUDA  
Turkey Vulture- CATHARTES AURA; Corbeau- CORAGYPS ATRATUS  
Great Antshrike- TARABA MAJOR; Ruddy Ground-Dove - COLUMBINA TALPACOTI  
Tropical Kingbird- TYRANNUS MELANCHOLICUS; Tropical Mockingbird- MIMUS GILVUS  
Cattle Egret- BUBULCUS IBIS; American Egret- CASMERODIUS ALBUS  
Plumbeous Kite- ICTINIA PLUMBEA; Crimson-crested Woodpecker- PHLOEOCEASTES  
MELANOLCUCOS  
Golden-olive Woodpecker- PICULUS RUBIGINOSUS; Gray Hawk- BUTEO NITIDUS  
Yellow-headed Caracara- MILVAGO CHIMACHIMA;  
Common Amazon Parrot- AMAZONA AMAZONICA;  
Glossy Grasquit- VOLATINIA JACARINA; Merle Corbeau- CROTOPHAGA ANI

Somewhere outside Bush-Bush a Pearl Kite (GAMPSONYX SWAINSONI) was seen. This was an outstanding find as Pearl Kites are rare and not often seen.

The report from the butterfly catchers was that there was nothing outstanding. Some butterflies were caught but unfortunately I do not have a list.

## A TRIP TO THE CUMACA CAVES by Hans E. A. Boos

The Cumaca Cave lies deep in the Valencia forest of the northern range of mountains of Trinidad. It is situated on the old Leotaud Estate (now owned by the Maharaj Brothers of Curepe), and is the source of the Oropouche River which flows through the Cumaca and Platanal districts.

This cave is well known to be the roosting place of one of the largest colonies of the 'Oil Birds' also called 'Guacharo' and 'Diablotin'. Its scientific name is *Steatornis caripensis*.

On March 12, 1987 I made a trip there, accompanied by John Seyjagat, Allan Rodriguez, Michael Carter from Canada and his nephew Ronnie Carter from Florida. We were going to investigate a report that a strange animal had been seen deep inside the cave. During a trip in to the inner depths of the cave by another party, a loud splash had been heard up ahead in the darkness, and there were signs of recent animal tracks on the edge of the sand bank near the last pool in the deepest reaches of the cave. Spiny Rats too, had been seen in some numbers near the cave mouth, and these rats and the Blind Catfish which live in the river inside the cave were our targets for capture.

As we began our hike in to the Estate on which the cave is situated, it was disturbing to realize that, in an apparent misguided spirit of development, the new owners had begun to construct a massive road for easy access to the cave. The completion of such a road will mean disaster in particular to the cave and its unique fauna as well as for the area in general as it is opened to slash and burn agriculture and squatting. The area is rich in limestone and quarrying will totally destroy another place in the northern range.

But, the walk in was still unique, made more so by the extreme seasonal dryness. This hike is well known to be a difficult one because of the year-round wetness of the  
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As we walked single file the sharp eyes of Ronnie Carter spotted a small snake crossing the path behind me and it took the even sharper ones of John Seyjagat to pick it out entwined in the fronds of the Selaginella at the side of the path.

I picked it up and getting my first good look at it, for the first time in twenty years I was stumped. I could not identify it at once. I had never seen one like it before, but by a system of elimination it could only be one snake, Leptophis rivetti Despax, the only specimen of which for Trinidad, had been collected in 1937 on the summit of Mt. Aripo approximately six kilometers away as the crow flies.

This identification I confirmed back in my office by scale counting the slim 30 cm-long specimen and comparing these counts to the keys in the available literature.

Elated by this capture, we pressed on and came to the cave. As we arrived at the mouth, which appeared as a large fissure in the mountain side, we noticed that the water level in the river flowing out was very low and the gentle current had not washed away the millions of Palm seed kernels that lay on the river bed.

The pericarp of these Palm seeds forms the main food of these strange nocturnal birds whose cries began to echo out of the gloom beyond the vertical walls of the opening. Turning on our flashlights we entered the Guacharo's world of eternal darkness, stumbling and slipping over the palm seeds which lay like a vast bed of wet marbles in our path, and the cries of the well-named Diablotins or Devil-birds overwhelmed us, as hundreds of frantic birds took flight in the vault of the cave above. The beams of the flashlights stabbed and criss crossed the darkness as hissing clicks and loud screaming cries echoed about our heads, while a steady rain of dung and debris dislodged from the rock shelves and nests cascaded down on us.

Ghostly columns of stalagmites and curtains of stalactites stood in our way as we picked our way carefully deeper and deeper into the gloom, our light beams catching unawares two large toads Bufo marinus, squatting and blinking in depressions in the rocks, and the largest Manicou Crab Pseudothelphusa garmani, I had ever seen dragged by with claws so big that it sprawled in the shallow water like an exhausted boxer, too tired to lift its huge oversized fists.

Though the ground was littered with their droppings there were few bats to be seen as we left the first large chamber with the birds and their fat bobbling nestlings. I also noted that there seemed to be little or no insect activity on the drier surfaces of the cave floor.

Bird cries ahead told of another large chamber where there were more Guacharos to come. The second attendant storm of noise and droppings was as fierce as the first one as we threaded our way through the swirling masses and arrived at a low overhanging shelf of rock. Here we searched for tracks on the sand bank, but finding none we shed our back-packs and inching into the water, which rose up to our mid-thighs, we crouched over and passed under this unpleasant claustrophobic obstacle to arrive at the final pool where the river is born.

Here, in a small chamber the water flows silently out of the womb of the earth, I thought that, were we not there, except for the ultrasonic squeaks of bats, the chamber is eternally silent and pitch black.

Down in the clear water our light beams found movement as a blind Catfish, Caecorhamdia urichi, lazily cruised along the sandy bottom. A carefully placed net finally captured one of these eyeless creatures which we brought back to the Emperor Valley Zoo for display.

However, no sudden or unexplained splashes disturbed the faintly echoing silence at this final chamber and I had a moment of thought for the spirits of the two divers who had plunged into this crystal pool and died twenty three years ago, on March 22, 1964. Short by only ten days, twenty three years before, I had watched Adam Richards and Victor Abraham don Scuba gear and go down into this hole. They never came back alive.

As we reemerged from the vibrating darkness into the bright verdant jungle light, smeared with bird droppings, our ear drums ringing, we could still smell the foetid breath of the cave, and I looked up at the brass plaque fixed to the rock face commemorating the deaths of the two young adventurers. I had cleaned it off so that I could photograph it during a visit to the mouth of the cave in August 1982. Now the mosses had once more begun to cover it over.

Cool drinks were a welcome pause, before we washed the gravel out of our shoes, and shouldering our packs once more, we set out to return to our everyday lives from a place so fantastically filled with memories, mysteries and 'Devil Birds'.

Luisa Zuniaga  
Honorary Secretary  
June 28, 1987.