

THE FIELD NATURALIST

BULLETIN OF THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO FIELD NATURALIST CLUB

SECOND QUARTER OF 1993

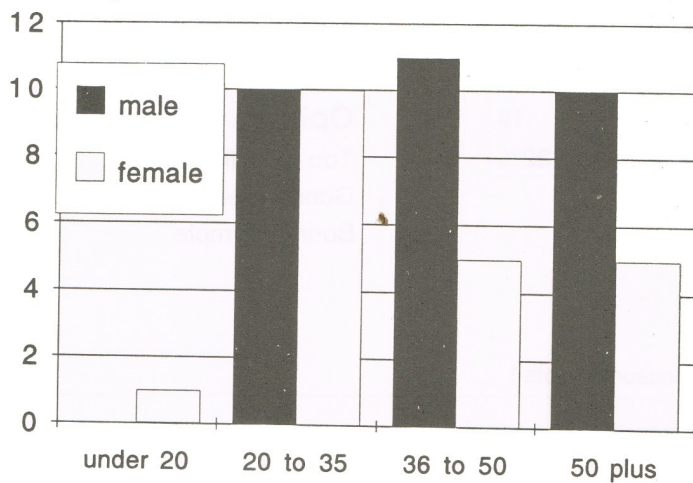
RESULTS OF CLUB SURVEY

The Club recently undertook a survey of membership composition, interests and preferences, as a basis for deciding on future directions and priorities. The results presented here were compiled by Paul Christopher.

Composition of Polled Members

Years of membership	less than 2	2 to 4	5 to 9	10 to 14	15 to 19	20 to 24	25 plus	not given
No. Members	14	3	7	9	4	1	6	8

gender / age	under 20	20 to 35	36 to 50	50 plus
male	0	10	11	10
female	1	10	5	5



Why did you join?

Many members gave more than one reason for joining the Club. The most common was "to learn about nature" (71%), followed by "to meet people of similar interests" (53%), "to go on field trips" (51%) and "conservation" (44%). 24% also cited other reasons.

Interests

Again, members usually gave more than one answer: birds (58%), plants (49%), mammals (39%), reptiles (25%), fishes (24%), butterflies (22%), and insects in general (19%). 31% of respondents also mentioned other interests.

Knowledge of natural history

Of 61 members responding, 5 (8.2%) characterized themselves as entirely ignorant of the subject, 32 (52.5%) as novices or beginners, 20 (32.8%) as knowledgeable amateurs, and 4 (6.6%) as professionals.

Are you satisfied with what you learn through your membership?

To this question, 67% responded "Yes" and 33% responded "No".

How many meetings and field trips do you attend per year?
(number of individuals responding)

	<u>meetings</u>	<u>field trips</u>
0-2	12	19
3-5	15	16
6-8	17	9
≥ 9	15	8

Your Opinion of Field Trips

Good	32%
disorganized	27%
Informative	24%
Aimless	7%
other	12%

N.B. Replies were often given in more than one category

The reason you go on Field Trips*

See new places	58%
Look for natural things of personal interest	47%
Enjoy being in the forest	46%
Outdoor Exercise	42%
Conduct scientific collecting /observations	24%
Good Lime	15%
other	19%

*N.B. Replies were often given in more than one category

Opinion of Lectures

Too complicated	10%
Good / Effective	76%
Boring / Simple	2%

Opinion of Magazine

Too complicated	29%
Good / Effective	46%
Boring / Simple	5%

**Do You read
"Living World"?**

Yes	No
37	17
63%	29%

**Would you buy it
for \$25?**

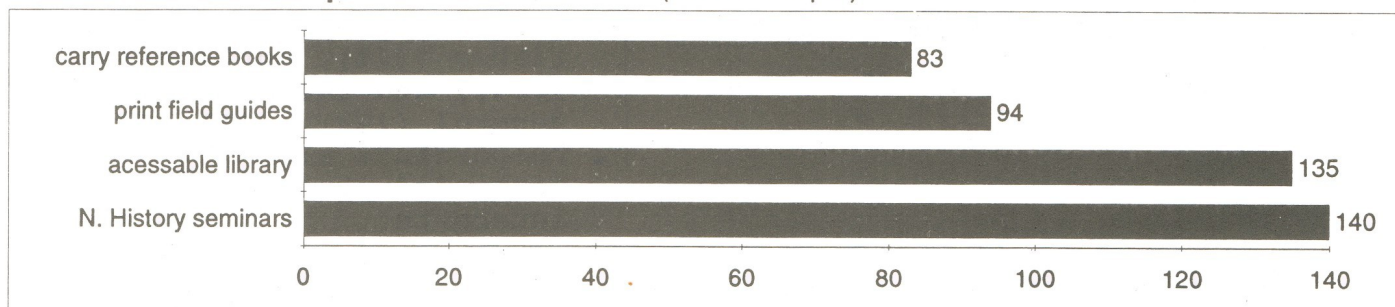
Yes	No
31	21
53%	36%

**Does it relate
to you?**

Yes	No
25	19
42%	32%

How to improve information

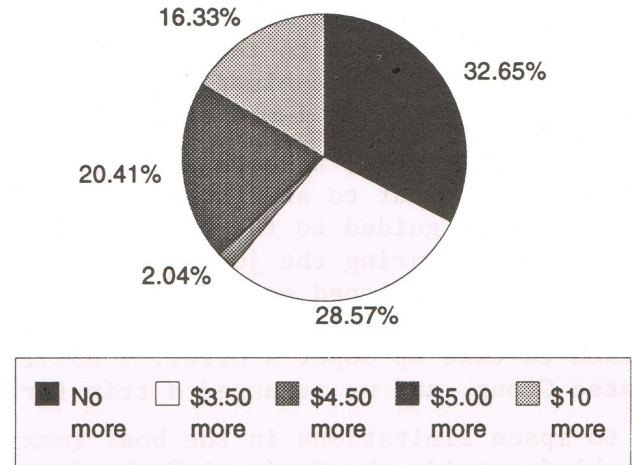
(Measured in pts.)



Voluntary Human Resources

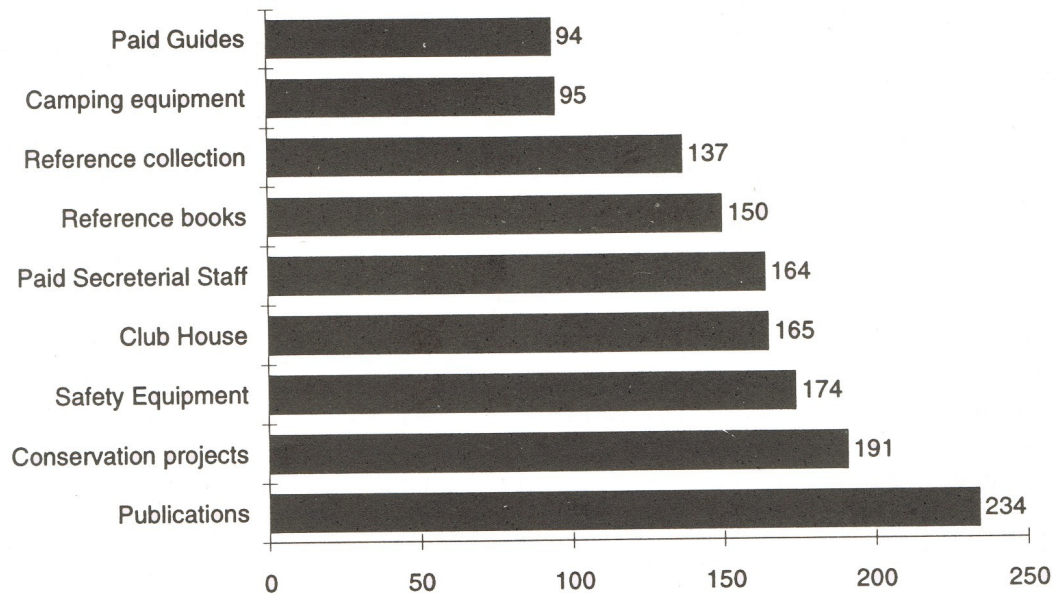
Writing	32%
Research	27%
Other	22%
Lecturing	20%
FundRaising	17%
Publishing	14%
Exhibit Design	14%
Surveying/guide	12%
Management	10%
Field identification	10%
First Aid	7%
Secreterial	5%

Are you willing to pay more for membership?



Preferences in Club Spending

(Measured in pts.)



MANATEES AT NARIVA by Paul L. Comeau

In recent years, there have been conflicting rumours about the number of manatees inhabiting the waterways along Trinidad's east coast. Concerned naturalists and environmental groups have speculated that the local manatee population has been reduced to near-extinction levels while east coast fishermen report frequent sightings. To clear up this confusion, some members of the Field Naturalists' Club formed a group in 1990 to investigate manatees in Trinidad in order to obtain first hand knowledge of these elusive creatures. This meant field observations, but opportunities were not immediately forthcoming.

In January this year, accompanied by colleagues from the University of Paris, I visited Bois Neuf to see the mud volcano. Setting off by boat from the east coast, we were guided to the site by "Super", a fisherman who grew up in and around Nariva Swamp. During the journey, while talking about wildlife in the area, manatees were mentioned and Super informed us that it was not difficult to see these animals and to contact him anytime we were interested in such a venture. Having decided to take up Super's offer, I notified Jalaludin Khan, the leader of the Manatee Group, and we arranged a trip for March 18th 1993.

Due to space limitations in the boat (maximum capacity 10 adults), a small group assembled outside the National Herbarium, U.W.I. at 12:30 pm on the date mentioned. In addition to Jalaludin and myself, we were joined by Doreen Jodhan, Assistant Technician at the Herbarium and John Warren, the Plant Breeder at the Cocoa Research Unit, U.W.I. Doreen's father, Durga, kindly drove us to a predetermined spot on the Manzanilla Mayaro Road where we met the other members of the expedition, our guide, Super, "Fly" (the man who knows how to contact Super), Winston Johnson, Chief Technician at the Herbarium who knows how to get in touch with Fly, and "Tallman", the chief oarsman. We were informed that the site they were taking us to contained a small isolated group of manatee that had been cut off from the main population at Nariva. The manatees probably reached this area during a flood and are now stranded because of blocked water channels. To avoid startling these manatee, we took a boat without an outboard engine. Using a cutlass, paddles were fashioned from discarded boards and the base of coconut leaves and when these were ready, we set off quietly at 2:30 pm.

The creature we were stalking, **Trichechus manatus**, is a large (450 kg) mammalian herbivore that can live in fresh, brackish or saline water (BOSTID 1976). It inhabits the tropical coastal regions from the mouth of the Amazon in north-eastern Brazil to the Yucatan Peninsula in southern Mexico as well as Puerto Rico and southern Florida. It is one of three species of manatee world-wide, the other two being **Trichechus inunguis** which is confined to the Amazon River basin and **Trichechus senegalensis** which occurs in western Africa. Manatees, like their distant cousin, the Dugong (**Dugong dugon**) of south-east Asia/Australia, are related to the elephant.

As the boat glided along the quiet waters of the Doubloon River (a corruption of Dugong?) we noticed a few fishermen along the embankment with their bamboo poles supported by the cut stumps of Wild Tannia (**Montrichardia arborescens**). One fisherman had five poles in use at the same time hoping for a good catch of cascadox (**Hoplosternum littorale**). Our boat soon arrived at the broad section of a river junction where the waters were deep enough for manatee (2 m or more according to BOSTID 1976). Here we patiently waited for our first sighting of a manatee or sea cow as the locals call it. We were shown what signs to look for, a minor swirling pattern on the surface of the water, small floating bubbles, then, suddenly in the distance, a small dark protrusion about the size of a coconut that seemed to float

momentarily on the water before disappearing beneath the surface. Was this the elusive manatee, a creature that can grow three metres in length, weigh half a ton and consume about 20 kg of vegetation a day? Indeed it was, for soon this snout was close enough to the boat to allow us a glimpse of nostrils and whiskers. With camera poised, I tried to photograph this 5-second apparition, managing one bull's-eye in three attempts.

Over the next three hours we saw many briefly-appearing snouts but nothing of the massive body concealed in the dark, organic stained waters. Our best observations were from the boat as it moved slowly about the surface. The temptation to jump in the water for a closer encounter was quite strong. At one point, we were put ashore and tried to conceal ourselves in the tangled roots of the Red Mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*) in the hope of getting a better view of the manatees but this proved futile. During our vigil, however, Jalaludin and Doreen did manage to spot a caiman (*Caiman crocodilus*) resting in the water.

We also paddled up and down the river and its tributary to observe the floating mats of aquatic vegetation which the manatees feed upon, species like the Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), Para Grass (*Brachiaria mutica*), the aquatic fern *Salvinia auriculata*, Duckweeds (*Spirodela polyrhiza*, *Lemna* sp.) and *Hydrocotyle umbellata*. These mats can be quite dense and sometimes occur where the water is shallow. We were informed by Super that the favourite food of the manatees is Kharmi Bhaji (*Ipomoea aquatica*) which is also a popular green vegetable amongst the East Indian community in Trinidad. However, we saw no specimens of this plant in the area surveyed.

The vegetation on the banks around the river junction consisted mainly of Wild Tannia with some Red Mangrove. Other plants observed were Monkey or Pond Apple (*Annona glabra*), vines with milky sap (*Sarcostemma clausum*, *Rhabdadenia biflora*), vines with showy flowers (*Phryganocydia corymbosa*, *Ipomoea* sp.), legumes (*Entada polystachya*, *Dalbergia ecastaphyllum*), ferns (*Acrostichum danaeifolium*, *Nephrolepis biserrata*), the composite *Mikania micrantha*, the sedge *Rhynchospora corymbosa* and trees belonging to the MORACEAE family: Bois Canot (*Cecropia peltata*) and the Matapal (*Ficus amazonica*, *Ficus nymphaeifolia*). Growing in the water near the river bank were patches of Water Lettuce (*Pistia stratiotes*) and Bladderwort (*Utricularia* sp.). Seaward, you could see the tops of the coconut palms and hear the endless roar of the Atlantic surf.

As daylight started to fade, we again sat on the branches and roots of a Red Mangrove tree, and this time were rewarded with numerous snout appearances as we gazed over the river junction and listened to Super speculate on how many manatees there are (several hundred to a thousand? Who knows?). He explained how he could corral some of the manatees so that next time we would have a better chance of seeing their huge size. As we took to the boat and paddled back to the launch site, there was a general feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment in knowing for certain that these docile creatures were alive and well. Darkness had now fallen and it was only when I got back in the vehicle that I received my first mosquito bite.

Reference

BOSTID (1976) **Making aquatic weeds useful: Some perspectives for developing countries.** Board on Science and Technology for International Development (BOSTID). National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C., 175p.

Book Notice Léon Provancher's *Séjour à Trinidad*.

Léon Provancher (1820-1896) was a French-Canadian priest and an ardent naturalist. Although he lived in Québec while it was still a very inward-looking society, and although he was very much a creature of the Church, Provancher traveled extensively and apparently functioned well in English.

In 1868 he founded the influential journal *Le Naturaliste Canadien*, which continues today. A great deal of the journal was taken up with his own writings on a wide range of topics, and the freedom from editorial restraint allowed Provancher to expound at often great length. The various parts of his travelogue on an 1888 visit to various Caribbean islands, for example, amount to a substantial book. The complete reference is as follows:

Provancher, L. 1888-1890. Une excursion aux climats tropicaux. Nat. Can. 17:166-76, 193-99; 18:5-80, 82-95, 99-160, 164-92; 19:3-40, 45-70, 80-96, 101-20, 127-44, 147-82.

Part 3, on "A stay in Trinidad", is found in volumes 18 and 19 and occupies about 57% of the total. I have deposited a copy of this part in the West-Indiana section of the UWI library. It presents a foreign naturalist's view of Trinidad just before the establishment of our own club. We gain some idea of the difficulties under which the Club's founder's must have laboured from Provancher's remarks on how in a colonial island "the naturalist's instincts" can fall into a state of semi-paralysis for lack of access to the literature with which to make sense of what one observes in daily life.

Consistent with his broad interests, Provancher has much to say on the people, customs, material culture and history of the island. Given his background, references to the "childlike" qualities of native Trinidadians come as no surprise. Nonetheless, Provancher was no reactionary and expressed himself explicitly against the lingering evils of slavery.

Remarking that "the Pitch Lake is a marvel that every foreigner stopping at Trinidad will not fail to visit", just as one would not pass by Niagara without viewing the falls, he goes on to summarize the industrial utilization of the pitch.

One also finds here observations from two visits to the Botanic Gardens, one in the company of the director, and on various animals encountered. One of the insects he collected was new to science, and he later described and named it.

Provancher's informants were evidently not always reliable, as evidenced by a man with "a very little learning in very many areas" who reported that Trinidad had just two venomous snakes, a coral snake and the bushmaster. Provancher explicitly mentioned how odd it was that the fer-de-lance (i.e. mapepire balsain) should be absent from Trinidad, which of course it is not. His characterization of Arima as "an undistinguished parish consisting of just a small village near the church" may likewise have been due to misinformation.

C.K. Starr

On Thursday 12 November 1992 a hummingbird visited the black-sage tree just outside my dining-room window at Maraval. It stayed for about 20 minutes in the period between 07:30 and 08:00. My son Illya and wife Virginia were as enraptured as I was by this tiny, bee-like wonder of a bird. It never once came to rest during this time but darted from flower to flower and once nearly entered the house. I was unable to focus my binoculars on it, but Illya and I took notes on its features as it was there in front of us. It seems certain that it was a rufous-shafted woodstar (*Chaetocercus jourdanii*).

In his guidebook to the birds of Trinidad & Tobago, Ffrench characterizes the rufous-shafted woodstar as very rare, found only in forested areas. To have seen it at our house on the outskirts of the city was thus quite extraordinary.

Ishmael Samad

NEWS FROM THE TOBAGO BRANCH

[The following notes are excerpted from a recent letter to the Management Committee from Romano McFarlane, president of the Tobago branch of the Club.]

On 1 March we met together with representatives of the Tobago House of Assembly (Forestry Division) and the Defence Force on the subject of beach patrols for the protection of marine turtles. It was agreed that such patrols will henceforth involve all three organizations. This will allow Club members and Forestry personnel to collect data on the turtles, while the presence of the Defence Force will protect our people in any confrontation with turtle poachers.

It is recommended that patrols take place at least twice weekly during the nesting season. Coordinators have been assigned for each beach. It will be their business to keep in touch with any member wishing to assist in the patrol of that particular beach. Coordinators will also maintain contact with the local community, in order to be apprised of any poaching activity. It is intended that all concerned in the community be notified that patrols are in place.

We have asked the Institute of Marine Affairs about having one of their people address the Tobago membership about turtles. If such a lecture can be arranged, we will also approach the police about having a representative present to report on the legal consequences of turtle poaching.

Announcement

Some copies of the 1991 issue of the *Living World* are still available for distribution. Any member who did not receive a copy and would like one should contact the Secretary.