



# THE FIELD NATURALIST

Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

July-September

No. 03 : 2001

## Follow-up report on Erin Savannas

By John Lum Young

As a result of the destruction of the western savanna in the Erin Reserve noted by the TTFNC on the June 2001 field trip, a few of us returned to the Reserve with the goal of locating the "middle savanna". The middle savanna is not as accessible as the western savanna and we hoped that Caribbean pine (*Pinus caribaea*) had not replaced the savanna plants.

We are pleased to report that the middle savanna is in its natural state. The open savanna is covered in grasses and sedges and numerous *Byrsonima* and *Curatelle* shrubs. The leaves of the *Curatelle* are very coarse and, in fact, were used as pot scrubs in the "good old days". There were a number of savanna plants in bloom including the yellow flowering vine called the savanna flower (*Xyris* sp.), plants of the *Sauvagesia* sp. and the ground orchid with the purple flower *Pogonia grandiflora*.

Palms in the natural forest at the edge of the savanna included the moriche (*Maurita flexuosa*), cororite (*Maximiliana* sp.) and *Euterpe*. Fine examples of the hard iron pan that forms on and beneath the surface as a result of oxidisation were also observed.

Scattered over the savanna were mounds of the ground termite (*Nasutitermes ephratae*). These termites play an important ecological role in the harsh savanna environment. They break down dead plant tissues thereby making nutrients available for plant growth and they produce a fine soil free of stones and iron incrustations.

We also followed a trail for about 15 minutes that headed eastward through the forest, in an effort to locate the "eastern savanna". There were numerous palms in this forest including the royal palm (*Roystonea* sp.), the banga (*Acrocomia* sp.) and the other palms noted above. The trail turned southwards after crossing an intermittent watercourse and passed by a lek where the males of the white bearded manakin (*Manacus manacus*) danced to attract the females. The track then circled and petered out.

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There is a quarry a few hundred feet from the southern boundary of the savanna. Although this quarry has been there for a number of years, it should not hurt to remind the authorities to monitor its operations, as it is very easy for the quarry to encroach on the open savanna.

Efforts must be made by the Club to ensure that this savanna is not destroyed by the indiscriminate planting of Caribbean pine as was the case with the western savanna.



## Status of the Jane Boyle Mollusk Collection

by Christopher Starr, UWI

At a recent monthly meeting a question was raised about the whereabouts and condition of the late Jane Boyle's collection of Tobago mollusks. Long-time Tobago researcher J. David Hardy informs me that the collection is now on loan to the Florida State Museum, where it is hoped that much of the material can be better identified. The desired end result is a monographic catalogue of the mollusks of Tobago.

The number of specimens is unknown, but they are estimated to comprise 806 species. Most specimens are shells, with only a few (e.g. nudibranchs) preserved whole in spirit. The collection as a whole is in good condition, although many specimens lack exact locality labels. The taxonomic range is very wide, embracing all major groups found in Tobago waters.

The Florida State Museum also houses the worldwide Joanne Lightfoot mollusk collection, including substantial material from Tobago. 

July—September 2001

### The quarterly bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

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**The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation.**

#### Management Committee, 2001-2002

President....Nigel Gains (629-2496), Vice-President....Carrall Alexander (633-3373), Secretary...(vacant), Treasurer..... Selwyn Gomes (624-8017), Asst. Secretary....Deosaran Maharaj (672-3758), Committee Members...Juanita Henry (624-4046), Kay Hinkson (637-9601) & Dan Jaggernauth (659-2795).

Website: <http://www.wow.net/ttfnc>

#### TTFNC's MISSION STATEMENT

**To foster education and knowledge on natural history and to encourage and promote activities that would lead to the appreciation, preservation and conservation of our natural heritage.**

Contact: The Secretary, c/o P.O. Box 642, Port of Spain.

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### We need an office : CAN YOU HELP ??



We're looking for :

- ♦ Very cheap rent or purchase! (we would be willing to renovate an old building or share offices).
- ♦ Office location in, or on outskirts of, Port of Spain (a house would also be suitable)
- ♦ Need room for 1-2 offices, library/educational room/meeting room/t-shop, workroom (ideally!!)



## What Is To Be Done? Part 1

by Christopher Starr, UWI

At a recent monthly meeting, the president invited views on what the Club's main priorities and foci should be for the coming period. Did any member care to put forth proposals? We have recently seen discussion of the proposed Guppy Foundation, which I favour as a major new initiative. And, after some thought, I would like to suggest two additional directions. This piece is an outline of the first of these.

In some times past, the Club has devoted a certain number of its monthly field trips to repeat visits to a particular locality. Together with a conscious plan of investigation, this has led to a deeper understanding of the habitat and biota of those few places, reflected in substantial new data in Club publications. Our treatment of Monos Island is perhaps the clearest example from recent decades.

I would like to see this practice resumed and systematized as a matter of policy. As a beginning, I propose that we choose a locality of broad interest, yet too little studied, and undertake to devote to it one-third of our field trips for the two years starting January 2002. As an example, if the locality were Chacachacare (a strong candidate, I should think), we would designate 2002-03 as "The Biennium of Chacachacare".

When we take a field trip, our natural inclination is to prefer someplace novel. What could possibly justify going back to the very same locality eight times over just two years? If the Club is mainly about taking strolls in the woods, nothing at all. But if we are serious about generating new knowledge of nature, such repeat visits can be an excellent way to do it. Together.

Let me set this kind of initiative in perspective. As Edward O. Wilson noted in *Consilience*, "The greatest challenge today ... in all of science is the accurate and complete description of complex sys-

tems." Wilson explicitly includes ecosystems in this assessment. The compilation of basic natural-history parameters of a locality, along with extensive observations on particular species, is a major early step toward the "complete description" of an ecosystem.

From the point of view of ecological research, what happens when a site has been the subject of a great many studies over the years? Does it get used up, so that it becomes less and less interesting, less valuable for further study? In fact, exactly the opposite happens. It is in the nature of field studies that new data open up new questions, so that the better known a locality is, the more interest it excites.

This is well illustrated by the five neotropical localities that have served for such a variety of research that each is the subject of at least one book: La Selva, Costa Rica (McDade et al. 1994, Young 1991), Monteverde, Costa Rica (Nadkarni & Wheelwright 2000), Barro Colorado Island, Panama (Leigh et al. 1996), Manaus, Brazil (Penny & Arias 1982), and Manu National Park, Peru (Wilson & Sandoval 1997). In addition, four of these (all but Monteverde) are the subject of a major comparative treatment (Gentry 1990). Aside from their intrinsic value as field sites, each of these has been enriched by what is now known about its physical habitat and biota.

Only one place in Trinidad & Tobago makes even the barest approach toward the status of these five neotropical localities. Beebe's (1952) paper on the ecology of the area around Simla is in the same spirit and intent, although on a much smaller scale.

I would love to see some of our own beloved nature spots appear on the naturalist's map of the world. It is not too much to say that these islands remain virtually unexplored in this respect. (A walk in the woods is not exploration.) By devoting a biennium to a well-selected locality and exploring it in a well-conceived manner, we can make a real, collective contribution to natural history. And we can have a




great deal of fun while we do it.

This is not an offhand suggestion. Rather, it is a formal proposal, which is now laid before the Management Committee.

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### TTFNC Badges

Our sister organization, the Ottawa Field Naturalists' Club has donated badges to the TTFNC. The cost is TT\$5.00 each. A limited supply is available.

### Publications

Copies of the *Native Trees of Trinidad and Tobago* are still available for purchase at 80.00 per copy. It will make a lovely Christmas gift for family and friends. Buy your copy early.

Back Issues of the *Living World Journal* from 1991-2000 are also available. Contact Selwyn Gomes, Treasurer.



## OPINION

## Hiking In and Out of Context

By Glenn Wilkes

Sometimes you think you're getting the message across only to find out the listener is on a totally different "scene." Chris Starr's comments (in the January Quarterly Bulletin) on my hiking remarks had me feeling like the missionary whose sermon to the assembled village had been greeted with shouts of "Huzzanzah!" He was "happy like Pappy" until the following day when he was advised not to take the short-cut through the pasture because he would get his boots soiled with "huzzanzah."

My comment on "moral authority" was in a very specific context, that is, the Club's production and sale to the public of the "Trail Guide," and concerned a field trip to Paria and the fact that only one person had *not* gone by boat. Of relevance are two excerpts from our "Programme of activities 2000/2001." Under the heading "Field Trips" it is stated: "Field Trips are undertaken by the Club for the enjoyment and edification of its members. The Guidebook for these trips is the *Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club Trail Guide (1991)*." The particular trip was "28-29 October, Blanchisseuse to Paria—Overnight (23)." In the preface of the Guide, we state that "The Trail Guide opens the doors for nature enthusiasts of all ages to a wide variety of natural habitats." Nowhere in the description of "23" do we recommend to readers that "a boat will enable them to more readily reach their destination — where the rocks and plants and animals were to be found — so that they could spend more time in the kind of place that makes field trips worthwhile." (Once John X. and X. John finish building their arch, plans for the Blanchisseuse-Matlot road may be revived, and the "Johns" will be elated to find that they can quote no less an authority than Dr. Starr to justify better access to Paria).

Since Chris was not on that trip, he should have paid attention to the comments of members who had made the decision to go by boat. Basically, they said that the "stuff" they needed to take with them, was too heavy to carry. I can assure him, said "stuff" did *not* include microscope, plant presses, etc., and no reason was given why the "stuff" *and* members had to go in the boat.

Implicit in our publication of the "Trail Guide" are first, that the naturalist/nature-lover's way of going to Blanchisseuse to Paria is by hiking, not by boat. Secondly, that the public can use our guide to find their way. I stand by my comments—if we ourselves are convinced that the best way to get to Paria *is* by boat, and if, as we did on another occasion, we can cancel a field trip *that is in the trail guide* because "we don't have anyone coming who knows the way," then we have no "moral authority" to ask the public to buy it.

But this is just *my* opinion, and as we have seen, one man's morality is another man's "huzzanzah." And since one self-styled "born naturalist" was also a lover of curried scarlet ibis, we may well decide that our Fund-Raising dinner will be more successful if we included wild meat on the menu.

Finally, I fear that the comment "field trips are about exercising the mind" implies that academics are academics, jocks are jocks, and never the twain shall meet. There is increasing evidence that mental processes are linked to physical fitness. It makes sense, since although the brain itself is not muscle, it requires oxygen i.e. an efficient blood supply i.e. good cardio-vascular fitness. Guess what is high up on the list of activities to promote cardio-vascular fitness? Walking. And the harder you

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## FIELD TRIP REPORT

El Cerro del Aripo—May 27<sup>th</sup> 2001

By John Lum Young

The Club tackled the “feared” El Cerro del Aripo for the May 2001 field trip. Many do not undertake the walk to the highest point in the Northern Range at 3,085 feet or 925m. (Though part of the reason may be that the flat summit is thickly forested and does not easily offer panoramic views of the surrounding valleys.)

The climb to the highest point in Trinidad was approached from the west via La Laja Road, about six miles north of Arima. This road climbed out of the Arima Valley and over the Guanapo divide. La Laja Road offered an excellent view of the Guanapo Valley to the south. The recently reopened quarry in the Heights of Guanapo left a wide gash in the otherwise verdant hillside.



Members looking at Trig. Mark (No. 86 on 98)  
Photo: Selwyn Gomes

The walk initially was along a dirt road that pointed in a northerly direction through agricultural holdings. A bench trail was followed that kept climbing generally northwards. This trail, which led to Brasso Seco, did not appear to be as frequently used as it was a few years ago. In the recent past, children from La Laja left home at six a.m. and walked over the hill to attend the primary school at Brasso Seco (a two hour trek).

The bench trail was followed until the Brasso Seco divide; the elevation here was 2,150 feet. The concrete signpost that once identified the road to Brasso Seco lies just north and east where

it tumbled over sometime in the mid nineties. There was a faint trail to the northwest that ascended Morne Bleu. The group continued eastwards along trails that kept on the ridges above the Brasso Seco Valley to the north.

This trail entered virgin forests. Cocoa and coffee plantations and other agricultural activities never disturbed this area. The walk passed through Lower Montane Rain Forests and Montane Rain Forest.

With the original vegetation intact, this pristine environment was rich in epiphytes. Gregory Lee Kin, who is a member of The Orchid Society, and who frequently takes samples of species to the National Herbarium to update the Herbarium's records, was able to identify 18 species of orchids.

These included *Ornithocephalis gladius*, *Dicheaea picta*, *Stenia pallida*, *Jacquinella globosa*, *Polystachya luteola*, *Hexisea reflexa*, *Richenbachanthus reflexus*, and *Gongora maculata*. *Vanilla*, *Erychrodes* and *Stellis sp.* were also noticed. Also observed were the butterfly orchid *Oncidium papillo* and the toothbrush orchid *Catasetum barbatum* so named because its flowers resembled a used toothbrush. More than eight varieties of the *Epidendrum sp.* were seen, but they were not in bloom and so could not be identified. More than four varieties of the *Maxallaria sp.* were also seen, but similarly these can only be distinguished by their flowers. Six varieties of *Puleurothallis sp.* could not be identified



for the same reason.

The trained eye of Mr. Lee Kin spotted the extremely rare *Dichaea muricata*. This orchid is about one inch in length, fully grown, and its leaves sprout alternately along the stem. A seedling of the *Paphinia cristata* was found on the forest floor and it was placed on a tree in order for it to have a better chance of survival.

Eight peaks, of varying heights and gradients, had to be ascended to reach the destination.

At the second peak members who were wearily plodding along were suddenly energised as they sought specimens of the famed aphrodisiac, mountain bois bande *Richeria grandes*. This tree flourished in altitudes over 2,300 feet and its leaf was bigger than that of the lowland variety. Remarkably there was a bois bande nurse log supporting a number of fully grown trees.

As indicated, the trail hugged the ridge and offered breathtaking views of the North Coast in the distance and the Brasso Seco Valley below. There were no views southwards despite the declining height of the trees with the increasing altitude. Mountain bamboo (*Arthrostylidium*) was the dominant grass on some of the hilltops.

Finally, the summit of El Cerro del Aripo was attained. Seven variety of trees dominated the peak. These included *Clethra broadwayi*, *Didymopanax glabratum*, *Clusia itertexta* (mountain mangrove) and *Vismia* sp. An interesting understory plant was the mountain cashibo (*Calathea* sp.). It closely resembled the variety found in the lowlands, the leaves of which are used as plates in traditional Indian weddings. The leaves of the mountain variety though identical in form and features were much smaller than the wedding leaf.


Due to the leaf litter and the thick undergrowth,



Selwyn Gomes (Treasurer) stands by Peak No. 2—a large horizontal *Richeria grandis* (Bois Bande) nurse log supporting several trees.

Photo: Deosaran Maharaj

the trig mark indicating the highest point could not be found and this led initially to some disappointment. Even the global positioning system (GPS) was not much help. It was left to Murray Guppy to remind the group that the trig mark was placed on the mountaintop before satellites were in orbit. Victor Quesnel suggested that a search be made in an area with dense vegetation. From a previous visit he remembered a tree being next to the marker and the dense vegetation in one area indicated that a tree fell allowing light to penetrate the canopy, thereby encouraging the undergrowth to grow profusely. The search commenced and some female members drew attention to a concrete block underfoot. One could imagine the cheers that punctuated the stillness of the forest when the mark was discovered. The area was cleaned to allow other visitors to spot the trig mark readily.

Congratulations were in order to Victor Quesnel, who was born in 1925. Many members would like to emulate him and complete the climb after their 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. Congratulations also to the Committee for another interesting field trip. 



walk, the more benefit you get.

But even if one believes that walking "should remain above all a means to get where we are going," it is a physical activity, and the only way to be efficient is to train for it. Simply put, the "jock-naturalist" will be able to go where boats, 4-wheel drives and unfit naturalists can't. And if the area of study is at the destination, rather than along the route, he will have more time for productive work. So don't be ashamed of being a hiker, naturalists, just put that asset to better use in our Club's activities. 265

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### WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

NAMES	MEMBERSHIP TYPE
Brian James	Ordinary
Bruce Culter	Life
Carla Smith	Ordinary
Clare Bowen-O'Connor	Ordinary
David Juan Persaud	Ordinary
Deosaran Maharaj	Upgrade to Life
Dominic Mar	Ordinary
Douglas Fraser	Life
Elizabeth Toussaint	Ordinary
Farzanah Mohammed	Ordinary
Gillian Henry	Life
Hema Secramsingh	Ordinary
Jean Ramahan	Ordinary
Jerry Wittel	Ordinary
John Correia	Upgrade to Life
John Lum Young	Upgrade to Life
John Ramahan	Ordinary
Kevin Khan	Ordinary
Lorraine Guichard	Ordinary
Louis J. Rodriguez	Ordinary
Mark Guinness	Junior
Natasha A. Mohammed	Ordinary
Nicholas Lee Wai	Ordinary
Pershic Joseph	Ordinary
Roger Karim	Ordinary
Tricia Manbode	Ordinary
Verroy Williams	Ordinary



## BOOK REVIEW

## WELCOME TO PLANET OCEAN

## Review of:

Ellen Prager & Sylvia A. Earle 2000. *The Oceans*. New York: McGraw-Hill 314 pp. ISBN 0-07-135253-8 hb US\$25

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As a land-based naturalist, I found this book a convenient, systematic introduction to a subject of which I know far too little. The text is mainly Prager's responsibility, with Earle contributing a foreword, an afterword and chapter-opening quotations.

The 14 chapters are grouped into three sections, sensibly titled "Oceans of the Past", "The Seas Today", and "Waves of the Future". In this way, the complex subject unfolds in a way that is easy to follow.

The book is mainly about the physical sea, although with two substantial chapters on marine life. And even in the physical chapters, living organisms are always on the authors' mind. Their explicit attention to the scientific practice of studying the sea is a welcome feature. How do we know what we know? Why do we know some things about the sea better than others? Their answers to these questions show that this book is aimed at the thinking lay-person.

Prager is not an impressive prose stylist. The text abounds in awkward expressions, and some of the sudden american slang can be jarring. There is nothing necessarily wrong with introducing colloquialisms into a sober work of popular science if it is done with thought and skill, but Prager's uses tend to seem rather silly.

Still, these are minor irritations. Overall, the text is in plain language accessible to the average educated English speaker, but without talking down to the reader. Specialized terms are used where they are called for; that is, where they really are better than those of ordinary speech. And Prager takes care to introduce terms that the attentive person will have encountered in news reports, such as algal bloom, dinoflagellate, horse latitudes, hydrothermal vent, manganese nodules, El Niño, sea mount, subduction and tsunami. Admit it, you have heard of most of these things and wondered about some of them. And, aside from its systematic exposition, this is where the book's great strength lies, in explaining things that we already know we don't understand.

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## EVENTS

### 2001 Christmas Party

The annual Christmas party is tentatively scheduled to be held on December 15, 2001 at Horticultural Society Headquarters. It will take the form of a Dinner and Dance beginning approx. 4:00 p.m. Details will be provided in the next issue of the Quarterly Bulletin



