THE FIELD NATURALIST

Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

January – March 2014 **Issue No: 1/2014**

Field Trip Report, Sunday January 26, 2014

ARIPO CAVES

Report by Kris Sookdeo

When it comes to connecting with nature, there are few experiences that can beat a walk in the forest. Add to that the opportunity to see oil birds and a better than average chance to see snakes and you have yourself a very rewarding encounter with nature.

(Continued on page 3)

Breathtaking views on the way to the Aripo caves: a spectacular example of mountain immortelle, *Erythrina poeppigiana* in full bloom, and the chosen home of a large colony of crested oropendolas, *Psarocolius decumanus*.

Photo: Eddison Baptiste

Inside This Issue

Editor's note :
Many thanks to all who contributed and assisted with articles and photographs.

Disclaimer :
The views expressed in this bulletin are those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion and views of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

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ARIPO CAVES

(Continued from page 1)

And so it was that about 10 Club members turned up for the trip to the Aripo Caves in January. The drive up to the starting point was an adventure in itself, as horrible road conditions almost made me reconsider the trip. We eventually reached the start of the trail which overlooked a neat christophene field and, after a quick briefing, Edmund and Bobby led us off through a dry streambed that ran parallel to the road (apparently the owner of the estate further up the road restricts passage through the property).

There were lots of interesting plants to see along the trail and Edmund soon drew our attention to a nice specimen of *Costus scaber* growing along the trail. Apparently edible, he demonstrated how parts of the plant could be used in the field and proceeded to break off and chew the succulent stem to get at the fluids inside. While this *Costus* is a very common plant I never knew that it could be used in this way. Nor did I know of the amusing vernacular name for the plant of 'bush totee', so named after the plant's rather phallic flower bracts.

Another interesting understory plant we encountered was the gorgeous cooper hoop or mountain rose, *Brownea coccinea*. It was soon after this that Kay remarked upon the fact that many of the blooms we encounter in the forest understory are red in colour. Thinking about it, this certainly must be related to the plants' choice of pollinators, and the tubular shapes of the flowers of costus, cooper hoop, balisier and deer meat are good clues to the main suspect – hummingbirds. Indeed, the downward facing blooms of the cooper hoop must also facilitate easy access by these birds.

The topography of the Aripo area is fascinating. In many areas outcrops of limestone are visible, ranging from rock faces several metres high to jagged protrusions that barely scrape at your knees. The many crevices and gaps should be great resting places for snakes but I searched many of them in vain.

As often happens in the tropics, the weather soon turned on us and the rain came down. Not that I minded. It did make for a very slippery trail in some parts but I always find that walking through a forest in the rain to be an invigorating experience.

Following a series of descents and ascents, we eventually reached the small ravine that leads to the cave and after navigating the remaining length of the boulder choked waterway we reached the cave mouth. The rains had however raised the water level a bit and we decided to stay at the mouth of the cave for a only a few minutes in case the water level rose further.

The cave itself is very interesting. According to 'A Register Of The Caves Of Trinidad And Tobago' by Paul Shaw, the Aripo Cave system is the largest cave system known in Trinidad at a length of 862 m. *"The cave is structured on a series of levels, chambers and tunnels, created by water flow under conditions of falling base level; the upper cave system is largely dry, even during heavy rains. Access to the upper part is by scrambling down a boulder slope to a stream bed, but access beyond is limited by vertical drops of 9.2 m and 15.2 m. A crawlway (low ceiling) has to be negotiated to reach the furthest section, comprising a waterfall, pool and terminal pot. Total vertical drop is estimated around 164 m."* It would have been very interesting to explore such a system but also very foolhardy given our lack of preparation.

Even above the roar of rushing water you could hear the inhabitants of the cave. Oilbirds, *Steatornis caripensis* make the cave their home and in the gloom you could just make out the shapes of the birds as they fluttered about. These large birds live their lives in the dark, leaving the caves only at night to feed on the fruit of forest trees.

In addition to the oilbirds, a few bats could be seen. Paul Shaw listed three species of bat that inhabit the cave -- *Anoura geoffroyi*, *Chilonycteris rubiginosa fusca*, *Glossophaga soricina* – and noted that they roosted further into the cave than the oilbirds. With our time up and not wanting to annoy the oilbirds any further, we decided to leave. Thoroughly soaked, we made our way back through the slippery trails.

About an hour later we were passing the large limestone rock faces when someone behind me found a snake. Of course it was a fer-de-lance, *Bothrops cf. asper* and of course it was right on the trail where I and several others had just passed. But this is par for the course on hikes and many a fer-de

-lance is passed on the trails without being noticed. Indeed this particular specimen, a baby at just about 1 foot in length, was very reluctant to do anything and was never aggressive. It is sometimes claimed that the young individuals, inexperienced and vulnerable, are more likely to deliver a full load of venom on biting. Whether this is true of fer de lance in Trinidad I cannot say but we didn't care to test it and quickly escorted the snake safely off the trail.

By now the rains had awoken countless Trinidad stream frogs, *Mannophryne trinitatis* which were calling from everywhere the small streams flowed. These little frogs are common everywhere in the Northern and Central Range but can be troublesome to find. There are usually lots of other interesting things to see once you look carefully. Searching fallen branches, for example, often turns up interesting orchids and I came across at least three *Maxillaria* species and a nice *Gongora maculata* specimen that day (plus a few others I have yet to identify). One final reward was a new moth *Neodusia cinerea* for my photo collection. The remainder of the trip was relatively straightforward with the group emerging from the forest by 3:30pm, so ending another successful Club trip.

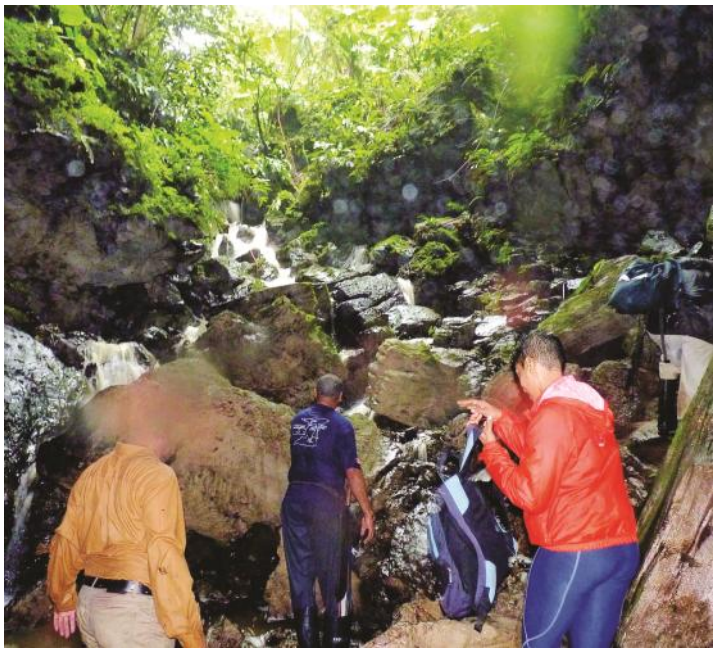
Photos : Kris Sookdeo unless otherwise stated

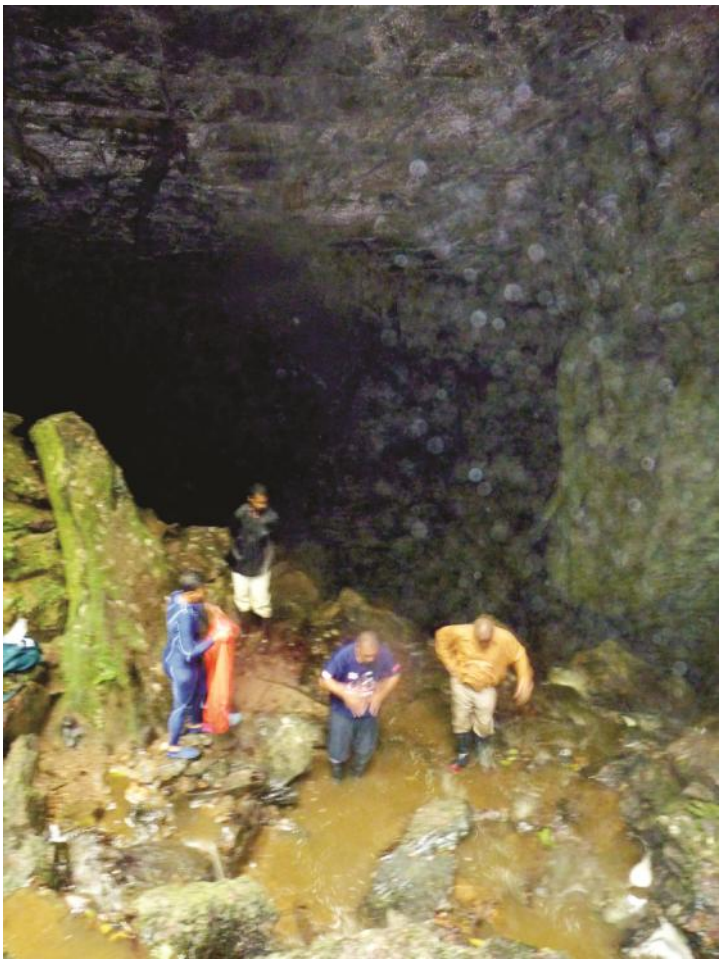
Top left : ***Costus scaber***

- bottom photos taken in light rain/rain drops on lens resulting in distortions -

Bottom left : **Mouth of the cave (looking out)**

Bottom right : **Cave mouth (looking in)**





Above: **Mountain rose, *Brownea coccinea***

Right: **Trinidad stream frog, *Mannophryne trinitatis***

Above left: (*photo: Eddison Baptiste)*
Close up of one of the many outcrops of limestone

Below left:
Fer-de-lance, *Bothrops cf. asper*

2013 Overseas Field Trip to Guadeloupe Report
Sunday 23rd - 30th June 2013
THE AFTERGLOW

Report by Kay Hinkson

After a sabbatical of 2 years, the day of the Field Naturalists' Club's overseas trip to Guadeloupe finally arrived – 23 June 2013. Excitement and anticipation were rife amongst the 14 members awaiting departure at Piarco International Airport. It is common knowledge that the potential exists for frustrating and challenging situations to arise with overseas travel but despite flight delays our spirits were in full throttle.

"Bienvenue a Guadeloupe," the neon sign tattooed a welcome at the very modern structure that is Pole Karaibe airport. Because of the lateness of the hour, our immigration formalities were completed in short shrift and Customs officials were non existent. Outside the terminal, the group was welcomed by our bi-lingual tour guide and taxi driver, Gilles Dousseau and my niece, Gennike Mayers, who was instrumental in the successful execution of this tour. After a photo op moment for authentication, and then dinner, the question was, at 10.30 pm on a Sunday, would we find an open restaurant? Gennike found us a Senegalese restaurant very close to our hotel where we partook of a sumptuous meal before checking in to Hotel Karaibes which was to be our home away from home for the week.

This small Caribbean island where the official language is French, although a lot of the inhabitants speak Kreole, has a land area of 629 sq. miles and a population of about 400,000. It comprises two main Islands, Basse Terre - with its rough volcanic relief and eastern Grande Terre which features rolling hills and flat plains. They are separated by a narrow sea channel called Salt River. There is a first world mentality (France overseas), eco-friendly and patriotic citizenry. The preservation of the environment and ecosystems is top priority and of national importance. This is the kind of place that one could easily be convinced to spend the rest of one's days.

On our travel agenda was a trip focused on history, culture and ecosystems. Our first expedition begins with an eco-tour of the Guadeloupe Aquarium and a guided snorkeling tour of a coral reef reserve. The aquarium is located at the marina in Gosier, where one can view the marine life in large tanks in the serenity of its confines. Our guide, Cyrill, took us on a journey through the mangroves where we learnt that there are three different types – red, white and black -- after which we anchored just outside the main area and were treated to a first class underwater nature reserve, where one is not allowed to stand at any time and where the flora and fauna provide a unique eco-experience. The rest of the afternoon was spent discovering the environs.

A pause to digress:

- There are no venomous snakes in Guadeloupe.
- The dead are never buried underground because of the hard volcanic soil.
- The wider population drives Peugeot automobiles.
- The musical culture produces sounds of the Kadans, Bouyon, Quadrille, Gwo Ka, Zouk and the Beguine.
- Quite a few of us in the group had a working knowledge of French, but there are always verbal and visual cues for communication in any language.

Let us continue the journey. The next day came "the big one" — a trip that was to challenge the level of our fitness: the climb to the summit of the Soufriere volcano. It was an early call as it was approximately a 2-hr journey to our destination and we also needed to stop at the Basseterre market for some vital supplies.

Soufriere, situated in South Basseterre, is the highest peak in Guadeloupe's mountain chain, clocking in at 1467 metres (considerably higher than our 940 metre Cerro del Aripo). As we approached the

entrance to the trail, it started raining. Undeterred, we pressed on as this was the highlight of the entire journey. The few in the group who were not taking up the challenge, were taken on a scenic tour of the surrounding areas while we climbed.

The trail was clearly defined by cobblestones, barriers and strategically placed landmarks, so a guide was unnecessary. From some slopes en route to the summit, both neighbouring Dominica and Martinique in the distance, were visible. The majestic chataigniers, *Artocarpus camans* (known as 'chataigne' in Trinidad and Tobago), are the largest visible trees at that elevation and provide shade for the numerous ferns, mosses and epiphytes that encroach on the trunks and branches. Beautiful ferns, baby frogs living in the wells of lilies, iridescent-headed hummingbirds, red-throated seedeaters and panoramic views presented a distraction for what lay ahead. As we climbed higher, the violent winds and the smell of sulphur thickened from volcanic activity. The mist also served to create a totally different landscape.

Guadeloupe has the richest soil for plant varieties in this hemisphere, not only because of the chalky earth, but also the original volcanic soil, thus creating two almost permanent zones. After three and a half hours of blood, sweat and tears, we arrived at the summit in a raging torrent accompanied by gusty winds. As we strained against the wind we were prevented from going further on to the crater, as the raindrops were now ice particles and it was decided that we should not venture into the unknown, as we were cold, drenched and could step out of our comfort zone. We tried waiting out the

Club Members - Overseas Trip to Guadeloupe June 23-30, 2012 (L - R)
Front: Ann Williams, Bernadette Harris, Averil Ramchand, Nadia Hosein, Annemarie Sankersingh. **Middle:** Diana MacIntyre, Stuart Millar, Kay Hinkson, Clayton Hull, Winston Boodoo, Diane Boodoo. **Back:** Gerard Williams, Joy Millar, Haroon Husain.

downpour, still hoping to see the crater, but to no avail. We took cover in a bunker as we started the return journey which took an hour and a half. We were never so happy as when mellowing in the "yellow sulphur baths" after this field trip. They are proclaimed as a "cure all" or so some people believe. That night we settled for a buffet dinner at the Creole Beach Hotel located next door to where we were staying, as energy levels were now depleted.

Our third day's outing was a scenic trip through the National Park, again located in Basseterre. Cascade des Ecrevisses (Waterfall) is breathtaking in its own right, ending in a pool for the swimming enthusiasts. From there we made our way slowly into the seclusion and serenity of Corossol (soursop). Located on the Route des Mamelles that runs through the middle of the National Park in the heart of the tropical forest of Basseterre, it is a remarkable setting for picnicking, bird-watching and many other outdoor activities. Malendure, our next port of call, renowned for its beautiful, black sand beach, was the place for a local meal, of savoury mélange, prepared on the spot. We had certainly discovered the richness of the Gwada cuisine.

Some of the group had a dip in the crystal clear water, before leaving to visit La Maison de Cacao. As we traversed the route along the Atlantic side, magnificent vistas formed a back drop of immense beauty. At the chocolate factory, we were treated to a comprehensive knowledge-based insight into the rudiments of processing cocoa. According to the account of the Reverend Father Jean-Baptist Labat 1720, between the 12th and 16th centuries Aztecs cultivated cocoa for many purposes, including establishing new trade of dried seeds of cocoa. He described how a nutritional, revitalizing (and apparently aphrodisiac) drink known as 'tchocoalt' was prepared from the paste, and how the cocoa butter or 'golden oil' was used for its medicinal properties as a sun-block and to treat skin burns. A tasting session ensued, where additives such as pepper, ginger and honey lent a new dimension to the history of chocolate, and titillated the taste buds.

A short drive and we were at Domaine de Severin Rum distillery in the town of Ste. Rose. One has to go back in time in order to understand a tradition that is 300 years old. There is an exhibit that explains the origin and culture of the sugar cane, with artifacts from the past on display guiding the visitor through the different stages of manufacturing from the grinding of the cane, fermentation, distilling and preservation until the ageing process.

Guadeloupe, like Trinidad, has its off-shore islands: La Desirade, Marie-Galante (the largest, likened to a pancake) the two islands of Les Saintes (Terre de Haut and Terre de Bas) and six other little "pebbles." When Columbus discovered these islands in 1493, he met the Amerindian Caribs who were the first inhabitants. These islands are owned by the "department" of Guadeloupe.

Our day was to be a sporty visit to the larger of 'Les Saintes' – Terre de Haut. I will indulge my fantasy and liken this island to a mini Saint Tropez. It has been quoted as having one of the top ten most beautiful bays in the world. The hills encompass the bay, from where one has a unique view of Fort Napoleon – our destination. This island offers multiple possibilities: you may elect to bike, ramble to the Fort, swim or shop on the bustling streets. There is also a well-stocked, open air market town buzzing with life. A twenty minute ramble uphill in hot sunny

(continued on page 10)

- photos page 9 -

- **A : Au Sommet - Soufriere**
  Haroon Hussain, Averil Ramchand, Ann Williams, Annemarie Sankersingh and Kay Hinkson (image captures weather conditions!)
- **B : Fern Valley (example of vegetation)**
- **C : Bridge (in the distance) joining Basseterre and Grande Terre**
- **D : Soufrere volcano - vent**
- **E : Groupe welcome at the cocoa house**


A


B


C


D


CACAO
GROUPE DES TRINITARIO
Type : angoleta
Arôme riche et amertume moyenne
Utilisé pour les chocolats fins
E

THE AFTERGLOW

(Continued from page 8)

conditions allowed us to absorb as much of the beauty of the French-influenced culture as possible.

Fort Napoleon, a military structure, was rebuilt in 1844 to replace a fortification destroyed by the English in 1809. The main purpose being to house a garrison to protect the naval roadstead, considered one of the safest in the Caribbean. The French and English had been at loggerheads in this part of the world and were embroiled in a bloody naval battle, but when all was said and done the French were victorious. Housed in the Fort is a museum, with explanatory notes (en francais) and numerous reminders of the island's unique history on display - antique furniture, models of ships and old and traditional memorabilia. Posters positioned around the grounds thanked the patrons to NOT FEED THE IGUANAS. It is not possible at this time to be accurate about the local population on the island, as registers were apparently incomplete or partly destroyed during wars.

After the tour we relocated to the beach hotel for a lunch that was local, traditional and typically delicious. A dip in "the salt" was a necessary bonus, before heading back to the pier to await our ferry – Miss Antoinette. Back at the hotel the consensus was a light dinner of stone baked pizza on the compound of our hotel, as we basked in the afterglow of another absorbing experience.

Some say that "all good things must come to an end." We begged to differ: we were not ready to leave this paradise! If paradise were a place I'd call it GUADELOUPE. Our final day was The Field Naturalists' Club's Discovery day 2013, an exploring day by coach, where we were going to traverse the "other wing" of this Butterfly Island – Grande-Terre, as so far the focus of our activities had been centered mostly on Basse-Terre.

We motored along a coastal route from Ste. Anne to Saint Francoise towards the East end of the island, Pointe des Colibris, which connects the cove of La Gourde to the Beach of Dreams. From the beach one sees an immense cross, which can be accessed by climbing a number of steps bordered on each side by colorful berries, sea grapes and red gum trees that provide a buffer from the wind. This is an historic site which overlooks the landscape and boasts panoramic views of the neighbouring islands. The terrain appears very similar to Point Galera in Toco. This is an island of contrasting landscapes. There are cliffs and lagoons, salty air, mangroves, and seaside plum trees that retain the sand. Lunch followed and served up at the beach, prepared for us by la tante de Rudi, our other driver. Next, a visit to Village Artisanal in St. Anne for local craft, souvenirs and a host of gifts, and a quick stint at the Mall as we wanted to participate in the hustle and bustle of the night market before dinner time. Back at the hotel, a rather unexpected visitor appeared in the form of Monsieur Willy Rosier, General Manager at the Department of Tourism. This was a pleasant encounter in which a presentation was made to the group, at the end of which umbrellas and cookbooks were presented to the ladies and magazines relating to the cultural aspects of Guadeloupe to the men.

Tam Tam restaurant, three quarter of an hour's walk from our hotel, serving totally local cuisine, came highly recommended for the "last supper." It did not disappoint. We were entertained by the house DJ to an explosion of cultural fusion during the night. But alas, curfew was at midnight. Airport call was at 5 am and flight departure to St. Lucia 7 am.

Guadeloupe has flexed its charms, surpassing all of our expectations . It has been noted that we've only scratched the surface, so this is definitely a destination worth revisiting.

LAGNIAPPE: I'm certain this translates to "prolonging the bien-etre". In St. Lucia there was a 5 -hr. in-transit layover until our departure to Trinidad, so still in that celebratory mood, some of us in the group hired a "maxi" which took us into the mountains to Ladera Hotel, nestled between the Pitons. What an idyllic location, an eye-opener to the holiday maker who's looking for those elusive magical moments, that blissfully serene and rustic environment, where time seemed to stand still. Maybe, just maybe, dreams do come true here. 

Field Trip Report, Sunday March 30, 2014

ERIN SAVANNAH

Report by Richard Acosta

The TTFNC group met punctually at 6:30 am at Grand Bazaar and proceeded south to the roundabout at Mon Repos in San Fernando. After a long winding drive through Fyzabad and Pt Fortin we snaked our way through the dry hills of Erin.

Our landmark was a bar reported to be over one hundred years old which unfortunately seemed to be undergoing a facelift. We turned down a quiet unassuming side lane much to the interest of the residents and proceeded down an all-too-familiar (to TTFNC explorers), foreboding track through dense undergrowth.

Now 9 am, we assembled our cars, six strong with Dan's signature yellow van as our leader, and exited into the seemingly alien landscape. Our group numbered 14 persons, who immediately began attempting to identify the flora that would be our companions for the rest of the day.

The gardens of timit, cocorite palms *Attalea maripa*, razor grass and 'banga' or 'gru gru bef' would accompany us for the length of our journey perforated only by the appearances of the introduced Caribbean pine, *Pinus caribe*, a species introduced by the Forestry Department. This planting programme was strongly opposed by the TTFNC in previous years, but appears to have continued regardless – there was evidence of spread from the original plantations, with smaller trees now encroaching on the remaining natural savannah. We had a request from Dr Mike Oatham at UWI to report back on the presence and abundance of moriche palm, *Mauritia flexuosa* on the savannah, but there were none to be seen. Dan singled out a specimen of *Besmonicus ortocantus*, the spiny broadleaf climbing palm.

Reg Potter and his satellite navigation equipment painstakingly sought the location of our car park and road that would lead us to our destination. Reg had previously had difficulty locating another road at the San Fernando bypass which resulted in our motorcade making an illegal right turn into San Fernando. After much deliberation the group concluded that we should walk to the more visible road just south of where we were.

Our intrepid group confidently made its way across this arid landscape in the ever-present sun and cool consistent breeze, boots crunching the arid rocky earthen path well into the palms and conifers. To keep the spirit of adventure alive, Reg reminded us of the tales of feral cows that once, or presently, roamed the area.

As we ventured deeper within the quiet herbal stage we noticed that we were no longer on familiar soil. As if transported to some Martian landscape we were now on a planet of pink, orange earth. A rare and indigenous soil that could be found only in this quiet part of South Trinidad lay beneath us. A very brittle clayish rocky soil, Reg easily crushes it in his hands in the hope of finding plant imprints within its strata. He explained how the rock, known locally as Erin stone and prized in the making of roads locally, is thought to have been created by an intense burning of lignite (a low-grade coal) many years ago, producing an extensive layer of partially baked earth below (the Erin stone). The extent of exactly how vast this phenomenon actually was could be seen deep into our expedition at a quarry sight in the savannah which was quite conspicuous with its blatant pink-orange colouring. The debate as to precisely how the stone was formed continued well into the rest of the expedition, Reg never quite being convinced of accepted theories.

The *Genipa americana* made a modest appearance along our path. Known as the 'monkey apple', it stood proud welcoming us on our way. The spotlight was soon on the distant nesting of the crested oropendola or cornbird who adorned two distant cocorite palms with its well-knitted hanging nests that blew in the wind like hanging baskets.

'Pois doux' was identified with its long green pods which were teasingly out of reach for our parched enthusiasts. Contrasted against the unfamiliar background an old friend made his exit at the sound of our approach: the matte lizard of regular size and colour. Christmas cones littered the path

reminding us of the ever-present invasion of the non-native pine trees.

More unexpected in this wild untamed landscape was the presence of bee hives assembled in a quiet cove. About twenty-six unassuming boxes kept the group ill at ease at the prospect of harassment by ill-tempered bees. The real interest of the bees was clearly apparent along our journey: the majestic cocorite palm flowers, a grand and voluminous bouquet of yellow floral abundance. Dan explained that the fruit produced would number in the hundreds.

A course in webbing was offered by two experts in the field. One web that measured about four inches across was by a common but quite impressive spider that sat quietly observing our beephobic bunch. On the adjacent branch, as though at a web symposium, was the second instructor, what Reynold Boyce could only speculate was a tent caterpillar. But competing with these for our interest, and winning, was the webless pink-toed tarantula, *Avicularia avicularia* with its blazing red abdomen and furry legs. From here, we realised we could see Venezuela, our ominous guardian and birth mother.

We were now in the savannah, an inlet of Erin rock and grass shaped in a modest bowl. It is here our group rested and met the remaining TTFNC group (early-rising birders and entomologists who had arrived at the crack of dawn) adding six to our party. Armed with butterfly nets and cameras, most eagerly sought the residents of this quiet sanctuary. Others sought shade. The birders were excited to share their morning's sightings with us, which had included toucans and three species of warbler.

An emerald-patched cattleheart butterfly, *Parides sesostris trinitensis* entertained us by sipping 'Gatorade' before fluttering off into the radiant sun. The floor of this quaint bowl was littered with the

below - **The 'inlet of Erin rock and grass shaped in a modest bowl' where the general field trip group met the early-rising birders.** *Photo: Eddison Baptiste*

black round seeds of the cocorite palm. The grasses and spotting of trees presented an almost theatrical setting for the myriad butterflies to dance to the urging of the sun and wind. Not much else dared venture in this heat. Only the emblem of Trinidad's ever present waste problem, the proud corbeaux, would oversee our expedition. This was the natural savannah of the Erin plains. A land of pink stone and proud palm. And pertinacious pine?

The group made its way briskly back to the point where both Dan and Reg speculated that the previous trail actually lay. Lunch was had and the group slowly disbanded. But the day's proceedings could not be culminated in the bush and heat. Refuge was sought at a relic of this landscape: the centenarian bar. As we refreshed ourselves, Dan continued on in the heat alone, along a different trail deep into the savannah, and finally discovered a single, proud specimen of the elusive moriche palm.

above R - **Wild passion fruit flower seen along the trail** *Photos: Eddison Baptiste*

below - **View south east from a high point along the edge of the inlet of Erin rock**

Art Field Trip Report Sunday 16th March, 2014

INSPIRATION IN AN ARTIST'S GARDEN

An account of the Art Group's visit to Ajoupa

Report by Amy Deacon

What could be a more perfect venue for our natural history art group than a garden lovingly created and maintained with both art and nature in mind?

On Sunday 16th March, our group of artists, photographers, botanists, birders and fungi-hunters finally made it through the unusually heavy highway traffic to the haven of Ajoupa Pottery, near Couva. Here, Bunty and Rory O'Connor welcomed us into their home and garden, where we had free reign to explore, and full use of their beautiful guest cottage

(Continued on page 16)

Club Members on the deck at Ajoupa, with a stunning view of the Northern Range behind. (L-R)

Front: Anne Solomon, Alësha Naranjit, Paula Smith, Alain Briggs and resident dog.

Back: Back-Bunty O'Connor, Amy Deacon, Maya Patel, Nicholas See Wai, Fiona Cooper, Lynn Abbassi, Georgette Briggs

photo: Frazer Higgins

- **A : Art group members outside the guest cottage at Ajoupa.**
  L– R (Anne Solomon, Roma & Jeffrey Wong Sang, Nicholas See Wai and Paula Smith)
  photo: Amy Deacon

- **B : Copper basin pond in the garden. These were full of guppies and water plants**
  photo: Rachael Frank

- **C : The garden had many orchids, some In hanging baskets and others growing epiphytically such as this *Epistephium sp.***
  photo: Fiona Cooper

- **D : A watercolour by Art Group member Maya Patel: View of the Northern Range from Ajoupa (including El Tucuche).**

INSPIRATION IN AN ARTIST'S GARDEN

(Continued from page 14)

as a shady base in which to rest between sketches and eat our picnic lunches.

From the cottage we were treated to stunning views of the Northern Range, with El Tucuche clearly visible. Understandably, Maya Patel decided to set up here straight away and painted a lovely watercolour landscape while, one by one, the rest of us were enticed away from the cottage by the numerous pulls of the magical garden, and we soon dispersed. With around 25 attendees, this was the best-attended art trip so far, yet it was easy to feel like the only inhabitant in the whole garden while getting lost along the maze-like paths and secret spots that make up this beautiful location.

It's hard to believe that 25 years ago the Ajoupa plot, now so lush and diverse, was dominated by razor grass. Rory described how its transformation only happened thanks to an extremely dedicated local gardener, alongside their own hard work and vision in collecting and planting cuttings and seeds. Passionate about wildlife, and botany in particular, they insisted on planting trees as well as shrubs. This adds height, and with it an element of mystery, to the garden.

The dense vegetation means it is impossible to view the whole space at once – one has to discover the various nooks, crannies and surprise clearings on foot. It has all the touches of an artist's garden; examples of Bunty's pottery and other artwork are tucked amongst the plants like cryptic clues on an elaborate treasure hunt – some fun (such as the giant hands emerging from one of the ponds) and some simply beautiful. What could be better inspiration for a group of natural history artists?

The birders among us were not disappointed either – an abundance of plants in bloom meant that hummingbirds were well represented: copper-rumped, ruby topaz and both little and rufous-breasted hermits flitted about as we painted. Between us we also saw a white-tailed hawk, a long-billed gnatwren, a violaceous euphonia, at least 3 species of bat, a skink and several unidentified bird nests.

This trip had it all: from fungi and fig trees to lizards and landscapes. Far too much to fit into just a few hours – we'll definitely be returning soon with our paintbrushes and binoculars for another visit!

The TTFNC art group would like to thank the O'Connors for being so welcoming and helpful during our visit. The art group is open to anyone who has an interest in art, no matter how inexperienced. Those interested should ask to join the mailing list by emailing Amy at aed32@st-andrews.ac.uk.

Shell ginger, *Alpinia zerumbet*. One of many flowers in the garden at Ajoupa.

Photo : Amy Deacon

THE CUMACA CAVE, FROM A PERSPECTIVE OF 50 YEARS LATER

The Cumaca Cave tragedy of 1964

A response to Hans Boos' account (in QB3 2011, re-published in the Newsday, March 2014)

by Martin Warwick Bermer, April 2014

On March 22, 1964 I was concerned with the cave dive made by the Trinidad branch of the British Sub Aqua Club which resulted in the sad death of two young members of the club. I have a scrapbook of newspaper cuttings and other documentation about this event and have often wondered whether the brass plaque which I erected at the cave was still in place. My occasional emails to hiking groups inquiring whether the plaque was still in place were only once responded to.

On March 28, 2014 my wife found a reference in the Newsday newspaper on line to "The Cumaca Cave tragedy of 1964" and drew my attention to it. I was most interested to find a full account of the event from the point of view of a non-diver and I made contact with the author – Hans Boos of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists Club (TTFNC). He directed me to the website of The Field Naturalists Club where I was able to locate his article "Retrospective on Cumaca Cave" which he published in March 2011. Clearly this was the foundation for the Newsday article and it is accompanied by a few rather blurred black-and-white photographs which evoke strong memories especially as the first picture includes my car, a Sunbeam-Talbot 90 Mk.III!

Hans Boos was kind enough to suggest that I

The original photo published in TTFNC Quarterly Bulletin no.3, 2011 (QB3 2011) that includes Martin W. Bermer's car - left back, a Sunbeam -Talbot 90 Mk.III.

March 22th 1964 group photo of members of TTFNC and the British Sub-Aqua Group on the Cumaca Road before the commencement of the hike to the Caves which are located on the Leotaud Estate

Photo source : Ian Lambie

should write more about this sad event but to do so in detail or to reproduce the official report which I made to the British Sub Aqua club would really add little to the facts which were explained so well. Perhaps my own reactions to the events as they unfolded may be of interest.

While it is true that the Sub Aqua club had been diving on the Spanish galleons at Gasparee (and I had found a cask of Stockholm tar which must have sunk before it burnt) there was no question of diving in the confined space of a wreck – something which I have always been disinclined to attempt. So the attempt to dive in the Cumaca cave was something new for the Club and presented a challenge which we thought we could deal with. We hoped that we should find a further, unexplored, open cave through which this underground river ran.

We had heard that a Royal Navy team had dived there some years before, although this was never substantiated, and so we planned our expedition carefully. We anticipated that divers passing through this narrow channel would stir up silt and make visibility difficult and felt that to drag a rope behind the divers would exacerbate the disturbance of silt. We therefore decided that the divers should pay out a line as they went down so the line would lie on the floor of the cave. This had the disadvantage in that as the line would not be held taut between diver and handler on the surface, it could not be used for exchanging signals. But we did not expect that this would be a problem.

The line that was used was provided by Adam Richards and I remember examining it with him. It was a reel of half inch nylon tape and I still have a sample which was tested to a bursting strain of 550lbs. What I did not know was that there was a joint in the tape, which was not in fact a measuring tape but had been intended to be used for making wristwatch straps, and this joint was merely strong enough to allow the tape to pass through the machine making the straps so that when stress was put on it, it gave way. We devised a reel which the divers would carry between them and the tape would pay off as they went down, letting the reel rotate, so there should be a minimum disturbance to the silt.

In the event, we found the track from where we had parked our cars to the cave to be quite a task, burdened as we were with aqualung cylinders, weight belts and so on, but we succeeded in reaching the mouth of the cave and then we had to find our way through a quarter mile of cave, through which the river flowed, with Guacharo birds and bats flying overhead in the cave, and cockroaches and droppings all over the floor, which was far from even, so that we stumbled our way through to where the roof came down to within about six inches of the water surface.

We had not expected to find this obstacle but found that by ducking under the obstruction we could emerge into a final chamber which was full of air but had a pool at its end from which the river flowed. This was where our dive took place. We had the usual setup of surface cover, in this case a diver standing over the pool and holding the tape, as well as a standby diver suited up and ready to put on his aqualung and go to the diver's assistance in case of need. I was the surface cover holding the tape.

I have a clear visual memory of Victor Abraham shortly before he dived holding a plastic bag in which he had caught a couple of the blind fish which lived in this river. I did not know that he was a member of the Field Naturalists' Club, about which I knew very little, but it seems likely that he intended to take them home and try to keep them in an aquarium. But both he and Adam Richards put on their gear, took the reel between them and went down in the water. Everything seemed to be going as planned but of course there was no communication between the divers and the surface. We were not even seeing bubbles from their aqualung exhaust and no doubt these were accumulating under the roof of the underground river.

We had planned on a half-hour dive at the most with sufficient air in the diver's tanks for this and a safety margin. We all stood there watching the pool waiting to see them come back up but time went by and after 20 minutes I was starting to feel some concern that they were staying so long. I thought I would see if I could feel any movement on the line so I pulled gently on it. There was some resistance but the line started to come to me and I remember turning to the others and saying, "they must be coming up!" and I continued to pull the line gently towards me, thinking that I was taking up the slack.

I was absolutely horrified when instead of the

divers, the end of the line appeared with just a piece of white adhesive tape stuck on the end. Clearly it had come apart and we were seeing no sign of the divers. I immediately told the standby diver to go down and see if he could find them and he did, using a rope which we held and which was securely tied to his equipment. By this time the turbidity of the water had increased with the movement of the divers going down and the standby diver going down, and after a quite a short time the standby diver came up and told us that he could see nothing down there. I immediately took over, put on the aqualung, weight belt, mask and with a rope tied to my equipment and handheld on the surface I went down.

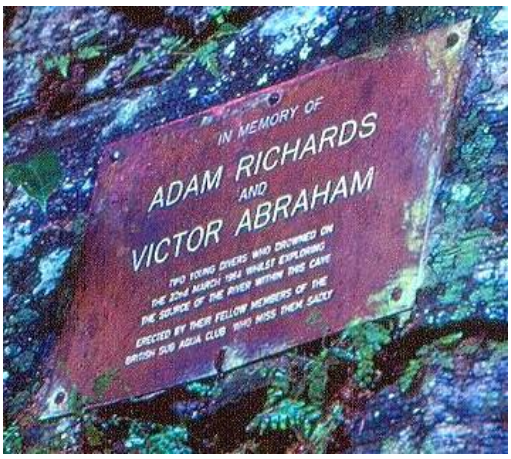
We had equipped ourselves with underwater flash lights which worked reasonably well but the silt had been disturbed to such an extent that it was like swimming in milk; the flashlight illuminated a cloud of water and it wasn't until you came up against an obstacle that, when it was quite close, you could see what it was. I have another strong visual recollection of a tooth of rock emerging through the milky haze and of trying to swim round it but encountering it whichever way I turned. Then I found that I was being held back and could go no further so that I was left with no alternative but to return to the surface. It seemed that I had reached the end of the rope which we had and of course the people on the surface were not prepared to let me go.

It was now clear that our divers were about to run out of air and we had no further air supply with us, so two of our members set off in search of further aqualungs from our cars. There was nothing further that we could do at that time except perhaps search the mountain above the cave to see whether there was any opening which might disclose a pool into which the divers could have surfaced and some of our members did this.

The rest of that day is a blur of horror at what had happened and at the need to go into the cave and bring out the bodies. As Hans Boos says, only one could be recovered, that of Victor Abraham. We had then to set about the sad things which one must do after a death. We attended the inquest, we called on the families of the two boys to express our condolences and share their grief. We had a plaque made and I found a place on the rock flat enough to accept it and secured it in place with square copper nails hammered into holes drilled in the rock. Adam Richard's father, a consulting engineer, wrote to me at length to explain just what must have happened, showing me how the bubbles from the aqualung exhaust collecting in the roof of the tunnel displaced the water and took away support from the mountain which fell in on them.

It was only in reading Hans Boos' account that I realised that it was he who made the connection with Malcolm Browne, the professional diver who brought out Victor's body. I had thought that our members who went out to the police station had made the contact, but we shall always be grateful that he was able to bring in Malcolm Browne, who we knew of as a competent professional diver.

Two days later, back at work I sat in my office, tried to work but found it impossible to concentrate. The loss of these two strong, active young men was something I could not accept. I lived with the memory, which brings back the events of that day, for many years and even today, fifty years later, the reactions are perhaps muted, but the story arouses the same feelings. I did not stop diving and I later lost another friend who drowned in Staubles Bay while diving on a mooring, but I would never again dive in a confined space, not even in a shipwreck, even though a shipwreck can be one of the most fascinating things to dive on, it can also be full of dangers not all of which can be anticipated.



The plaque at the Cumaca Cave entrance in memory Adam Richards and Victor Abraham

Originally published in TTFNC QB3 2011

Photo: Hans Boos

NORTHERN RANGE CROSSING, 2001

by Reginald Potter - Part 1 of 2

It must have been in the year 2000. I can only deduce this because I returned to live in Trinidad in Christmas 1999. In 2000 we had a contact from an old acquaintance in Scotland who had worked many years in Pointe-a-Pierre and who was fond of hiking. He had planned a visit to Trinidad and promised to contact me. This he did and I suggested we walk to the Aripo caves. While on the hike there must have been a tree fall or we passed some unfamiliar spot, because I caught a rare view of the valley beyond and the rising hills behind. This is most unusual in the forest since the vegetation generally obscures views of any distance. But that rare sight stirred something inside me and I thought it would be wonderful to slowly wander through and across the Northern Range over a few days, taking in the delights with none of the pressures of time that are experienced on a day hike.

The idea of a Northern Range crossing was born!

Many months passed during which I planned, but there were no obvious companions. I knew we would need bush hammocks to avoid sleeping on wet ground and the time taken each night to set up tents. I had a couple of home-mades and assumed I could make any more needed.

Then one day in 2001 at an oil conference at the Hilton a good friend introduced me to an Australian geologist called John Chambers who was then resident in Trinidad. We got talking and it soon emerged that he was keen on the crossing and had once done a lot of jungle trips while prospecting in Indonesia. John had a friend in British Gas, Mike Starcher, who was also a keen hiker and in the next few days we had a team consisting of myself, John, Mike and Vanessa, his wife, who was also a geologist with BG, all keen to go.

I checked the maps and visited UWI where there was an old Ordinance Survey map of the whole Northern Range on the wall at the Herbarium which showed old bridle paths which presented a possible route. It seemed to me that the best route was to start at Platanal at the end of the Cumaca road and travel generally north-east to meet the end of the Santa Cruz trail from Matelot. Thus we could descend the last 5 miles or so on a known trail. The old Herbarium map also showed a trail starting in Platanal which would get us up onto the Main Ridge so this route looked promising.

We decided to make an initial reconnaissance trip to verify that the start from Platanal looked reasonable and too much time would not be lost getting started. On this trip Laurent de Verteuil accompanied the four of us. We started at the bridge at the end of Platanal and walked up a well used trail which followed the river bed as part of the route, then entered the upper valley where a farmer was cultivating several acres mainly in peppers. It was that farmer who kept the trail clear since he dragged a sled with his tractor, through the mud and up the river, laden with his supplies. We entered the wide valley of the Platanal river (tributary to the Oropouche) and saw the farmer's house on the northern side of the valley. The river showed a healthy flow of crystal clear water. Several tributaries flowed into it from the north, some with quite a large flow. By this time Laurent was showing signs of stress and decided to walk out and meet us on the return later. It was evident that he was not fit enough to cross the range.

We continued up river then left the river bed on a muddy track ascending to a junction. We took the left fork and soon came to the shack of the famed "Norbert" who was something of a hermit who actually resided alone in the forest and was a notorious poacher. Norbert was an old rangy looking man with perfect teeth – which he was very proud of. Coincidentally, I had met his son, who was a fugitive from the law, some years before. This was far into the Platanal bush where I was leading a hike and was somewhat lost. After passing signs where trap guns were set we caught the smoky scent of human habitation and shortly afterward came to a shack built on stilts. A groggy looking youth emerged to our calls and demanded money

for showing us the way out. After pointing out to him that there were more of us than he alone, and a suggestion that he might experience some extreme discomfort should he continue to demand money, he agreed to show us the way out and was duly rewarded with a tip. We later learned that he was Norbert's son who was laying low for a while!

Norbert showed us something of the area and took us back down to the junction and along the right fork which required descending into a small stream and up the other side where we joined a well beaten track. Taking the left fork he showed us where it crossed the watershed and into the neighbouring valley which he told us was that of the Matura river. There he left us after explaining that some trail went on into the Matura river valley and passed through rock formations that he called 'the Cathedral'. As for the planned trip to Matelot he boasted that he could do that in one day no problem! He directed us not to return the same way but to follow what was the right fork on our way in and that would take us all the way to the original Platanal trail and passing through the forest reserve. This we did and it shortened the return trip. On tracing the route on my maps later I discovered that we were indeed in the Matura valley at our furthest point. The Matura flows generally SE to its junction with the Salybia river and emerging in the sea at Saline Bay, called Saybia in that area.

So the route looked feasible and all we had to do was plan the date and get ready. Somebody checked the internet and found a company called Hennessy who make light weight hammocks with tent roofs and mosquito nets. This sounded like a comfortable bed so we all ordered them and had them delivered. I did some extra walks to build stamina and even took a hike above the WASA tanks at the top of Lady Chancellor Hill with my back pack loaded with rocks to simulate our load. I asked my old hunting buddy Russell Bronte-Tinkew who farms in Toco if he knew a local maxi driver we could hire, and he recommended Mr. Doyle Bennett who lives in Cumana. He was duly booked to collect us in Matelot when we arrived. We thought it prudent to have a guide for this trip so I called a contact in Valencia to ask Norbert on his next trip into 'town' if he would do this. After quite a few days I eventually got confirmation that Norbert was in agreement and the date and time for us to meet was established.

I really don't remember the month but when it arrived I learnt that Vanessa would not be going on the trip for some medical reason. I had hoped to have at least four of us since both Louis Guy and Mr Quashie, forest ranger in Pt Cumana, had pointed out the difficulty in carrying out an injured person with fewer members.

On the appointed morning we started early and drove to Platanal. On the long drive up that Cumaca road we noted a police vehicle coming out and thought this a bit curious. We parked the vehicle near the bridge at the end of the road in Platanal, near to the lone house which belongs to 'Bald Head' Abraham who runs an electronics shop in Charlotte Street.

Trekking up the Platanal river and taking the forest reserve route this time we made pretty good headway up to Norbert's house but there was no sign of him despite calling as loudly as we could for a while. It then became obvious where Norbert was. That police vehicle had delivered somebody to the area in order for him to go hunting with Norbert. It just happens that it was the closed season for hunting, but Norbert (and the police) were no respecters of a closed season! Oh well, the best plans of mice and men . . .

After unloading the food we had allowed for Norbert to lighten our heavy packs and leaving it as a gift for the missing Norbert we continued back down the trail and on to the Platanal/Matura watershed and continued NE along a very vague trail that was supposed to skirt around an E-W spur. The trail soon disappeared and we were on our own cutting through forest. On the nose of the spur we were tempted by the clearer forest to descend N to another tributary to the Matura, crossed it and began ascending a spur heading NW. Notable about that slope were the number of manicou crabs seen scrambling around: must have been a good source of food nearby. The route became steeper and even came to a cliff on the spur where we used ropes to get up. Being the 'lead' it fell to me to climb up first and just for good measure I encountered a wasp nest on the way and had to remain perfectly still to

(Continued on page 23)

TTFNC Monthly Lecture Summary February 13, 2014

JUMPING GUABINES IN NORTHERN RANGE RIVERS: SHY STAY-AT-HOMES AND BOLD EXPLORERS

by Douglas Fraser

Understanding animal movement patterns has long attracted the interest of students of ecology, evolution, animal behaviour, and most recently, conservation biologists.

Evolutionary biologists are interested in movement because gene flow affects the speciation process, while ecologists and conservation biologists focus attention on issues involving isolated populations, movement between patches, and the repopulation of areas from which a species has been extirpated. Animal behaviourists are especially concerned with understanding who moves and why.

One movement pattern that seems to be well-established for populations of many species, both vertebrates and invertebrates, typically consists of two fractions, movers and stay-at-homes.

The number making long-distant moves is always far fewer than those that stay within an established home range. This is the pattern that we found in a study of the movement behavior of Trinidad's jumping guabine, *Rivulus hartii,* in the upper reaches of the Guanapo River.

Jumping guabine, *Rivulus hartii*

Photo: UWI

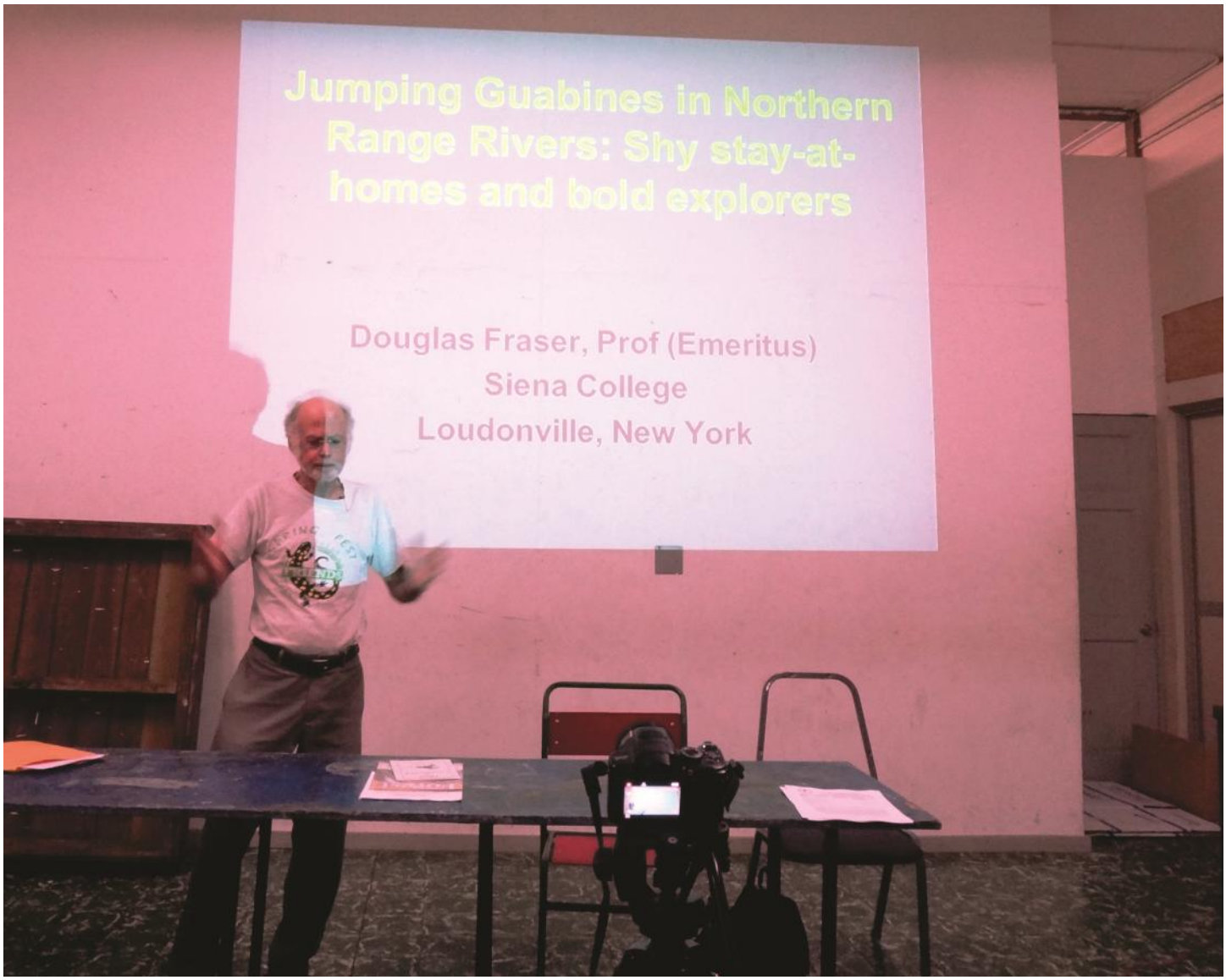
The jumping guabine is a small fish, maximum size about 100 mm in total length, that frequently co-occurs with the ubiquitous guppy, and which can be found in almost every conceivable body of freshwater. Unlike the guppy, which forms shoals under the threat of predation, the jumping guabine is usually a loner and always shifts to the safety of rocky riffles and edge pools when the large, predatory pike cichlids and guabines are present. Because of this, we thought that the predatory fish might be natural blockers of up and downstream movement of the jumping guabine, effectively isolating tributary populations from one another, and eventually leading to genetic differentiation.

We tested this idea by uniquely marking over 5000 fish in the Guanapo River over the course of several years. Each fish received a triplet code consisting of three small dots of a dye injected under the skin by a fine hypodermic needle and then released at the same spot from which it was captured. We selected 7 standard locations on the body of the fish. We chose the three colours from five colours, red, orange, green, yellow and blue, which allowed us to generate thousands of unique codes. We recaptured over a thousand individuals of which about ten percent were long distant movers. These fish had moved well beyond their home pool, or patch of cobble, and many moved through locations, such as deep pools with steep walls (canyon pools) that also contained the dangerous predatory fish and which we thought would block movement.

We did follow up studies to test the hypothesis that the movers had "personalities" that caused them to be "bold for exploration", somewhat analogous to human behavior where a few individuals explore remote places in the world or climb the highest mountains, while most others stay closer to home. We assayed 50 jumping guabine for their "boldness" in laboratory trials where they received a score for their willingness to explore a large test tank. We then released these fish back into the river

and recaptured as many as possible after 24 hours. We found that movers in the river were also the ones that had received the highest test scores in the lab tests, suggesting that a personality trait, boldness for exploration, may be one of the factors that determine movement behaviour in this and perhaps many other species of fish.

Prof. Douglas Fraser - TTFNC 13 February 2014 - *Photo:Amy Deacon*



NORTHERN RANGE CROSSING 2001

(Continued from page 21)

allow them to settle and not fall off the cliff! At the top of the cliff the bush was very thick and presented another delay to clear a space. Above this point the forest became more clear and pleasant and the slope more gentle.

There was still cell phone contact at this point and Mike managed to call home to report our whereabouts. He then finally told us that the reason Vanessa had not come was that she had discovered she was pregnant. He was duly congratulated by John and myself. About here the daylight started fading so we slung our hammocks on the slope, ate a meal and bedded down for the night.

(to be continued)

ENCOUNTERS WITH BOTHROPS.

by Hans Boos

Part 1 of 3

The snake genus *Bothrops*, a pit viper, is one of the most widespread snakes, found in Central and South America and it is also found on Trinidad (not Tobago). There are two distinct species found on two other Caribbean Islands, *Bothrops caribbaeus* on the island of St Lucia and *B. lanceolatus* on the French island of Martinique.

There seems to be some controversy as to the species found on Trinidad, but until DNA work proves otherwise, I have chosen to use both in my book, "The Snakes of Trinidad and Tobago" (Boos 2001) and in this article, the long standing and familiar name, *Bothrops atrox*. There are many species of *Bothrops* throughout its range and I have had the fortune and experience to interact with several species and individuals of these special snakes.

The tales recounted below will chronicle my experiences over the years 1960 to 2006, and to the best of my memory will include all the exciting and memorable encounters I have had.

I had never seen a living *Bothrops atrox* before I moved to Port of Spain to take a job with ESSO Standard Oil in 1960. I had seen pictures in the few books I was able to buy or which had been given to me, but the photos taken by the great Raymond Ditmars, shown to me by his friend and my mentor Ludolph Wehekind of the Royal Victoria Institute, showed a dazzlingly beautiful, but deadly-appearing snake.

And the tales and accounts of its habits and of its bite were equally fascinating. It seemed to be a thoroughly irascible and irritable snake, quick to strike and quite deadly, probably accounting for most of the snake bite occurrences and some deaths in Trinidad and throughout South and Central America.

As I settled into my life in Port of Spain, for I grew up and was schooled in San Fernando, I gravitated to the Field Naturalists' Club and to new friends who shared my interests in hiking through the bush and mountains and in the photography of our native flora and fauna.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

On one of these early hikes, with Sandy Gibson and I believe Chris Bain, we climbed to the top of the Blue Basin waterfall, where there are two or three deep coffin-like pools where the water is icy cold and deep.

We had to negotiate several groves of the spiny *Bactris* palms that lined the steep paths, and we had to go single file, the lead man warning of any dangers that were to be avoided as we made our way up this steep and sometimes dangerous climb.

As Sandy, I believe it was him, crested the rim of the first pool he gave a shout of alarm, and just said one word, "Snake!" He was standing stock still as I came up to him, and he just breathed a sigh of relief and said, "It dead."

There on the rock, its head crushed and its body mangled with several chops, was a small, not more than perhaps eighteen inches, *Bothrops atrox*, my first mapepire balsain in the flesh, but indeed very much dead.

The colours were still vivid and the characteristic dirty yellow tail-tip could be clearly seen. It had not been dead long as there was no decomposition, and the jungle army ants had not yet found such a prize.

It had obviously fallen prey to another hiker who had dispatched it swiftly rather that allow it to live and perhaps bite him or someone else some time in the future. This was an attitude I was to run across as I gained experience and knowledge of our native snakes, unfortunately not isolated to the venomous ones, but to all snakes.

I was soon also a member of the council of the Zoological Society of Trinidad and Tobago Inc., and through this contact was able to see and handle several of the snakes in their meagre collection. I too had begun to collect and keep snakes in captivity, and to learn about their natural history and other aspects of their lives, encouraged by Ludolph Wehekind and Arthur Greenhall. John Dunston from

Arima, and Tommy Aitken of the Virus lab, contributed specimens and Jake Price and Professor Garth Underwood of the University of the West Indies offered me space and further encouragement to try to keep every species found on the island and to photograph them with the vague idea of perhaps writing a book that would supersede the one written in serial form in the Trinidad Gazette newspaper in 1926 by R.R. Mole.

On the Society council was Willie Dixon, instrumental in the setting up and building of the young Emperor Valley Zoo, and I asked him if ever he found snakes on the estate that he managed, and where he lived up near Blue Basin, that he should either have his workers collect the non venomous ones or I would come and collect the venomous ones.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS.

One day not long after, I received a frantic call from someone on the estate, that there was a large mapepire under a bush near the main house.

After work I drove up to the estate as fast as I could, having requested the caller to ask the discoverer to keep an eye on the snake in case it moved away, for I was beginning to have the experience of arriving at the scene of a sighting only to be told that the snake was right there an hour, a day, or a week ago, and the animal was long gone. Arriving in the yard in front of the house I was directed to where they said a man was standing guard, watching the snake.

I have recounted this story in my book (which I eventually wrote about thirty years later), but it bears repeating here if only to illustrate how unique this snake is. In fact many other snakes share this ability to literally blend invisibly into their background.

Mr. Dixon's worker was standing outside the perimeter of a dome-shaped allamanda bush. These decorative bushes tend to overshadow and inhibit any other weeds or grass from growing in the complete shade beneath them. This one was no exception and peer as I might into this shadowed area, all I could see was a carpet of dried leaves and occasional mottling of sunlight filtering through the closed canopy.

Turning to the man I enquired where the snake was for I could discern nothing. I also asked him how big it was. All he assured me was that it was there and that it was quite big. But I still could not see anything, much less a big snake, lying on what looked like leaf-covered, sun-dappled earth.

Thinking that I was perhaps blind, he once more told me it was there, pointing with a tentative finger just outside the edge of the leafy dome. Still no luck. There was no snake there I decided, and I told him so.

He made a disgusted face and taking a slim bamboo pole that he was carrying, he threaded it through the leaves and touched what looked to me like more dry leaves, and suddenly the spot came to life, the snake, which had been there invisibly all along, moved just a little, and immediately it swam into focus and I saw it.

I had been given a pair if Pillstrom tongs by George Gorman who was studying for his first degree at the University of the West Indies. This implement is a cross between a long pliers and a tweezer, and allows for a safe extension of one's hand to capture dangerous snakes or to bring them out of their hiding places in trees and holes.

Threading the closed jaw of the tongs under the leaves and branches of the allamanda bush, I grabbed a coil of the snake and slowly pulled it into the open where I could have a better look at it and assess how I was going to capture it and get it into the cloth bag that every snake- catching man has to carry or have within reach at all times.

The man of course had backed off some distance and changed his grip on the pole to one used if the pole was going to be plied as a club, but I assured him I knew what I was doing (I really did not, as this was my first wild capture), and with bravado I did not feel inside, I pinned the triangular head of the snake with the shank of the tongs, and for the first time, grabbing the narrow space behind the flared jaws, I felt the roughness of the keeled scales that are one of the distinctions in identifying this species. The mapepire began to thrash around and I maintained my grip despite the wide gaping of the mouth and the erection of the curved fangs that were protruding from the front of the upper jaw. I would learn how dangerous this ability was in a later encounter. Opening the mouth of the cloth bag I

threaded the squirming tail into its depth and dropped the rest of the snake after it. I could smell the distinctive odour of the defensive musk that some snakes exude from their cloacas, their only defense when all others fail.

The man was looking at me as if I had two heads, as I thanked him and asked him to pass these thanks along to Mr. Dixon. I walked to my car trying not to show the trembling I felt as the adrenalin rush I had experienced while capturing the snake, subsided. My first capture in the wild of this highly venomous snake did little to prepare me, however, for the next time I was confronted with an entirely different situation. But that was many years later.

(to be continued)

Mapepire balsain or fer-de-lance, *Bothrops atrox*

Taken at Asa Wright Nature Centre

Many now believe the species found in Trinidad to be *B. asper,* but as the ranges of these two species overlap there is still some controversy over whether one, the other, or both are present . Hans Boos' position is that "until DNA work proves otherwise, I have chosen to use both in my book, "The Snakes of Trinidad and Tobago" (Boos 2001) and in this article, the long standing and familiar name, *Bothrops atrox*."

Photo: Mike Rutherford

Dear Fellow Members, on 10th July, 2016 TTFNC will be Celebrating its 125th Birthday.

We therefore invite all to help create a Special Birthday Experience with a lead up week of activities to commemorate this auspicious occasion.

We need volunteers to help plan and coordinate these upcoming activities.

Let's make our 125th Birthday one that will be remembered for the next 125 years.

send e-mail to **admin@ttfnc.org**

If you would like to help plan the event

THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

2015 Annual Calendar

The deadline for submission of natural history photos for our 2015 TTFNC Calendar is June 30, 2014.

We look forward to your submissions.

Both species and habitat shots are welcome.

Action shots will be especially well-received.

Help us to make the 2015 TTFNC Calendar the best yet!

e-mail submissions to **admin@ttfnc.org**

Let's all help make our 2015 Calendar a success.

TTFNC QUARTERLY BULLETINS ONLINE LINK :
http://ttfnc.org/photojournals/index.html

Management Notices

New members; Volunteers; Publications

New Members

The Club warmly welcomes the following new members:

Junior members:

Ordinary members: **Ann-Marina White, Avinash Gajadhar, Damien Ibrahim, Damien Samaroo, Makini Emmanuel, Renoir Auguste, Zora Ali**

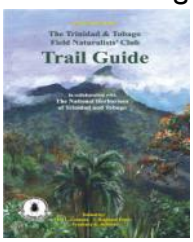
New life members:

Family members : **Russell and Cheryl Heera**

Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club
P.O. Box 642, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

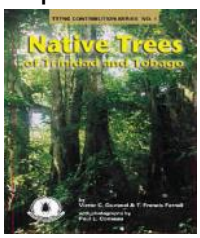
PUBLICATIONS

The following Club publications are available to members and non-members:



The TTFNC Trail Guide

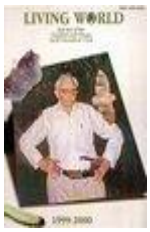
Members : TT$160.00

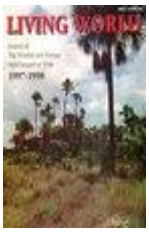


The Native Trees of T&T

2nd Edition
Members :
TT$80.00

Living World Journal 1892-1896 CD
Members :
TT$95.00





Living World Journal 2008
Living World Journal back issues
Members price : free

Living World 2012 supplement

Due to limited supply Living World 2012 supplements are $20.00 each.

MISCELLANEOUS

The Greenhall Trust

Started in 2005, in memory of Elizabeth and Arthur Greenhall, dedicated artist and zoologist respectively, the Trust offers financial assistance to aspiring artists and biologists (in the areas of flora and fauna) in Trinidad and Tobago. Full details are available on their website: http://www.greenhallstrust-wi.org/link.htm

Your 2014 Annual Membership Fees are Due:

Please view bottom right of the mailing label to check if your subscription has been paid.

Submission of articles and field trip reports:

1. **All articles must reach the editor by the eighth week of each quarter. Submission deadline for the 2nd Quarter 2014 issue is May 31, 2014.**
2. **Electronic copies can be submitted to the 'Editor' at: admin@ttfnc.org or directly to the editor or any member of Management. Please include the code QB2014-2 in the email subject label.**