



THE FIELD NATURALIST

Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

April – June 2016

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Field Trip Report, February 28, 2016 L'EAU MICHELE AND DIGITY MUD VOLCANOES

by Matt Kelly



Mud volcanoes have always been on my bucket list. A mud volcano is not a volcano in the traditional sense, spewing lava. Mud volcanoes will ooze mainly mud, sea water and methane gas. Trinidad has about 15+ prominent mud volcanoes, and a lot of smaller vents. They are all in South Trinidad. These volcanoes are sometimes known locally as

“bouffes” (French for swelling), “mornes” or “yards.” For the most part, they are fairly harmless and inactive. But they all have the potential to occasionally blow.

On February 12, 1997, the Piparo mud volcano blew up, shooting mud and debris some 60 metres

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The main pool at L'Eau Michele by Jeffrey Wong Sang

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Editors' note :

Many thanks to all who contributed and assisted with articles and photographs.

Disclaimer :

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FIELD TRIP REPORT - L'EAU MICHELE 2016

(Continued from page 1)

in the air, and causing the evacuation of some 300 residents. On May 10, 2001, a mud volcano erupted in Trinidad's Chatham Bay. And in the Columbus Channel, a mud volcano island rose up to 3 metres, then sank again, four times since 1911. According to geologist A. Aslan:

"Mud volcanoes along the northwest margin of the Orinoco Delta are part of a regional belt of soft sediment deformation and diapirism that formed in response to rapid foredeep sedimentation and subsequent tectonic compression along the Caribbean-South American plate boundary." [This boundary runs through South Trinidad.] "... Preliminary analysis suggests that the mud volcano sediment is derived from underlying Miocene and Pliocene strata. Hydrocarbon seeps are associated with several of the active mud volcanoes."

My trip started with Selwyn Gomes, and we were off by 6:00 a.m. Our first stop was the Twin Towers at 6:15. We picked up some people, and moved on to Grand Bazaar for 6:30. There was a good crowd waiting. We now had a convoy, which moved on down the Uriah Butler Highway to meet with our southern contingency. Kris Sookdeo reported a good crowd with him in San Fernando. We stopped our convoy on a bridge at the Debe exit to wait for some more folks to catch up. While we waited, Kamal Mahabir, Jerome Foster and I did a little birding from the side of the highway. We saw 10 species in 10 minutes.

After a bit of confusion around Debe, our 24-car convoy got underway along the Penal Rock Road. We turned off onto Bunsee Trace. The road started as paved, but after about 2.5 km, turned to dirt. We passed a track on the right, a large sign, approximately 1 metre by 1.5 metres lying on its side near the opened gate. The sign was not old, and had a bright orange-yellow background with large black letters reading; "RADIOACTIVE AREA" with the nuclear symbol underneath, followed underneath by, "KEEP CLEAR". I wonder what that was all about? [I later contacted the local EMA (Environmental Management Authority) Office in San Fernando to ask about this sign. They had "no idea." They

Birds seen while waiting at the Debe exit of the Uriah-Butler Highway (10 minutes)

2	Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon)	<i>Columba livia</i>
15	Ruddy Ground-Dove	<i>Columbina talpacoti</i>
7	Smooth-billed Ani	<i>Crotophaga ani</i>
1	Pied Water-Tyrant	<i>Fluvicola pica</i>
1	Great Kiskadee	<i>Pitangus sulphuratus</i>
3	Tropical Kingbird	<i>Tyrannus melancholicus</i>
2	House Wren (nesting in side of bridge)	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>
1	Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>
2	Carib Grackle	<i>Quiscalus lugubris</i>
1	Yellow-hooded Blackbird	<i>Agelaius icterocephalus</i>

would look into it and get back to me. I am still waiting...] Once the road turned to dirt, we travelled another 1.5 km. to an open area.

We drove into a large government teak farm, and drove some ways through teak. It was very hot and dry, and most of the teak leaves had fallen off, or were in the process of falling. The road came out into an open area, where we parked along the road. It was a short 5 minute walk to L'eau Michele mud volcano.

L'eau Michele, pronounced, "La Moshell" mud volcano was situated in the middle of an open area, geologically called a tassik, approximately 40 X 60 metres, clear of any vegetation. The active area of the mud volcano was circular and flat, with no cone, and had a grey liquid mud centre, about 10 metres across. There were trails where the volcano had overflowed a lot of mud in the past, all down gradient to the South, Southeast, and East. On three sides of this pool, evidence of a lot of overflowing mud channels was quite evident. One corner, on the southerly side, was constantly belching up bubbles, up to a metre or more across. A bubble (or group of them) would belch up about once every 5 seconds or so. We stood ringed around the mud pool, on dry mud, on the edges of the liquid mud. We all made a circle around the edge of the liquid

mud. I counted 55 people in our group (see front cover photo).

Dan Jaggernaut, our Group Leader, welcomed everyone, and cautioned people not to fall in! He introduced Reg Potter, who described mud volcanoes. He said that underground pressure can cause an “anticline” to develop (which is a folding up of the earth’s strata or crust). In this anticline, a “diapir” (dome) can develop underground, and the most viscous of materials (like mud, sea water, and methane gas) can be forced into the diapir. In the case of these “volcanoes” it is liquid mud. Underground pressure will then force the mud out, sometimes with great force, and sometimes with methane gas. Mud volcanoes have traditionally been a sign of oil. Early oil exploration in Trinidad centred around mud volcanoes.

Declan Hive, a geography teacher, also said a few words about the mud and mud volcanoes. He said that Japanese researchers had studied the mud and found it very beneficial for the skin. Since the price of oil is down on the world markets, maybe T&T could make a profit exporting the mud! The “birders” and I skulked around the area a little bit. I did the owl call and brought in a few birds. Mostly, the woods were very dry, and very quiet. Everywhere down gradient of the volcano were mud trails and evidence of previous overflowing of mud. There were at least two other small vents down gradient spewing mud.

Dan showed us many local plants, including wild coffee, parrot apple (*Clusia rosea*), calabash, and toothbrush vine. Kris Sookdeo pointed out 3 different species of ground-dwelling bromeliads.

After checking out this area for a while, the group then took a walk back past the cars, and along the road through more teak forest to L’eau Michele Beach. It was about a 20 to 30 minute walk on the road, then on a trail. The heat was punishing, especially through the mostly leafless teak. We walked mainly downhill to the sea. Some of the trees and plants we passed in this area were teak, sandbox tree, manicou fig, naked indian tree, roseau palm vine, jiggerwood, and seaside mango.

We passed a small tree with a cluster of ants on one branch. We wondered what kind of ants they were and why they were all clustered on one



Southern beardless tyrannulet by Jerome Foster

branch. I later asked Chris Starr (who was not on this trip) to identify these ants. He said, they were “*Cephalotes atratus*, the turtle ant. Quite common in trees ... they might have been collecting honeydew from aphids or treehoppers.”

Many complaints were heard about the amount of trash strewn along the trail. There were some locals hanging around on this road. Upon reaching the beach, our first walkers met a local guy carrying a homemade shotgun, and asking if we had seen any police up the road. We also saw a local guy ride down the steep trail, through the bush on a motorcycle, and zoom up and down the beach a few times. It is purported that a motorcycle is invaluable for quick transport of drugs and illegal cargo brought in by boat to a beach.

L’eau Michele Beach was very quaint and refreshing. There were no breaking waves. The sea water



Turtle ants *Cephalotes atratus* by Matt Kelly

was very calm and clear. Some people, like Stuart Millar, waded into the sea. It was very hot, and bird activity was low. I recorded just a few birds. I could see evidence of mud flows coming down from the volcano area above, and into the sea. It looks like mud has not flowed to the sea here for a long time. We stayed around the beach for 30 to 45 minutes. We made our way back up through the hot and dry forest. Many of our group left us at this point.

There was a large shade tree near our parking area. I walked over where several folks were liming. I found the tree was heavily colonized by a most interesting social insect species, which made a nest structure that I had never seen. I thought it was some kind of termite. I have seen many arboreal ant nests made of carton, but never one with such large leafy-looking structures on the outside. Professor Starr later identified these as ants of the genus *Azteca* spp. I have seen *Azteca* nests before but not this one.

Professor Starr remarked;

"That is an especially nice photo of an Azteca nest. It is made of carton (i.e. a dried paste made from chewed-up wood or other plant matter), and you're quite right that it looks like termites might have made it. Although several species of this genus are recorded from Trinidad its taxonomy is not well worked out, so we cannot be sure which you have here. The species

that you shot is found throughout Trinidad, where it typically has several distinct nest structures of varying sizes in a tree. The great big one in your picture probably contains the queen, but it would take a very dedicated myrmecologist to confirm this. Like all members of the subfamily Dolichoderinae, Azteca have secondarily lost the stinger. However, anyone interfering with the colony is likely to be covered quite quickly by many hundreds of angry little workers, all biting vigorously. The bite does not penetrate human skin, in my experience, and a single bite doesn't really hurt, but 150 little creatures crawling around inside one's clothing, all biting away, are enough to put anyone to flight."

It was blisteringly hot when we drove back down Bunsee Trace and rallied at "D Volcano Bar" for some "beastly cold" (mostly soft) drinks. Then, our smaller convoy made its way about 15 km to Barrackpore to visit the Digits Mud Volcano. This is a very easy access to this volcano, as there is a small park and parking lot built alongside the volcano. This volcano is much different. This one has a large cone about 7 meters high. It was very dry. There is an area of dried mud around it where it has overflowed in the past. Digits has a particular mud composition that scientists find similar to the soil on planet Mars. Digits's mud has been used in scientific experiments to determine how this mud can support life, and hence whether life could exist on Mars. These scientist report that some "Trinidad



Views of L'Eau Michele beach by Jeffrey Wong Sang



Selwyn Gomes and Edmund Charles climbing the Digits mud volcano *by Matt Kelly*

mud volcanoes can serve as analogs for the Martian environment due to similar geological features found extensively on Mars.” There was at least one more vent from this volcano in the vicinity.

At the end of the parking area was a trail which was formerly a rail line. There were remnants of a concrete bridge crossing the deep gully over the South Oropuche River, that was crossable if you had the pluck, as the remnants of this “bridge” were 2 cement pillars, about 46 cm wide, lying side-by-side, with about an 8 – 10 metre precarious drop down into the river gully. To our shock, the colour of the river water was a bright blood-red. Some kind of chemical had been dumped upstream. This can only have negative consequences to the envi-

ronment.

Along the old rail line, all the track and rail ties, or sleepers, had been removed long ago. Kris and I each found an old metal rail spike. Souvenirs from days gone by. We departed for home at about 2:00 p.m.





Bird Group Report, May 15 2016
Aripo Savannah and Cumuto
by Feroze Omardeen



We drove out in continuous rain to the Aripo Savannahs, raising our hopes that the brutal 2015-2016 El Nino was coming to an end. It was pleasant birding in the intermittent drizzle, keeping us cool after some of the hottest months in memory that surely must have taken their toll on the birds as well as us humans.

This was the old railway line between Sangre Grande and Port of Spain that Kamal said his grandfather used as a young man. Still straight as an arrow but no trace of the rails left. We tried to imagine what birds the pre-Columbian Trinidadians would have been hearing on their journeys through the savannah. The blue-and-gold macaw? the horned screamer? Well thank goodness there were still red-bellied macaws here. And plenty of them, this morn-

ing, overflying us too quickly for the photographers' comfort. These mini-macaws (*Orthopsittaca manilatus*) not only depend on the moriche palms as their primary source of food, but they also breed in the cavities in the trunks of the old palms in February. Even more numerous and more noisy, was another psittacid, the ubiquitous orange-winged amazon parrot, one of the most successful Trinidadian avian species. These probably also nest in the old palm cavities, and the macaws may use the old abandoned nests of the *Amazona* species.

However we were more interested in the specialists than the generalists. The commonest swift was the neotropical palm swift, who nest in the old down-hanging old leaves of the palms. Their buzzy insect-like calls dominated the soundscape. In South



A damp start along the old railway line in the Aripo Savannahs by Jerome Foster



Birders Brian D'Abreu, Devan Mulchansingh, Jerome Foster and Rashid Ali in Cumuto, Rufous-tailed jacamar (right) and white-lined tanager (bottom left) by Jerome Foster

America this swift (*Tachornis squamata*) seems closely linked to the moriche forests, and the species seems to have co-evolved with the palm. However urbanisation has allowed the species to move out of palm savannahs and into "human savannahs" with planted palms. They are now common in areas of Port of Spain, and the east-west corridor.

The sulphury flycatcher (*Tyrannopsis sulphurea*) was also evident and vocal; we had learnt the call from the recent Granville trip. At least seven of these were found. This is another moriche bird considered rare but local in Trinidad. Well, we did our best, but failed, to find a moriche oriole, an icterid that has adapted to the morichal environment.

So we got some insight into at least the avian side of the morichal habitat, the vast stands of this beau-

tiful palm that have dominated large tracts of South America probably since the Miocene. We did see and hear other birds, but light wasn't great for photography or appreciation of the beauty of the tanagers and honeycreepers. There was the always-supercute bran-colored flycatcher, the persistently calling wrens, gnat wrens and peppershrikes, and lots of golden-fronted greenlets and bananaquits. Plenty of cool trees too, the road is lined by puni, olliviere, pois doux, kiskedee, cajuca and a variety of melanostomes. And, as always, there were a couple mystery birds whose true identity we may never know!



Field Trip Report, April 24 2016

CAURITA CARVINGS: A JOURNEY TO OUR PASTby *Chrisalene Dedier*

This trip takes you through nature and the history of our past ancestors. The first people have been present in Trinidad for quite some time. The petroglyphs on the Caurita Rock are evidence of this.

This rock is approximately six feet by eight feet with ancient petroglyphs on its face of stick-like human figures which is believed to have been created between c1000 and 1500. Petroglyphs are a form of rock art which is usually created by incising, picking, carving or abrading the rock surface and is often associated with prehistoric peoples.

We parked the vehicles on the hill in the scorching sun. The journey began at the entrance of the El Tucuche Old Road,

On the trail there were a few squatters and farmed lands. The vast number of cocorite palms with fruits was a clear sign of the growth of secondary forest as result of past bush fires.

We saw pumbulan (looks like a passion fruit but with softer skin) and sweet, regular pois doux trees with fruits. We even saw for the first time a rectangular shaped pois doux.

In addition, we sighted manicou fig (Chinese fig) ping wing, from the Bromeliaecae family, which in



The Caurita petroglyph by *Chrisalene Dedier*

harsh dry season provides food for wildlife. It is also used to make juice and wine.

We followed the trail until we met a junction where we turned left by a bamboo patch. We passed through a tonka bean field laden with fruits; there was evidence of agouti eating the fruits.

On arrival at the cocoa plantation we found it to be well cultivated. At a left turn on the trail uphill, deer meat (*Centropogon sp.*) was observed off the trail and adiantum fern on the ground. We also saw yam seeds on vine, Easter lily, black stick with red flowers, donkey eye, stinging nettle and wild cane.

Nests of the crested oropendola were also observed hanging from trees on the trail. Birds seen included white-bearded manakin, bananaquit, white-tipped dove, channel-billed toucan and pygmy owl.

The *Anochetus emarginatus* which is a slim version of tactac (*Odontomachus*) was observed nesting on the cocoa trees and other plants above ground. Its sting is quite sharp, but not as severe as tactac. In addition, the *Heliconia hirsute* which has young inflorescences embrace the presence of ants. According to Shane Ballah, the bracts have nectaries which attract ants that presumably protect the plant against herbivores.

We crossed a man-made bridge of neatly stacked stones and a few semi-dried streams. The latter part of the trail involved a precipitous climb to the rock carvings which is perched on the ridge.

On arrival at the rock, we observed the stick like human carvings. There were some vines over the rocks, cocorite palms and a bamboo patch hovered down. We took photos, had a bite and a little rest. On our way back down, we indulged our taste buds in the strange rectangular pois doux, tonka bean and some manicou fig. The return trip took around 4 hours.



Many thanks to Dan Jaggernauth, Christopher Starr and Edmund Charles for their contributions to this report.



Art Group Report, May 7 2016

Art in Paradise: San Antonio Gardens

by Amy Deacon




Just four art group members ventured out on a damp Saturday morning in May to explore the gardens of Peter and Chancy Moll.

Situated just behind the San Antonio Farms Garden Centre in Santa Cruz, and adjacent to the riding stables, it has been cleverly landscaped to feel as though you can get completely lost along the numerous trails, paths and clearings, even in a relatively small area.

Having explored the nooks and crannies of the garden, I obsessed, using pen and watercolour, over some unusual hanging *Heliconia* plants. Roma and Jeffrey Wong Sang wandered around taking photographs of the picturesque scenes that greeted us around every corner, while Shereen Ali, having ex-

plored the garden, chose to sketch the horses at the stables next door.

The garden itself comprises an extremely well-tended-to collection of native and non-native plants, scattered with sculptures and ornaments; it is based under the canopies of several large samaan trees. Someone had clearly taken a great deal of time to select species and varieties with contrasting colours and textures which fill the garden with surprises. Yet, despite the manicured nature of the flowerbeds, the trees, birdsong and dense, lush vegetation create a lovely wild feel. 

We are extremely grateful to the Molls for allowing us to visit their garden. If you are interested in joining on future art trips, please email amy.deacon@sta.uwi.edu



Clockwise from top left: Horses in the adjacent stables; looking into a bromeliad, Buddha in a pond, and Amy sketching *Heliconia* by Jeffrey Wong Sang



Herpetology Group Report, June 4 2016

Herps and Honeybees

by Mike G. Rutherford



The June outing of the Herpetology Group proved to be an exciting time, but not for the right reasons! Twenty people gathered at 4pm at the entrance to the Tamana InTech Park at the eastern end of the Churchill Roosevelt Highway. We had been granted permission by eTeck to access the park and visit the site of the old Waller Field airport which supports an interesting mix of savannah remnants, ditches and ponds, as well as mixed secondary forest. The group consisted of several club members, visiting herpetologists John Murphy and Alvin Brasswell and the members of the University of Glasgow 2016 Trinidad Expedition. At the gate we had to provide details of all the driv-

ers to the guards on duty which proved to be quite an interesting undertaking as it resulted in showing drivers licences from Slovakia, Germany, Britain, USA and Trinidad, showing the wide diversity of the Herp Group.

We stopped first at the Moriche Palm Walk just south of the old runway for a briefing by John and myself about what we hoped to find. We were of course interested in any and all reptiles and amphibians but John asked the group to keep a special look out for whiptail lizards as they are quite uncommon. Just next to where we had gathered there was a large pink-toed tarantula (*Avicularia avicularia*) on the side of a palm tree, so several people got a nice



The group is briefed by John Murphy before setting out by Mike Rutherford

close up look and lots of photos. We then drove further down the road until we were blocked by a moriche palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*) that had fallen across the road. With several people pulling at once we managed to drag the palm out of the way; we noticed that it had been brought down by a strangling *Clusia rosea*. We turned east at the end of the road to find a spot to start a walk and when the road ran out we parked up and ventured into the bush.

There wasn't much of herpetological interest along the trail. It was a mix of secondary forest and remnants of savannah, but we did encounter some very hairy caterpillars swarming together on a tree. As the path disappeared into the bush we decided to return to the cars and head in another direction. Everyone had just got back when a few people decided to investigate an interesting looking tree just off the road. Unfortunately the tree was also of interest to a swarm of bees! At first there were just a couple of exclamations from people as they got stung, and everyone slowly moved back to the road unsure of what was happening. Soon, though, it was obvious that the bees were coming out in force and then all hell broke loose. Some people, including myself, managed to get into their vehicles and close the doors and windows but as most of the cars were standing with their doors open they were already filling up with bees.

At this point the majority of the group dropped bags, bottles, machetes and cameras and ran off down the road as fast as they could go. One person jumped into a pond as their hair was full of bees whilst others were taking off shirts as the bees had gotten under their clothing. After about 15 minutes the bees calmed down and most returned to their nest, however the cars still contained many individuals and they could have become aggressive again very quickly if disturbed. At this point I decided to try and move the abandoned cars so I put on a rain coat with a hood, and a thick pair of gloves, and walked down to the rest of the group to get car keys. One by one the cars were moved to a bee free area further down the road and people got their gear back in order.

From photos and some dead specimens the bees were identified as honey bees (*Apis mellifera*). Al-

most everyone got stung at least once but one poor student from Glasgow had around 30 stings. Fortunately no one was allergic to the stings, but they were gently removed and antihistamine pills were given to anyone who needed them. (For the best protocol for bee attacks see the end of this article).

The group gathered together again and as darkness fell we took the time to have a bit to eat and a drink before planning the next step. It was decided that we would walk around the perimeter of the forested area as this edge habitat provided a good mix of ditches, ponds and low vegetation which should provide many suitable microhabitats for frogs and reptiles. John and Alvin elected to carry on driving around the roads in the park looking for snakes.

Eighteen people headed off on foot and soon we were hearing many frogs calling from puddles and ditches and wherever else there was water. The majority were common whistling frogs (*Leptodactylus fuscus*) calling from low down in the grass, whilst in the vegetation above the ponds there were many yellow treefrogs (*Dendropsophus microcephalus*) calling. Toads (*Rhinella* spp.) were also plentiful. One whistling frog that was photographed looked like it had an extra leg, unfortunately it evaded attempts at capture. This phenomenon is well known in many parts of the world and one possible cause is tadpoles becoming infected with trematode worm parasites.

A swamp eel or zangee (*Synbranchus marmoratus*) slipping through a shallow puddle provided a false alarm as a suspected snake. Amy Deacon had a small dip net and found some other fish including a blue coscorob (*Andinoacara pulcher*) as well as several crabs (*Poppiana dentata*).

Very few reptiles were encountered: a juvenile green iguana (*Iguana iguana*) found sleeping on a low bush near the start of the old runway, and whilst trying to get a close up photo of another yellow treefrog I turned to find a vine snake (*Oxybelis aeneus*) coiled round a thin branch just a few centimetres away.

A very unpleasant smell alerted us to the body of a black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) writhing with maggots who were doing a great job of stripping the body down to bone and feather. It was not a specimen I wanted to collect for the Zoology Museum!




Clockwise from top left; The group walking along the tracks with torches checking puddles for frogs and snakes; vine snake (*Oxybelis aeneus*); Beebe's toad (*Rhinella beebei*) and a sleeping iguana by Mike Rutherford

We finished the 3km circuit around 9pm and met up with John and Alvin again; they had not had much success either apart from a sighting of a single whip-tail lizard (*Kentropyx striata*).

One more drama occurred at the end of the night when one of the Glasgow team accidentally locked their keys inside their rental car. Despite efforts to open it up we had to leave the car behind for the night and squeeze the extra people into other vehicles. Fortunately they retrieved the car with no problem the next day with a spare set of keys from the rental company.

A list of species seen was sent to eTeck and they

kindly invited us to visit again anytime for further surveying. Thanks to Kelly Vine and the security staff from eTeck for allowing us entry.

See overleaf for the species list, as well as some expert tips, should you ever encounter a bee's nest... 

Herpetological Species List

Scientific Name	Common Name
<i>Rhinella beebei</i>	Beebe's Toad
<i>Rhinella marina</i>	Marine Toad
<i>Leptodactylus fuscus</i>	Whistling Frog
<i>Leptodactylus validus</i>	Ditch Frog
<i>Dendropsophus microcephalus</i>	Yellow Treefrog
<i>Scinax ruber</i>	Bathroom Frog
<i>Scarthyla vigilans</i>	Pale Grey-Green Treefrog
<i>Hypsiboas punctatus</i>	Polka-dot Treefrog
<i>Engystomo pspustulosus</i>	Tungara Frog
<i>Iguana iguana</i>	Green Iguana
<i>Kentropyx striatus</i>	Whiptail Lizard
<i>Oxybelis aeneus</i>	Horsewhip snake



A whistling frog (*Leptodactylus fuscus*) with an extra leg by Mike Rutherford

Protocol for how to behave during a bee attack

Adapted from an article by Justin O. Schmidt in *The Field Naturalist*, 4/1993

1. In a situation where you may expect to encounter colonies of stinging insects, wear light-coloured clothes and cover long hair with a hat.
2. If an insect is buzzing about your head, do not swat frantically at it. Stay calm and observe whether it is in fact a bee or wasp
3. If an insect attacks, momentarily hold your breath (which stinging insects can use to orient themselves towards you) and try to determine where it is coming from. Then walk in the opposite direction
4. If attacked by many insects at once, hold your breath initially, cover your face and run away from the nest (without flapping your arms around) to the shelter of a vehicle, building, etc. If no such shelter is near, keep running, preferably in the direction of people, whose help you may need.



Bird Group Report, June 12, 2016

ARENA FOREST

by Feroze Omardeen



"The Arena Forest is not primary forest, it was carefully planned and planted in layers and stages in the last century according to a specific protocol."

Jalaludin began the day giving us the surprising history of the forest.

"You will see these well kept trails, called *rides*, that network through the forest. That is because they were built originally for horses."

It was a bleak, overcast day that left us little light for birding. The birds mostly looked like dark silhouettes and we could not enjoy their colours and features. But we certainly enjoyed the most colourful, entertaining and nicest collection of characters in the Field Naturalists' Club (sorry herpers, buggies et al, no offence, we birders just can't help being cool).

Birding began with Elizabeth pointing out the plain-brown woodcreeper virtually over our heads, while we heard the loud call of the cocoa woodcreeper in other areas. Trogons were surprisingly quiet, but we spotted several, all I believe were Guianan trogons, and we got good views despite the light. The dominant hummingbird there seems to be the white-chested emerald, but (although we saw many) they just looked like dark shapes rather than the jewels for which they were named. Some *inga* (pois doux) trees were in flower at the roadside, and a male tufted coquette was seen at the flowers, again as a dark shape flitting through the leaves. At other fruiting trees, honeycreepers and dacnis fed. On one tree we saw all three honeycreeper species, while nearby turquoise and bay-headed tanagers tried to add some colour to the day.


Two South American migrants were very much in evidence. The plumbeous kites were numerous and began riding the airwaves by mid-morning. We saw at least 10 of these, and photographed a nest. The noisy *swee-uu* of the piratic flycatcher was all around. We saw them occupying pirated pendulous nests of both the oropendolas and the yellow-rumped caciques. These lazy flycatchers don't build their own nests, but mercilessly harass the much

larger icterid birds forcing them to abandon their beautifully constructed hanging nests.



Elizabeth, Devan, Brian and Selene read from the New Birding Testament

Perhaps the most interesting sight of the morning was a large colony of yellow-rumped caciques on Caratal Road. About 500 metres from their nesting site they seemed to be randomly flitting about over a few trees in the distance, a curious sight. Then we realised they were actually doing flycatching sallies, along with a few kingbirds, for "rainflies."

Kool Kat and Doc Stu tried to turn on the charm, but were unable to talk the guards into letting us into the dam area. We ended up going to Caratal, on the Eastern side of the reservoir, to look for Trinidad euphonias on a certain little road known to Wendell. It was a lovely drive through interesting countryside, worth a special trip on its own. *Plus* there is a lively rumshop at the parking area for Wendell's road, and several members headed there at the end of the trip, intending to buy bottled water. 



Field Trip Report, May 31 2015
MACAJUEL POND
by Imran Khan



The hike to Macajuel Pond started with the group assembling in the village of Brasso Seco. We drove along the road as far as our vehicles could reliably take us, passing the house of active bird bander Carl Fitzgerald, and stopping just short of another Carl whose home could be described as perhaps the last full time household on the road. After receiving words of advice from Carl that snakes were not commonly seen at this time of the year, we would venture onwards on our journey with what would later be deemed as a false sense of security. After all, we were headed to Macajuel Pond!

The early part of the hike consisted of walking along a dirt trail, a remnant of the off-roading that has taken place by those who need access to their agricultural/weekend lands, or by avid off-roaders. So deep were some of these ruts that we found several crayfish living in the pools of water that accumulated in them. Driving over these lands must have been about as hard as it was to walk on them. The wet sticky clay made getting a foothold difficult, and foot-steps were also made heavy as with each step the soil would clump around and stick on one's feet. Dan would give sufficient breaks by pointing out plants and providing the common, scientific, and in one instance, even the Hindi name for trees.

The hike took on an interesting turn when the terrain shifted gears and we found ourselves walking through the river. It has always been a joy to be able to wade through the streams of the Northern Range, and this was not to be the exception. This was especially so for me, as it was the first time that I was hiking in this particular stretch of the woods. We soon came across a sunlit opening over the river area where water emptying into it left deposits on the way down to form a small but stunning stone cascade.

Selwyn seemed to have a fondness for this area as he donned his goggles, fins and camera, and had his fill.

There would be several other noteworthy spots along the rest of the river segment of the hike, each



Stone cascade (above) and Neotropical otter scat (below) by Imran Khan

with its own natural beauty, for instance: deposits forming cascading caps over the tops of several boulders, a narrow stretch of river that may be termed a gorge, the bloom of the copper hoop (*Brownea latifolia*) overhanging the river, the dominance of the forest on either side of the river etc. My personal favourite was finding scat and feeding sites belonging to the Neotropical otter (*Lontra longicaudis*) (see below). This species is perhaps better known in the forested mountain stream environments. However, they may just as easily be present in lowland river/stream environments, as “evidence” has suggested to show such from Princes Town, Couva, Moruga, and the Caroni River and its lowland feeder rivers/tributaries.

No direct otter sighting was had on this hike. Instead, what was had was several mapepire (*Bothrops atrox*) encounters by different sub groups at different parts of the trail. By our deductions there were probably five individuals, all of them being sizeable fellows. The most noteworthy encounter would perhaps belong to Kris. Whilst trying to assist a volunteer out of the river in an area of unsteady footing, with one hand on that person and another on a walking stick, he had to deal with an oncoming mapepire in the river. It was coming downstream towards them, aided by the movement of the river flow, and they were trying to go upstream. If I recall correctly, it took an effort on his part to use the walking stick to keep trying to redirect the snake away from them – perhaps thinking them to be solid ground on which to rest. Eventually, they got past the snake in this manner, or the snake got past them, and they continued back out to vehicles without getting to Macajuel Pond.

Macajuel Pond was accessed via a short trek up-river on an adjoining tributary to the one that we were hiking along. I did not expect what my eyes would set upon as the destination, as it was really unlike any upland fall and plunge pool that I had ever seen before, at least in Trinidad. A well rounded open space in the forest formed the basin, and the colour of the water resembled a shade between emerald/turquoise/aquamarine/light blue Kool Aid. A picture perfect fall of about 3 metres in height and a heavy downfall of water all but completed our destination. All that was missing was the macajuel (*Boa*

constrictor). The group enjoyed the sight and the water, having lunch and a bit of a soak and swim. I climbed up along the right hand side of the fall and stood atop it, enjoying the sound of the falling water before jumping in feet first. By my estimate, the plunge pool could have been no more than 3 metres at its deepest.



Eggs of the Trinidad leaf frog, *Phyllomedusa trinitatis* by Imran Khan

The destination was well worth the hike and this is one that I will definitely repeat in the future. I will be sure to take along my goggles/mask, as there is surely as much to see below the waters as well. After about half hour of relaxing, we all made our way out towards the vehicles, backtracking on our initial trail through the river and the land, both made worse by the rains that fell. On the bright side, the rains triggered egg laying from the Trinidad leaf frog (*Phyllomedusa trinitatis*). 🐸



NATURE IN THE NEWS

A quarterly summary of local environmental news by Kris Sookdeo



Man fined for illegally possessing macaws

Harris Ramcharan of Mappipire Road, Williamsville pleaded guilty and was fined \$750 for the possession of 4 blue and gold macaws and 1 yellow-headed parrot by a San Fernando magistrate Cheryl Ann Antoine. He had offered the birds for sale in a newspaper and forest rangers sting operation setup to apprehend him. He was fined \$150 on each of the five charges. (2 Apr 2016, *Trinidad Newsday*)

EU urges TT to do more to fight illegal fishing practices

The European Commission has warned TT that it risks being listed as uncooperative in the fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Furthermore, it indicated that TT in particular has a large fleet operating internationally where authorities do not control or inspect foreign vessels and the poor traceability increases the risk of laundering of fish products. Further action by the EU could be taken if the issue is not resolved in six months. (22 Apr 2016, *Trinidad Newsday*)

Child stung by scorpion

A 3 year old girl was warded at the EWMSC after being stung by a scorpion. Other incidents involving scorpions were listed. In February 2013, a 2 year old was fatally stung by a scorpion in Chatam and in January 2012 a 3 year old died after a scorpion sting in San Fernando. (28 Apr 2016, *Trinidad Newsday*)

EMA serves notice to George Aboud

The EMA serves a notice of violation to George Aboud for the clearance of 19 hectares of land at Las Cuevas which was reported to be without the prerequisite approvals. (13 May 2016, *Trinidad Newsday*)

Maracas mountaintop illegally deforested

THE EMA has confirmed that the Maracas mountaintop stripped of forest cover and quarried by a land developer, was illegal as a CEC was never granted. The developer was served a notice of violation. (19 May 2016, *Trinidad Express*)

Toco road and ferry port funded

The Inter American Development Bank (IDB) will fund a new plan to link Trinidad to Tobago via a new ferry-port at Toco and a new road from Valencia to Toco. The RFP for consultancy services for alignment and design has been issued. (16 May 2016, *Trinidad Newsday*)

Minister supports hunting

The Minister of Agriculture has indicated his support for hunting as he sees it as a legitimate economic activity for some. The statement was made at the May 2016 session of the public consultation on wildlife at the Caroni Visitor Centre. (23 May 2016, *Trinidad Newsday*)

Two caught with turtle hatchlings

Two individuals were held with a turtle hatchling during a vehicle search exercise in Blanchisseuse on 27 May 2016. Charges were expected to be laid. (29 May 2016, *Trinidad Newsday*)

Squatters cannot be removed

According to the Land Settlement Agency, there are over 200,000 squatters on state lands. The LSA does not have the authority to demolish squatter structures or take squatters to court. Furthermore they claim they have not been getting the cooperation of the Office of the Commissioner of State Lands and regional corporations which can take action. The former LSA board took a decision to grant Certificates of Comfort to squatters even if in scientific reserves or riverbanks. (8 Jun 2016, *Trinidad Newsday*).



What is life without a knife?

A memoir by Hans Boos

Part 1 of 3



In the television series NCIS, the main character, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, has a series of rules, number nine of which is “Never go anywhere without a knife.”

I cannot remember a time in my life, once I was old and responsible enough, when I have not owned a knife, which, either on my belt in a sheath or in my pocket, went with me everywhere.

I cannot recall the small pen-knives I must have owned before joining a Boy Scout Troop, the 8th San Fernando, but this was the perfect time to get my first jack-knife as part of my uniform. I recall this knife keenly; it had a pale yellow wooden handle, and a blade that when honed would easily shave the hairs along my forearm like a razor.



The author in his Scout uniform

Though it was part of my Scout uniform, I took to wearing it whenever I was out on my after-school rambles, mainly to gather rabbit-meat (fodder) for the small colony of rabbits I had begun to manage in coops below our house in Alexander Road, San Fernando, where we had moved around 1950.

Railway daisies, *Bidens pilosa*, were common roadside weeds, and loved by the rabbits, so it was easy to gather large bunches of this leafy herb and bring them home, tied with my belt strapped to the handlebars of my Raleigh semi-sports bicycle that had been given to me on the Christmas before I began to attend Naparima Boys' College on Broadway. In bush-choked empty lots on my ride home I picked the rabbit-meat. At other times, when I could carry the knife, it assisted me in slashing the soft stems as I gathered the leafy, flower-covered tops. That's when I felt the first bite of the knife. Slashing at the stems, it passed through them like a hot blade through butter, and the very tip nicked my inner calf, just south of my left knee. It was not a deep nick, but it bled furiously, and I still bear a small crescent-like keloid scar where the tip bit me. I was more careful and respectful of this knife from then on, and though there must have been several more accidents, they were not serious enough to recall.

But there was another facet of owning such a knife. I was reading the books by Leslie Charteris, a series about a pre-James Bond agent called Simon Templar, known as “The Saint,” who was an expert with a throwing knife. So, though the books told of his finely crafted, balanced, specially made knives, named “Anna” and “Belle,” I began to practice with what I had available – my jack-knife. I had no idea what a balanced knife was, only that if thrown in a practiced and correct way, over a distance, it could be made to stick into a target, or a potential enemy. Western and action movies of that time were replete with deadly knife-throwing scenes. Several of my father's cousins were schooled in the United States and they brought back traditions,

songs and popular boy's games that they had seen and participated in while there. These they passed on to my father and uncles. One of these was a game they played when he was a boy, called "Mumble the Peg" where a small penknife was made to flip off several parts of the body, coded "Tony Chestnut" (from the toe, knee, chest and head - the nut) and to stick into the ground as close as possible to the opponent's foot. The loser of this game had to pay a penalty of extracting a peg of wood driven into the soft earth by several whacks of the knife. This peg had to be "mumbled" out using the teeth. I practiced this flipping and soon worked out that it only took a simple flip of 180 degrees for the knife, with the right spin and force, to stick in the ground, or if thrown, horizontally, holding the blade before release, to travel a considerable distance before sticking, quivering, into the bark of a tree or convenient wall or dart-board target. Then it was only learning to judge distance, force of throw, and amount of spin with sometimes a little back "English" (like in tennis or ping-pong,) and I soon became a fairly good knife-thrower.

Of course during my Boy Scout days, this knife came in extremely useful in doing all the things a scout is supposed to become expert in doing. Splitting kindling, clearing tent sites, cutting rope were only a few among a myriad of other uses. But one day it failed me, in a crucial test, I must confess, however, it was not the knife that failed, but my fortitude to go through with the trial.

As scouts we often played what was known as a "wide game" so called by the troop leader, Mr. Ralph Kelshall. The troop was split into two teams. Using the abandoned coconut estate of Aubrey Boyack in Vistabella as our field of battle, one team had to try to get as many members through the bush in an easterly direction while the second team had to lie in wait and try to ambush the invaders and capture them, before they reached and "captured" a flag planted somewhere in the defenders' territory.

During one of these games, I was in the invading team, hotly pursued by a defender, when, in my flight, I fell down over a low cutting in the land, and rolling down the hill, I crashed into a low tangle of underbrush which entirely hid me from my pursuer. I lay quietly, oblivious to the pain as I came to a stop

flush against the young fronds of a banga palm, *Acrocomia aculeate* (known as gru-gru bef in northern Trinidad), which were festooned with hundreds of needle-like thorns. As I lay still, concealed, I became aware of fire-like pain in my left leg, and I pulled away, only to bring the leaf of the palm along, for I was transfixed and stitched with the thorns through my khaki short-pants and the scout sock, fastened with my patrol garter below the knee. Even my shoes were pierced, not to mention the bare flesh between the trouser hem and the top of the sock.

Easing myself backward I used my trusty knife to slice away the frond from my leg, and I rolled away to access the damage. My leg looked like a porcupine with the remaining thorns that had not been pulled free as I cut the frond off my leg, but the longer and larger ones were still embedded deeply in the flesh. Over the next hour I pulled them out carefully, one by one, even the ones that had pierced the leather of my shoe.

But there was one remaining thorn that had done more damage. My knee had made first contact with the tree, and a larger, blacker, thorn had pierced the flesh there, gone under the knee cap, and broken off under the epidermis. I could see the black base through the small hole that had closed over the thorn, but no pulling or stretching of the surrounding skin would allow me to get a grip on the base of the thorn, slippery with blood.

My knife did not fail me, for it had easily sliced



The author, El Tucuche, 1950s

(Continued from page 20)

my calf some years before, but try as I might, I could not make the cut into my already lacerated and punctured flesh to pull out the thorn that I could feel scraping bone every time I tried to straighten my leg. It was getting to late afternoon and the hunt had passed me by and come to its conclusion, whatever that was, but I had a problem. I could not straighten my leg to walk the fairly short distance home to Alexander Road, up the hill from where I lay. My trusty knife did not fail me as I fashioned a crutch from a dry fallen coconut branch, and with my scarf as a sling, keeping my lower leg flexed, I managed to hobble my way home.

When my parents had assessed my condition, and their guests had left, Dad drove me to the emergency room of the old wooden San Fernando Hospital, where a doctor sprayed a freezing liquid on the little blood-clotted hole, wiped it clean, slit it with a scalpel and extracted the thorn, fully about an inch and a half long. A few other black tips that were still embedded along the length of my leg and foot, my mother worked free with the sharp point of a needle.

This knife went with me on my first trip up the flanks of Mt El Tucuche when I was about thirteen years old. It was a school trip arranged by our Geography master, and my fellow students were surprised that I was the only one who carried a knife.

I saw for the first time the wild balisier, *Heliconia behai*, and was able to cut free the flower bracts and demonstrate to my fellow hikers what my father had described as a reputed “snake caller.” If the young, unopened bracts are pulled apart, back and forth, they make a loud squeaking noise. According to the lore, including a saying about “snakes in the balisier,” any resident snakes would supposedly be summoned by this high-pitched noise.

I squeaked away, but of course no snakes ever appeared to me, unschooled and ignorant as I was in matters herpetological in my early teens. Snakes lack a sense of hearing as we know it, so cannot perceive air-borne sounds, and could not respond to this “caller” any more than they could to a fabled “snake-caller” from the Arima Valley who was reputed to be able to whistle snakes out of the bush and trees. I saw too, and collected, the flower-bracts of the wild ginger, *Costus scaber*, and we joked in our teenage way over this find. My knife, of course, was

brought into play in gathering these forest curiosities.

I had been taught by the scouts from a Gasparillo troop who were experts in working bamboo into elaborate constructions, how to make a sort of whistle or flute using a piece of young stem. Selecting a stem about one and a half inches in diameter, the thickened joints to be carefully cut off. One end-cut had to be at right angles to the length while the other was sliced to form an angle of about 30 degrees. A slit was then cut into the top arc of the oval hole that this angle cut created, and a carefully trimmed piece of bamboo leaf had to be gingerly threaded into the slit held open by the blade of a sharp knife.

The whole end with this bamboo reed was then placed into the mouth and with a carefully controlled blowing, a loud flatulent buzzing or humming could be produced and varied to be almost musical. It was a good signalling device when wide games were played and simply dependent on having a keen and ready knife for construction.

My cousin, Jeffrey, now deceased, became almost a fanatic for collecting knives, and actually began making them. To my surprise he gave me one of his rejects, a roughly constructed blade, made, he said, from a Volkswagen torsion bar. The blade was over a foot long, and the haft was a length of half-inch galvanized steel pipe held in place by a large bolt, tack-welded for immovability. It was a wicked-looking weapon; needless to say, it too could be thrown with considerable force, and because of its weight, bury its tip deep into whatever target I managed to hit.

Two of the fellows in our group, Franklyn and Gene Aerstin, lived two houses up the road from our house. They had a spare room downstairs in their house, and it was in this room we perfected our knife-throwing skills. The dart-board hanging on a door was soon demolished as a target, and sadly the door behind soon was a mass of gaping punctures where our knives had found a hit. When their parents found out about this destruction we were banned from any further activities involving knives in that room.

Nearly all my friends became caught up in this knife-throwing frenzy, a phase we went through for about a year, for we all roamed the bush near to

where we lived and a good knife was always useful in the bush, to peel mangos, open coconuts, or trim good sling-shot forks, when one was spotted high up in some tree, none of which was unclimbable, as we seemed at times to be some form of evolved monkey.

Every school holidays, we would descend on a large mango vert tree that grew on a steep hillside overlooking the abandoned road cut through the aforementioned Boyack estate. Aptly named the "Tarzan Tree," it was well known to all the boys from North and Alexander Roads and from the suburb of Vistabella to the east of the estate. But not all of us who gathered at the tree were able to, as we called it, "swing." Swinging entailed a game of tag, or accumulative tag, where the slowest of us participants in this hazardous game, would be the chaser, who had to catch the others by tagging them with three taps to the top of the head as we wildly dived and jumped and swung through the branches of this tree. All this we did in a circular space in the tree which was about forty feet in diameter, with a vertical height of about the same.

However as the tree grew on a steep hillside, the greatest drop to the stony ground below far exceeded sixty feet, and though, luckily, no one ever fell down this deadly drop, at least two broken arms happened to hapless and less skilled "swingers" who attempted to play our game, but who missed their grips and fell to the ground below, their wrists snapping as they tried to break their fall. Others who fell but were only winded and scared, often never joined us again.

In the game, when someone was tagged, he joined the chase so that eventually there were only two fugitives left. Usually they were me and my friend David Ross, nicknamed "Squirrel" or "Skirrel." Sometimes a boy, also named David (Bahadoo), would join us. He was by far the most agile and swift swinger, and we seldom could catch him as he threw himself recklessly across spaces we would not attempt. I once timed the fastest passage around the circumference of the tree, the contestant running along branches, leaping across open spaces and brachiating like a gibbon; David clocked in at seventeen seconds.

Only one girl ever joined us in this holiday game.

She was Diann Johnson, a real tom-boy, who insisted that she could and would swing with the best of us if we would include her in our male clan. She began to come to the tree and practice going through the "tacts" (from "tactics") we had worked out we could do with comparative ease without getting hurt, except for the occasional bruises and calluses on our palms.

Soon she could join in the chases in the tag game, until one day she miscalculated one of her moves, and missed her footing on a slim branch across a space. Her heel skidded off, and she landed astraddle the branch, a slip no boy would ever forget whether he falls spread-legged on a branch, a fence rail or the crossbar of his bicycle. But she must have been equally hurt for Diann never swung with us again. She grew up more beautiful than ever and married a Barbadian jockey, and moved back to her ancestral island of Barbados.

Often as we rested after our games we would pick the large green mangos from the undisturbed outer branches, and with black-pepper and salt we had brought along, we peeled and sliced these not-quite-ripe fruit, and feasted until our teeth became etched and sensitive. Nearly every one of us carried a knife of some sort, so we only shared the condiments and not the peeling and cutting duties.

Had our parents known what we were doing or seen our "skills" I am sure that Tarzan Tree would have been cut down. In time, we grew too tall and heavy, to play in Tarzan Tree anymore, and we moved on with our lives. One day in 1960, when I had returned from Edinburgh, I nostalgically went to visit Tarzan Tree. It was still there, but somewhat depleted, for some branches had fallen or had been cut off. I climbed into what was still intact and made my way to the topmost cradle of branches we called the "crows-nest," and sat there swaying in the March breezes that whipped across this area. The thought of trying any of the former crazy stunts, made me shudder as I made my way carefully down the gnarled trunk which had witnessed so much boyhood dare-devilishness, risk and pleasure. I was not scared of heights and tall trees were always a challenge to me. In an empty lot near where we lived was a low Julie mango tree with several places where we could practice our leaps and swing-

ings. One comfy crotch formed a perfect seat, an aerial armchair where I would sit and summon my two dogs, Butch and Susie. They would scramble up the inclined trunk and join me in the tree to sit proudly in my lap.

Coconut palm trees were a special challenge and



In the mango tree with Butch the dog (1960s)

I climbed the highest in my life when I spent one holiday at an estate in Cedros where my dad's fishing partner, Romer Johnson, the estate manager, rented us a screened bungalow for a week. Here we rode in the water-buffalo carts, swam in the nearby muddy Gulf of Paria, and ate fruits exotic to us. Cai-metes, sugar apples, dunks, sampled soap-seed and lay-lay. All assisted by a sharp knife which still went everywhere with me. Climbing into the crown of a lone, tall coconut palm was a major feat for me, and I sat in the swaying rosette of leaf-bases and felt the tree sway and toss. To twist off a young and water-filled coconut, and with four thrusts of the knife blade into the soft top of the nut to remove a square plug, after the shell-like sepals had been sliced off, and to drink the cool water down in one gulping draft was an experience that I opine few boys my age and background ever had. The slide back down the rough trunk left abrasions on my chest and thighs, but they were worth it.

We followed the workers into the fields to watch the harvesting of the copra. Huge piles of dried coconuts were waiting for every team, which consisted of one man – the cutter, and several women, usually three or four, who sat in a circle with a crocus bag spread on their laps and another split open on the ground by their side.


The man, cutlass in hand, would pick up a dried nut on the tip of his cutlass, flip it expertly into the palm of his other hand and with three swift, measured chops into the three facets of the nut, the last chop with a slight twist, to split it into three parts, he would drop it in front of each woman in sequence. With the first chop, the inner nut would be split and the water inside would spurt out, and the man and the women were soon soaked to the skin by the flying water. Using a short, haft-padded knife, the women would pry the thick hardened inner jelly free and pile the cup-like shapes onto the bag at their sides.

We would watch this ritual for hours, wandering off to pick a nearby green mango, peel it and eat the slices of tart green flesh. Or get a piece of hard coconut jelly and chew it till there was no taste left that could have been sucked out and spit the frass into the low bushes nearby.

These workers were employed using the “task” system, and after an agreed amount of the nuts were opened and the jelly removed, gathered and bagged, the work for the day was done and they were paid a fixed and contracted amount. I never knew how many opened coconuts constituted a “task” but there must have been at least a thousand that were cut the day we watched.

To be as dexterous as the chopping-man became a desire of mine and I practiced to open the green, and the yellow “Chinee” coconuts that I often climbed after and picked, balancing them in my left hand and slicing off the sections carefully to expose the inner nut, which with a final gentle chop could be sliced off to expose nature's chalice.

A good sharp knife, too, was essential to carefully spirally peel the sugary sweet, but very thin-skinned, coco oranges we often came across in our rambles, so as to leave a perfectly rind-less globe of a perfectly peeled fruit, with one ribbon of peel, entire, which local legend and superstition dictated should be thrown over ones shoulder where it would fall and form the initial of your true love.

I cannot remember what became of that knife that my cousin had given me – it might have been inherited by my younger brother – or my first real knife, for they were supplanted by a much more impressive one. 

To be continued....



Your Ideas and Observations A Quarterly Update

The right stuff

The piece on Victor Quesnel in the new *Living World* is informative and much appreciated. One important point that is insufficiently emphasized is Victor's status as a consummate amateur naturalist. In physiology and biochemistry, he was of course a professional, but in natural history he was an amateur in the best sense of the word. That is, his professional training didn't give him any particular advantage in the pursuit of natural history, so that any other educated person with motivation and a keen eye could have made similar contributions.

This came to my attention many years ago when I was reading a journal article about mantises and saw reference to "Quesnel (1967)". I looked in the references and was surprised to find that this entomological work was by our own Victor.

Amateur naturalists (i.e. most members of the Club) are under no obligation to undertake original research projects, but Victor's example shows that it is within the capabilities of any member to discover significant things about the living world that no one has every known before. To be sure, those of us who have been able to do advanced degrees in such things as behavioural ecology have an easier time recognizing and undertaking research opportunities in natural history (not to mention actually getting paid for it), but no member should imagine that it is beyond her/his reach or even unreasonably difficult.

(Christopher K. Starr)

A note on the Trinidad striped swamp snake

It was recently brought to my attention that a local snake-man had posted a movie on Facebook, wherein he claimed that he had caught the first live specimen of the Trinidad striped swamp snake that so far has been found on the south western peninsula of Trinidad. However this is not the first live specimen collected of this rare little snake. As reported in my book "The Snakes of Trinidad and Tobago", at the time of its publication (2001) three dead specimens had been collected on the road, and these had been

sent to three museums in the US and the UK for identification.

At that time, though tentatively the specimens had been identified, they were sent on to a researcher who was working on the genus, and so, though I had foreknowledge of the intended species designation of this snake, protocols prohibited from using the name, and so the taxon in my book was *Thamnodynastes* sp., and in lieu of an extant common name, I called it the striped swamp snake, based on its appearance and the habitat surrounding the location where the specimens had been collected. It has since been named the double-lined water snake, *Thamnodynastes ramonriveroi*.

In early 2002 I received a telephone call from the owner of an Arima pet-shop who informed me he had caught a striped swamp snake while driving back to Arima from Cedros. It had been collected crossing the road.



T. ramonriveroi photographed by H. Boos in 2002

I hurried to Arima, confirmed that it was indeed this species, and he came with me as we took the specimen, still very much alive, though missing its right eye, and I photographed it on a handy balisier leaf at the side of the road at the first convenient site along the Arima/Blanchisseuse Road.

I have made multiple prints of this photo and given a copy to anyone who I knew had a copy of my book.

(Hans E.A Boos) 

If you have any interesting ideas or observations to share, we'd love to hear from you at admin@ttfnc.org.



Memoirs of a two week paddle around Trinidad in a canoe in 1985

IN THE WAKE OF THE CARIBS

by Glenn Wilkes — Part 5 of 5



Thursday 26th - 26 miles

It was effectively down to a run for home now. Less than forty miles, and two whole days to go. I had told Ian that my plan was to make a Phileas Fogg type dramatic return at the stroke of four, exactly two weeks after our departure. We were still undecided how we would break up the remaining distance, in view of the limited choice of campsites between San Fernando and Port of Spain. From our forays into the Caroni swamp, we knew of a building not too far up the Madame Espagnole River. There was even the possibility of taking full advantage of the calm Gulf waters, and setting a record day's run right into P.O.S.

From San Fernando we headed across to Pointe-a-Pierre, aiming for Carib Valley, where Roger Ache lived, right on the seaside. He was one of the Ache brothers with whom I'd first paddled a canoe, and I knew he'd get a kick out of seeing the kayak and hearing of the trip. Unfortunately he wasn't at home, so after having a second breakfast with Gersha and the girls, we continued on to Pt. Lisas. After a brief stop, we did another short run to Cangrejos Pt., and landed at the fish depot.

The weather was unsettled, and with Peter Percharde's warning ringing in my ears, we were coming ashore whenever thunderclouds loomed. We passed the temple on the sea, that mysterious white object which you can see from Five Islands. Years later, when I heard the inspiring story of Sewdass Sadhu, the man who built it, it seemed so appropriate that it should be visible from the little islands that were also linked with the East Indian Diaspora. By now we were adjacent to the Caroni swamp. The tide was out, and unaware of the depth, we ran aground even though we were about a quarter mile out. There was no way to estimate how far we would have to slog through the mud to get to deep water, so we decided to wait for the tide. The double kayak is quite beamy, and you can get fairly comfortable slouched down inside. We took a nap. Afloat once more, we had paddled only a couple miles when the sky darkened. We scooted into the mangrove and sheltered. It was now approaching

the time when we would normally start to scout out a campsite, and the longer we sheltered the less options we would have. I considered the mangrove critically. I've always believed in hammock camping because of its flexibility. We could easily string up the hammocks in the trees, but we'd be suspended over the water. I could visualise what would happen if, half-asleep, I got up to go and pee! Then there was the problem of unpacking the kayak, cooking, etc. It would be crazy to light up the stove inside the kayak. There were numerous small crabs scurrying along the roots, and I wondered if they would regard a sleeping person as something worth nibbling on.

Eventually the weather cleared up and we went back out and continued. It was a case of Hobson's choice - keeping away from shore to avoid running aground, while still trying to spot the mouth of the Madame Espagnole. The first time we ventured into the Caroni swamp, two things impressed me: its size, and how difficult it was to see a break in the mangrove. After a while we realised that we had missed the Madame Espagnole. There was still the Blue River, but it was a long way from the mouth to the swamp boats' jetty. The sun had gone down, but there was still a lot of reflected light from the clouds over the horizon to the west. Occasionally we passed wooden piles sticking out of the mud in the sea. Our choices seemed to be narrowing. Tie up on one of the piles and try to sleep in the boat, or paddle on in the night to Port of Spain. The city lights were clearly visible in the distance, but although we had enough energy left to make it, I was very apprehensive of negotiating the harbour in the dark. In the gloom ahead I suddenly saw what could only be a "sea-mirage". A jetty jutting out from the swamp, with a railed platform at the end. We were in the vicinity of the mouth of the Blue River, and when last we had paddled this coast, there had been nothing like this. As we drew closer we saw that it was real. Jubilantly we came alongside, hitched a rope to the kayak, and climbed up on to the plat-



The front page of the Trinidad Guardian on Saturday 24th August 1985 celebrates the return of the intrepid kayakers.

form. We hauled the boat out of the water and set up camp. I explored the boardwalk to the mangrove, and came to the conclusion that it must have been something built for tourists visiting the swamp. After dinner, as we sat looking across the sea at the city lights, the imagery of a haunting Jose Feliciano ballad came to life. "Yo adivino el parpadeo, de las luces que a lo lejos, va marcando mi retorno." This was our last night; tomorrow we would return to the real world - or was it the other way around.

Perhaps in the final analysis, our trip was a sort of vanishing point on the horizon, where different lines of perspective converged.

Sometime during the night we heard the sound of an engine. A boat approached the jetty and stopped not far away. We could hear the voices but not the words of the occupants. They seemed unaware of our presence, and unsure of what they were about, we didn't hail them. Eventually they left.

Friday 23rd - 12 miles

As the sun came up, the City looked even closer than last night. By eight o'clock we were in the harbour, tied up to the hulk of a derelict ship. A short distance away, people were hustling to work. It re-

mined me of how I felt whenever I returned to Trinidad from working in Tobago - so relaxed you couldn't figure out why everyone else is uptight. We timed our paddle across to West Mall to catch HiLo just as they were opening and bought supplies for the day. From there it was another short paddle to Pelican Island, the most easterly of the Five Islands.

"At a distance of five miles west from Port of Spain is Pelican Island, the first and smallest of a group of five. These islands are all now owned by Government. Nelson's, formerly known as Stevenson's, is the largest, and is used as a sanatorium for Indian immigrants. The remainder, Caledonia with Craig, Lenegan, Rock and Pelican, are used as quarantine depots. When not so occupied they can be and are usually rented by those who require rest, the benefit of the sea breezes, excellent bathing and choice fresh fish." (*The Trinidad Reviewer 1899*)

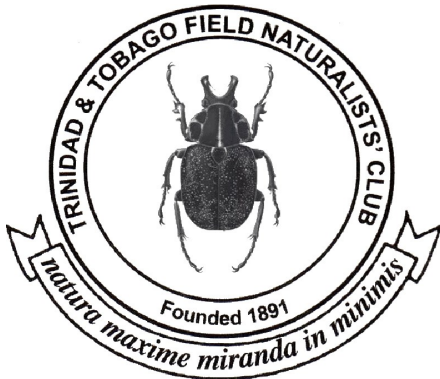
There are no longer any buildings on Pelican Island, just paved steps, walkways, empty cisterns and a low wall along the northwestern edge. Few people go there, and after an initial clean up, we had no difficulty in maintaining it as our island resort. Just two miles across from Williams' Bay, it was ideal for an

easy afternoon paddle and "chill-out".

For the rest of the day we lazed around, killing time until about twenty to four, when we embarked on the final leg. As we approached the Alcoa buoys, we realised we were cutting it fine, and put in the over-drive, a controlled increase in power that leaves your rhythm intact. We had expected to see just the usual Carenage crowd when we came in, but there were quite a number of people awaiting us. Apparently Ian had called Bobby and they had spread the word around. Randy had even brought a bottle of champagne! A Guardian reporter came, and since he had missed our landing, asked us to go back out and "arrive" again. We made the front page the following day, and I'd be a liar if I said it didn't matter. Of course it did, and we revelled in whatever fame ensued, but it is equally true to say we had got a whole lot more from the trip. I had planned a journey of discovery, hoping in the end to be able to say I knew every nook and cranny of our coastline.

An expectation as ridiculous as the question Pee-Wee asked me the next time I saw him. "Glenn, now you've gone around Trinidad, is it really shaped the way they have it on the map?" No, we missed a lot of the topography, but we found things about others and ourselves that were as remarkable as the burning hill at Manzanilla. Even though I always felt we would be able to complete the circumnavigation, there were individual legs that looked impossible when we set out. Day after day, I was amazed at what we were able to do. Although he never mentioned it on the trip, Fouts later said there were times he was ready to give up, and only his determination not to let an "old man" outdo him, kept him going. The same Fouts who, three years later, completed his third circumnavigation in an astonishing six days! But above all, we rediscovered old friends, and found that there were strangers like Sham, who were prepared to give up their bed and sleep on the floor.

THE END 



Dear Fellow Members,
This year, TTFNC celebrates its 125th birthday.
 We invite all to help create a special anniversary issue of the Quarterly Bulletin.

We need your memoirs, photos and other contributions to include! Email admin@ttfnc.org
 Let's make our 125th birthday one that will be remembered for the next 125 years.



TTFNC QUARTERLY BULLETINS & INDEX ONLINE LINK :

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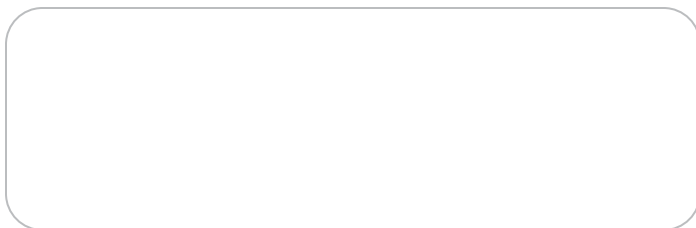
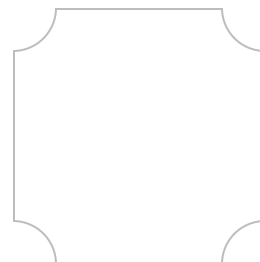
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The Club warmly welcomes the following new members:

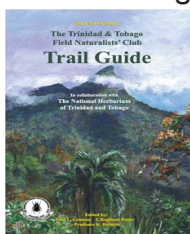
Dennis de la Rosa, Laura Baboolal, Steven Griffith, Lester James, Rachel Shui Feng, Aliya Hosein, Chrisalene Dedier, Jo-Ann Ali-Nandalal, Luis Romany, Malika de Leon, Michelle de Leon-Thomas, Stephen Fazeel Mohammed, Saach Fariel Mohammed, Catherine Seepersad and John Pilbean.

NOTICE FROM THE EDITORS: *Do you have any natural history articles, anecdotes or trip reports that could be published in The Field Naturalist? We welcome contributions from members. Please email your ideas or finished pieces to admin@ttfnc.org. We look forward to hearing from you!*

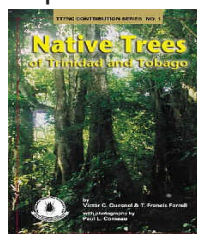


PUBLICATIONS

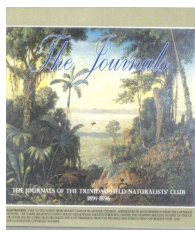
The following Club publications are available to members and non-members:



The TTFNC
Trail Guide
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TT\$160.00



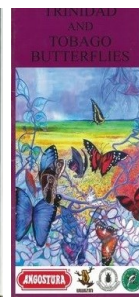
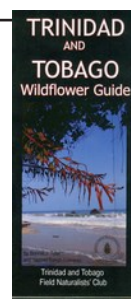
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MISCELLANEOUS

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>

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2. Electronic copies can be submitted to the editors at: admin@ttfnc.org or directly to the editors or any member of Management. Please include 'QB2016' in the email subject label.