



# THE FIELD NATURALIST

*Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club*

July – September 2018

Issue No: 3/2018



## HERPETOLOGY REPORT OCTOBER 2018 REVISITING THE ARIMA VALLEY



*by Renoir Auguste*

The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club's (TTFNC) Herpetology group, led by current club president Renoir Auguste, conducted its second Herpetology group trip for the year on Saturday 13th October 2018, at the same location as the 2nd annual September 2013 Bioblitz, the Arima Valley. The Herpetology group surveyed

for amphibians and reptiles at various sites, including at Asa Wright Nature Centre and the William Beebe Research Station, also known as Simla. Similar to the Bioblitz, the aim of this trip was to try and record as many amphibian and reptile species as possible. Thirty two amphibian and reptile species

*(Continued on page 3)*



Turnip-tailed gecko (*Thecadactylus rapicauda*) Photo by Rainer Deo

## Inside This Issue

- 1 Herpetology Trip Report  
REVISITING THE ARIMA VALLEY**  
- Renoir Auguste
- 5 Marine Group Report  
MACQUERIE DIVE AND SNORKEL TRIP**  
- Marianna Rampaul
- 9 Bird Group Trip Report  
BIRDING IN RAHAMUT TRACE AND SUDAMA STEPS**  
- Elizabeth Seebaran
- 13 YOUR IDEAS AND OBSERVATIONS**
- 13 NATURE IN THE NEWS**  
*Compiled by Kris Sookdeo*
- 14 A Naturalist In...  
HEAD FOR THE HILLS**  
- Christopher Starr
- 18 RELIC FROM THE 1930s**  
- H. Martyn Skinner Esq.
- 20 BAHAMAS PLANT DOCUMENTATION MILESTONE**  
- Reynold C. Boyce
- 23 Management Notices**

### Editors' 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

# THE FIELD NATURALIST

Quarterly Bulletin of the  
Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

**July - September 2018**

### Editors

Laura Baboolal, Stephanie Warren-Gittens

**Associate Editor:** Rupert Mends

### Contributing writers

Kris Sookdeo, Renoir Auguste, Marianna Rampaul, Elizabeth Seebaran, Christopher Starr, Reynold C. Boyce, H. Martyn Skinner Esq.

### Photographs

Rainer Deo, Elizabeth Seebaran, Brian D'Abreau, Marianna Rampaul, Reynold C. Boyce.

### Design and Layout

Eddison Baptiste and Amy Deacon

The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club is a non-profit, non-governmental organization

## Management Committee 2018/2019

President .....	Renoir Auguste	761-9197
Vice-President .....	Palaash Narase	751-3672
Treasurer.....	Selwyn Gomes	624-8017
Secretary .....	Amy Deacon	390-0826
Assist-Secretary .....	Danielle Morong	768-7666
Committee members ...	Dan Jaggernauth	659-2795
	Kris Sookdeo	647-5556
	Laura Baboolal	705-8716

## Contact us!

Email: [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org)

Website: [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org)

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/ttfieldnaturalistsclub](https://www.facebook.com/ttfieldnaturalistsclub)

YouTube: [www.tinyurl.com/ttfnc](http://www.tinyurl.com/ttfnc)

Postal: The Secretary, TTFNC, c/o P.O. Box 642,  
Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago



## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!



The club warmly welcomes the following new members:

**Aaliyha Malchan**  
**Devia Shah**  
**Renée le Genre**

**Ronnie Hosein**  
**Marianne Bishop**  
**Mario Russel**

### REVISITING THE ARIMA VALLEY

*(Continued from page 1)*

were recorded then. Would we find more species than those at the Bioblitz did during this trip?

The surveying started with a brief viewing at Simla at around 2:30 pm. Here, we spotted two lizards, the streaked gecko (*Gonatodes vittatus*) and the jungle anole (*Anolis planiceps*). After walking around for about half hour, we left Simla and headed up to Asa Wright Nature Centre. Once at the

Centre, we split up and walked around the driveway and road side trails at around 3:30 pm. We heard many Trinidad stream frogs (*Mannophryne trinitatis*) calling and even saw a male carrying its tadpoles on his back just off the road in puddles of water. We also observed the Caribbean treerunner lizard (*Plica caribbeana*) scurrying rapidly up a tree and the colourful variegated gecko (*Gonatodes ceciliae*) hiding cryptically on a tree bark. At around 5 pm we left the Centre and headed back to Simla for a walk



**Variegated gecko (*Gonatodes ceciliae*). Photo by Rainer Deo**




around the station to see what nocturnal species we can find.

The night time survey started at just after 6 pm and did not disappoint as seems for to be the theme the club's herpetology trips. We saw an additional twelve species at Simla, including two lizard species house gecko (*Hemidactylus mabouia*) and turnip-tailed gecko *Thecadactylus rapicauda*; three snake species, mapepire balsain (*Bothrops* sp), black-headed snake (*Tantilla melanocephala*) and cascabel (*Corallus ruschenbergerii*); and seven frog species cane toad (*Rhinella marina*), Urich's litter frog (*Pristimantis urichi*), marsupial treefrog (*Flectonotus fitzgeraldi*), rattle-voiced tree frog (*Boana xerophylla*), Garman's thin-toed frog (*Leptodactylus validus*), Tungara frog (*Engystomops pustulosus*) and Trinidad leaf frog (*Phyllomedusa trinitatis*). After searching for about two hours we left Simla just after 8 pm.

Although we did not observe as many species as at the 2013 Bioblitz, spotting 17 amphibian and reptile species in less than 3 hours of surveys on a hot afternoon and dry night was a pleasant surprise. The diversity of herpetofauna, especially at Simla is

intriguing and perhaps more long term herpetology studies should be based there, especially given the history of the place and the human disturbance happening nearby.

Thanks to those who came out, including Kerron Bedessie, Rainer Deo, Caroline Lewis, and others. The TTFNC would also like to specially thank the management and staff of Asa Wright for facilitating us on our trip and we hope to continue our excellent relationship with them in the future. 



**Above: Cane toad (*Rhinella marina*) [background] and Urich's litter frog (*Pristimantis urichi*) [foreground].**

**Below: Black-headed snake (*Tantilla melanocephala*) . Photos by Rainier Deo**





Marine Group Report- July 01st, 2018

## MACQUERIPE DIVE AND SNORKEL TRIP

by Marianna Rampaul



**Exploring Macquerie Bay, first by scuba diving then by snorkeling, enabled us to search high and low for all sorts of interesting creatures.** First up was the team divers. The five of us descended into the cool and somewhat turbid waters, cameras and bags in hand as the goal of this dive was to conduct an underwater clean-up. Although visibility was limited to about 3 m initially, conditions gradually improved. The clean-up was quite productive, with four bags of garbage,

including bundles of fishing lines and hooks, being removed after about an hour.

During the clean-up we encountered an unfortunate site—a speared almaco jack lying dead on the sea floor. The fish most likely struggled and escaped the fisherman's spear but eventually succumbed to its injury. Spearfishing in such a small, enclosed bay not only poses a safety hazard to the many swimmers, divers and snorkelers sharing the



**Spotfin Butterflyfish, *Chaetodon ocellatus***

Photo by Marianna Rampaul

**Above: Black Margate, *Haemulon parra* behind a tangle of fishing line. Below: Speared Almaco Jack, *Seriola rivoliana*** Photos by Marianna Rampaul



water but may also have a significant impact on the small resident fish populations.

Following the dive and a quick break, our group had grown to eight participants for the snorkel. Between the dive and snorkel, we encountered many interesting fishes, invertebrates and even an eel. The fishes included spotfin butterflyfish (*Chaetodon ocellatus*), flamefish (*Apogon maculatus*), black margate (*Anisotremus surinamensis*), eyed flounder (*Bothus ocellatus*), twinspot bass (*Serranus flaviventris*), red-ear sardines (*Harengula humeralis*), sapo bocon toadfish (*Amphichthys cryptocentrus*), white grunt juveniles (*Haemulon pulmieri*) and balloonfish (*Diodon holocanthus*).

Some of the more cryptic, harder-to-spot species were either buried in the sand or tucked away in rock crevices, like the shy flamefish and spotted moray eel (*Gymnothorax moringa*).





**Spotted Moray Eel, *Gymnothorax moringa* .**



**Balloonfish, *Diodon holocanthus* .**

The invertebrates included the brilliantly coloured beaded anemone (*Phymanthus crucifer*), sun anemone (*Stichodactylata helianthus*) and the magnificent feather duster worm (*Sabellastarte magnifica*). As we searched for these bottom dwelling inverts, sometimes it was necessary to look in between gorgonians gently swaying in the surge. The two main species encountered on this trip were the swollen-knob candelabrum (*Eunicea mammosa*) and sea plumes (*Antillogorgia spp.*).

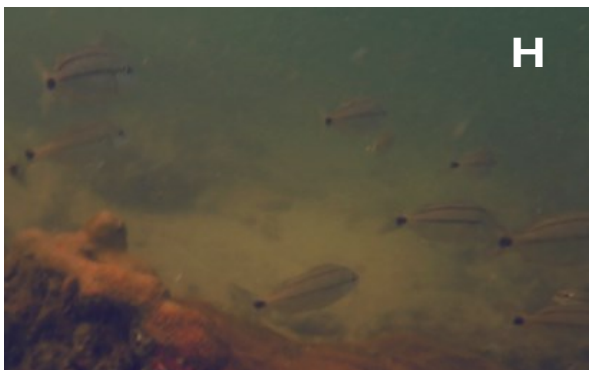
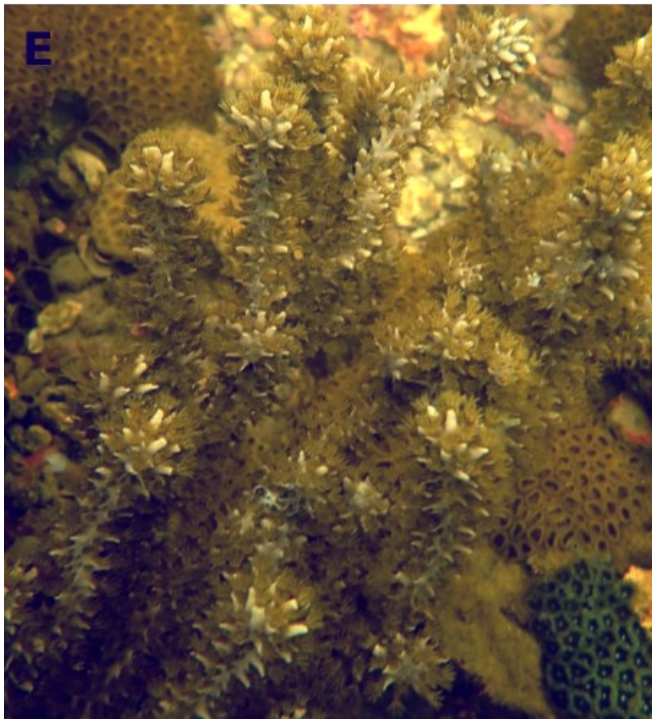
The beauty of the diverse marine flora and fauna of Macquarrie is evident to any underwater visitor,

as are the signs of a heavy human presence such as accumulations of cans, bottles, bundles of fishing lines, hooks, sinkers and the occasional hidden spear gun or speared fish. Repeated voluntary clean-ups and informal surveys by fellow naturalists would continue to help mitigate negative human impacts until more responsible use of the bay by all visitors becomes a reality. 🐛



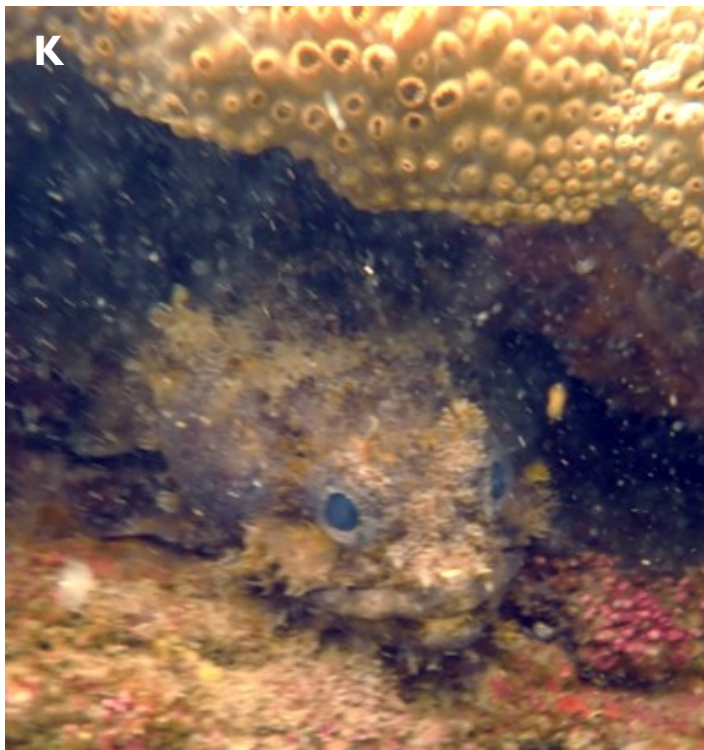
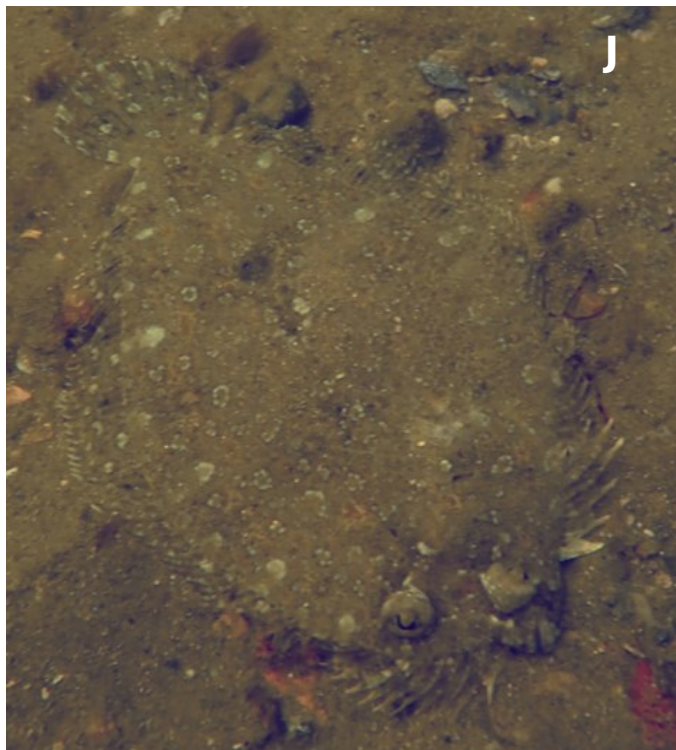
**Diver conducting clean up. Fishing lines removed from the reef.**





Left to right: C – Sun anemone, *Stichodactylata helianthus*, D – Beaded anemone, *Phymanthus crucifer*, E—Swollen-Knob Candelabrum, *Eunicea mammosa*, F – Flamefish, *Apogon maculatus*, G – Twinspot bass, *Serranus flaviventris*, H – Black margates, *Anisotremus surinamensis*, I – White grunt juveniles, *Haemulon pulmieri* Photos by Marianna Rampaul





(Top left- J): Eyed flounder, *Bothus ocellatus*; (Top right-K): Sapo Bocon (toadfish), *Amphichthys cryptocentrus*; (Bottom): Redear Sardines, *Harengula humeralis*. Photos by Marianna Rampaul.

---





Bird Group Report, 14th October, 2018

**BIRDING IN RAHAMUT TRACE AND SUDAMA STEPS***By Elizabeth Seebaran*

**In the very early morning hours of Sunday 14th October, six birders braved the weather and excitedly made our way from our meeting point at 4:20am in Chaguanas, along and towards the end of the Solomon Hochoy Highway.** Our targets were Rahamut Trace in Debe and the nacunda nighthawks that were spotted in the same area, around the same time last year. Ornithologist legend Richard French noted in his book that the nacunda nighthawk is a fairly regular migrant visitor to savannahs and open areas, with most sightings recorded during June to October in any given year.

This species is nocturnal in behaviour, returning to rest in open savannahs during the day. We arrived at Rahamut Trace in pre-dawn hours, where the visible blankets of mist hugged the ground in the rising sun, with two limpkins as our first sighting for the morning. Quickly locating our trip leader, Faraaz Abdool, who had made his way down from San Fernando, we started scanning the open savannahs where the famous nighthawks would come in for roosting.



**Birders on the look out for the Nacunda Nighthawks** *Photo by Elizabeth Seebaran*

After pre-dawn turned into dawn, and then early morning, our attempts proved futile. Maybe we were too late in October, or possibly looking in the wrong area of Rahamut Trace? Once the birds came in to roost for the day, their cryptic coloration ensured they blended so well with the soil and dry grass blades, that it would be almost impossible to spot them in plain sight on the open ground. Several other birders who could not make the earlier commute joined us after 7am.

With birders' luck, we decided to move on. Not too long after, Michael Boswell quickly identified the distinct call of the gray-breasted crake, right off the side of the road where freshwater marsh dominated this area of Rahamut Trace. Crakes, which rarely fly, are marshy swamp dwellers, difficult to observe as they skulk amidst thick vegetation. Richard ffrench, notes in his field guide the gray-breasted crake is resident of freshwater marshes, but rather uncommon, rarely flying amidst the dense vegetation it likes to inhabit. Attempts to return the call via cell-phone playback were futile to lure the bird out for a photo opportunity.

Along the marshy swamp area on both sides of this area of Rahamut Trace, pectoral sandpipers and wattled jacanas dominated. In the distance, an aplomado falcon, a migrant visitor to Trinidad savannahs, surveyed the open marsh from its perch, flying occasionally to trees near the roadside, and then returning to its perch further afar. A spotted tody-flycatcher did not disappoint, coming in for a close a view in the shade of some nearby trees.

We moved on to another side trace, off the main Rahamut Trace, parked the cars as far off the road as possible, and started walking in the now blistering sun. We came upon pale-breasted spinetails skulking amidst the thick grassy vegetation, playing "peek-a-boo". There were sightings also of yellow warblers and northern waterthush migrants. And then we saw Kris Sookdeo, casually walking towards us with his 2-year old daughter Saranna in hand. He located us whilst driving through the area on his way to get the traditional morning breakfast of doubles and aloo pies in Debe. Just as casually as Kris found us, he said, "Did you guys see the flock of bobolinks? Oh, they're just out near the parked cars". Our expressions were priceless! As if in redemption for our lack of luck with the nacunda nighthawks earlier in the morning, the majority of us had NEVER seen a bobolink! Martyn Kenefick Helm's Field Guide describes this species as a boreal passage migrant. (Boreal – northern regions, characteristic of the climatic zone south of the Arctic.) It is a rare visitor to Trinidad on its migration route, through the West Indies and Central America, to winter in the southern part of South America. It favours wet lowlands in October. These birds were right on time! Back north, the species is less commonly seen in the spring migration.

We gingerly made our way back out to the cars and started fanning out and scanning the grassland fields. At first all we could see were the brown grassy blades. Then, just as Faraaz seemed to have spotted the birds afar off, an osprey swooped in nearby spooking the flock of about 40 - 50 bobolinks, allowing us to witness a remarkable life event!



**Spotted tody-flycatcher** Photo by Elizabeth Seebaran





**Above: Flock of Bobolinks, Below: Closer photo of a solitary Bobolink.** *Photo by Brian D'Abreu*



Moving on from Rahamut Trace, we briefly made a stop at Sudama Steps and birded along the river bank, one side lined with mangrove trees and the other with a freshwater marshland—a unique landscape. It was either the near midday, blistering sun or the mosquito bites in the shade of the trees. Our trek yielded juvenile scarlet ibis and the masked yellow-throat resident warbler, as well as a juvenile common black hawk that flew overhead.

Rashid Ali who ventured bravely a little further than the rest of the group, out of sight by us, managed to secure a lovely sighting of the little cuckoo on the mangrove side of the trail.

52 species were identified and reported by group members, with one unknown seedeater, possibly a female grey seedeater:

White-headed marsh tyrant  
 Pied water tyrant  
 Wattled jacana  
 Purple gallinule  
 Little blue heron  
 Great egret  
 Snowy egret  
 Black-crowned night heron  
 Striated heron  
 Yellow-chinned spinetail  
 Solitary sandpiper  
 Yellow-hooded blackbird  
 Limpkin  
 Pectoral sandpiper  
 Gray-breasted crake  
 White-winged swallow  
 Ruddy ground dove  
 Carib grackle  
 Long winged harrier  
 Yellow-headed caracara  
 Aplomado falcon  
 Ringed kingfisher  
 Semipalmated/western sandpipers  
 Common waxbills  
 Red breasted meadowlark  
 Lesser yellowlegs  
 Great kiskadee  
 Yellow bellied elanea  
 Spotted tody-flycatcher  
 Yellow warbler  
 Yellow oriole

Grayish saltator  
 Tropical mockingbird  
 Tropical kingbird  
 Smooth-billed ani  
 Blue-black grassquit  
 Osprey  
 Northern waterthrush  
 Bobolink  
 Green-rumped parrotlet  
 Pale-breasted spinetail  
 Masked yellowthroat  
 Cattle egret  
 Bananaquit  
 Rufous-browed peppershrike  
 Scarlet ibis  
 Yellow crowned night heron  
 Bicoloured conebill  
 Common black hawk  
 Spotted sandpiper  
 Little cuckoo  
 Also, possible grey seedeater – suspected female



**Common Black Hawk** Photo by Brian D'Abreu





## Ticks on Reptiles

Club member and President, Mr. Renoir Auguste is investigating what tick species are associated with what reptile species and where across Trinidad. If you happen to come across a reptile with a tick and can safely remove the tick from it, please contact him. Just to be clear, this is if you can safely handle the reptile and remove the tick - don't go trying to handle any venomous snakes or aggravate any reptiles - just if by the chance if it is possible and feasible. He can be contacted at [renguste@gmail.com](mailto:renguste@gmail.com) if you come across any such observations.



A tick as viewed under a microscope. Photo by Renoir Auguste

Please send us your ideas and observations to [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org) for inclusion in the next Bulletin!



## NATURE IN THE NEWS

A quarterly summary of local environmental news

by Kris Sookdeo



### August

#### National Bird featured in National Geographic

The issue of poaching of the scarlet ibis in Trinidad was featured by the National Geographic. In the story, a former poacher indicates that "Big leaguers slaughter the birds en masse and sell them in sets of three for about \$15." ... "Some poachers are everyday fishermen and crabbers, he continued, but others are influential people." ... "I know customs officials coming in here and doing it."

Link to article: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2018/08/wildlife-watch-news-scarlet-ibis-bush-meat-trinidad/>

### September

#### Local Honey Supply

According to the Minister of Agriculture, one of the reasons why the country has been very slow in allowing honey from outside is because so far Trinidad and Tobago has been able to maintain its

honey, disease-free. Speaking in Guyana, the Minister indicated that once Trinidad is satisfied that there are no phyto-sanitary risks, Trinidad and Tobago is willing to examine the law prohibiting transshipment of honey from Guyana.

#### Hunter arrested

A 41 year old man of Guayaguayare man was arrested after he went hunting with an unlicensed firearm. Officers were on patrol along Guayaguayare Road when they stopped the suspect driving a Kia Cerato. The officers searched the vehicle and allegedly found a 16 gauge double barrel shotgun with 25 rounds of 16 gauge ammunition, as well as the carcasses of a tattoo and a lappe.



'Naturalist in' Series  
**HEAD FOR THE HILLS**  
*A Review by Christopher K. Starr*



Scenic view of Dominica's forest

**Review of:**

**Frederick A. Ober 1880. *Camps in the Caribbees*. Boston: Lee & Shepard 360 pp. (Available online at the Biodiversity Heritage Library.)**

[46th in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see [www.ckstarr.net/reviews\\_of\\_naturalist.htm](http://www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm)]

Frederick Ober regarded the Lesser Antilles, or Caribbees, as the "loveliest islands in the western hemisphere". He went there in 1876 on behalf of the Smithsonian Institution and stayed almost two years. His main mission was to collect bird specimens for the museum. Some naturalist-in books, in the manner of ordinary travelogues, spend the first part of the book on a long approach to the destination. In contrast, Ober very sensibly tells us

that, since there was nothing special about his sea voyages there and back, he will spare the reader their narration. Plainly, he has his eye on what really matters.

He was also someone who thought about what he saw. In the very opening of the book we are told that "Along the entire group of the Caribbee Isles, sweeping their western shores, flows a strange, mysterious current." This sounds like the start of a poetic discourse on the magic of tropical winds, but it was nothing of the sort. Rather, he was referring to the long misunderstood outflow from the Orinoco, which varies seasonally according to the great river's volume.



There was evidently some uncertainty whether some of the (edible) mammals found in the West Indies were native or brought there by the Amerindians. The sparseness of information available at the time, relative to our own time, is seen in the opening statement of Chapter 16 that "There are monkeys in Grenada" without further comment on how they got there. They are the mona monkey, *Cercopithecus mona*, also introduced into St Kitts & Nevis from West Africa. (Note that this is not the green monkey, *Chlorocebus sabaeus*, also introduced from Africa into several of the West Indies).

A strong sense of enchantment pervades in Ober's clear, strong prose, that is often lyrical but never purple. He remarked that "It is one of the pleasures of existence here than I can at any time [even from his campsite up in the hills] have within my view the still, creamy, beautiful sea of the Antilles." It is perhaps the most loving tribute to the smaller islands that I have met from any naturalist, even Al Akong.

There are 19 chapters with 34 illustrations, plus an appendix listing the previously known birds of the Lesser Antilles and another on the 19 new species described from Ober's specimens. The first 10 chapters are about Dominica, with later chapters treating Guadeloupe, Martinique, St Vincent, the Grenadines and Grenada.

The question is posed of whether the Lesser Antilles had once had an above-sea connection with South America (continental islands) or were raised volcanically from the sea floor (oceanic islands). Ober was inclined to regard them as oceanic, with no previous dry-land connection, but withheld judgement. In fact, the proof that they are oceanic is better seen in the pattern of their biota than in their geological history.

The book's title is appropriate. Already at that time there was a continuous belt of cleared, populated coastal lowlands on each island, while the interior was mostly forested and little penetrated by tourists and scientists. Accordingly, Ober soon headed up to the hills, including Guadeloupe's Soufrière (1467 m, the highest peak in the Lesser Antilles), Dominica's Morne Diablotin (1447 m) and Boiling Lake (800 m), St Vincent's Soufrière (1234 m) and Grenada's Grand Etang (550 m). There

were few or no houses where he was going. Ober paid attention to daily changes in his sites, including the sounds of dusk and dawn. He took special note of bird calls associated with these changes.

In these pages we find affectionate remarks on habitats and their vegetation -- streams, waterfalls, pools, tree-ferns, palms, epiphytes and lianas -- and the living birds that he was there to shoot. He had a special affection for hummingbirds, of which there is just one species in eastern North America, his institutional base. Chapter 8 concerns his efforts to collect the Dominica-endemic imperial parrot or sisserou, *Amazona imperialis*. It required a regular hunting expedition, as it does not flock, seldom comes down to the lowlands, and is well camouflaged and shy.

In a later chapter he went up Dominica's Morne Diablotin in hopes of settling the mystery of the diablotin bird, which had not been reported as seen in 30 years. It was described by Labat (1722), but did it really exist? The testimony of local people was contradictory. The older people blamed the lack of recent sightings on egg predation by the



Mysterious bird from St Vincent's Soufriere

oppossum. In the end, Ober's party did not find any, and he doubted its existence.

That doesn't seem quite right. First of all, Labat's report was not hearsay. His hunting party, he said, bagged and then had for supper 15 or 16 diablotins. So, what is or was the diablotin? The bird known by that name today (and presumably at that time) is the black-capped petrel, *Pterodroma hastata*. Labat's several pages of description of the diablotin and its habits match this bird well. (His illustration on page 349, which looks more like a large crow, was presumably done by someone else.) The black-capped petrel, long since extinct in Dominica, is endangered in the few islands where it persists.

Chapter 12 describes a camp in the crater of St Vincent's Soufrière volcano, which had had a great eruption in 1812. The aim was to ascend the mountain and collect specimens of the famous "invisible" bird, the St Vincent solitaire, which had been heard but not reported seen for a century. Like many before him, Ober had heard but not seen the bird during an earlier ascent, and when he was finally able to see one he concluded that its song was ventriloquial, hence the difficulty in spotting it. With much difficulty, he was able to collect specimens. Initially described as a new species, it is now treated as a form of the rufous-throated solitaire, *Mydastes genibarbis*.



**Army Crabs**

Changing the subject, he remarks that "It was during this march that we met one of the most curious processions ever seen in this land of wonders." It was a great mass of crabs descending the hillside toward the sea. The crabs were

*Gecarcinus ruricola*, the most thoroughly terrestrial of all west-indian crabs, found virtually throughout the Antilles. They can live many kilometres from the sea as adults.

Among the various common names is "army crab", on account of the phenomenon Ober witnessed. In April-May, after mating, the females go down to the shore in a mass migration to lay their eggs in the sea, where the larvae develop.

Some wandering naturalists have a knack for going native, but Ober wasn't one of them. Although he got local help in collecting birds and so had plenty of contact with working-class people of the islands, Ober remained very much an outsider. He was about equally annoyed at the creolized English and French Creole that the people spoke. Why couldn't they speak standard English, like regular Americans? Uh, well, because they weren't regular Americans, and standard English wasn't their language.

Chapter 14, about a month spent on a sugar estate in Dominica, is like a mini version of W.H. Hudson's *Idle Days in Patagonia*. Ober was bed-ridden with an illness, so that after a few days "I had exhausted all the resources of the room; had watched my favorite lizard as he caught flies on the window-pane, and a great, naked-limbed spider [presumably *Heteropoda venatoria*], that every morning caught a cockroach and dragged it to my headboard."

Unable to go into the field, he gives us a disquisition on his (white) host's complaint about his workforce. The local black people, satisfied with the breadfruit and fish available for free, found little reason to undertake farm labour for a wage. "Of the many trees which were introduced into the West Indies, none have proved so great a boon to the laboring classes and bane to the planters as the bread-fruit." Indentured labourers imported from India were so well protected by the British government that their bosses were unable to abuse them to force them to work. The terms of indentureship specified six days of work per week, but they persisted in taking Saturday as a holiday and so only put in five days.

In a later chapter he noted that cacao was especially abundant on Grenada, with the pernicious (to sugar planters) result that people could earn some income without working for wages.

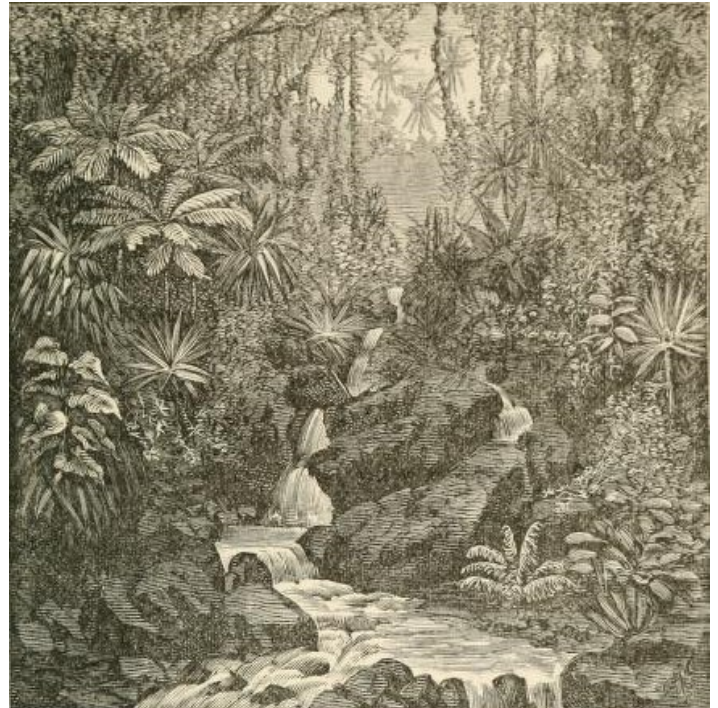


This is all set forth with a straight face, and the reader waits in vain for the punch line. "Oh my, the poor, suffering ex-slave-holder. The Africans are not facing starvation and so have conceived a puzzling distaste for farm labour, while the mischievous authorities prevent him from importuning the Indians to make them work for him. It is all just too much to bear!" Ober doesn't address the rather obvious (to us) question of why the planter didn't simply work the fields, himself, but his occasional references to "the better classes" implies a reason.

With repeated references to Columbus's remarks on the same places during his second voyage, Ober devotes more attention to colonial history than most of us would want, as it is a distraction from the natural history. Worst of all, Chapter 18 is mostly taken up with Josephine de Beauarnais's antecedents, birth and early years on Martinique. Maybe, as a stalwart of the "better classes", she really deserved so much ink, but to me the chapter is a dead loss. To return to people worthier of his attention, Ober was eager to meet the Caribs of Dominica, of which he had heard many admirable things. He visited a Carib reservation at Salibia and was based there for several weeks. Chapters 6-7 are about the Caribs' customs, crafts and economy, even as he regretted that they had been much acculturated. "Here, then, are people who have lost language, prestige, tradition, ambition, and it is a matter of comparatively little time ere they will have ceased to exist, and the forests and rivers, the cool, fern-shaded baths and tropic streams, no longer know their presence." His strong sympathy for the Caribs and their history of (losing) struggles for survival and independence somewhat compensate for the nonsense about Josephine and those poor ex-slaveholders.


Finally, there is comment on a group of low, arid islands with almost no real forest to speak of. "The natives of the Grenadines display a love for their islands not easily understood by a resident of more fertile and more attractive lands. I can understand this, but can hardly explain it. There is a feeling born of the isolation, of the very

barrenness of the land, of the loneliness of an island, that attracts one to it."



I am with Ober on this. I have had happy times in the Grenadines, which I hold in great affection and look forward to visiting again, but I couldn't quite tell you why. Maybe it requires a longer stay there.

#### Reference

Labat, J.B. 1722. *Nouveau Voyage aux Isles de l'Amérique*. Vol. 2. Paris: D.B. Delespine 598 pp. 





## RELIC FROM THE 1930s

By H. Martin Skinner Esq.

### THE NATURAL HISTORY OF MY HOUSE

I am the occupant of an old, ramshackle cedar house in the country. When I took possession of it a little over two years ago, it had been unoccupied for some time except for rats, bats, spiders, lizards etc. The house is cleaner now and more like a human abode, but most of the aboriginal inhabitants seemed to have stayed on and, being an ardent naturalist, I am glad of it. - In making this last statement I have strayed somewhat from the path of strict veracity on which I pride myself: - I should have said that they stayed on until recently, - the reason for the present sad depletion in their numbers I will speak of anon.

When I first arrived here, at dusk on a February evening, I found the house packed to the doors with a medley of my impedimenta, every item of which seemed to have been placed by the lorry-men who had brought it, in the most inaccessible place possible. My head, as I stepped inside, was surrounded by a cloud of bats, - mostly black house bats, which were obviously much annoyed at my intrusion. The only lamp I could find gave a light about equivalent to a very indifferent match and the whole effect was anything but inspiring. I was in a very run-down condition at the time and, I don't mind admitting, I felt very much like going out on the road and howling like a dog.

The bats, after a few days, decided to retire to the attic and there they remain. Bats are supposed to sleep by day, but these seem to spend all the time when not engaged in foraging for insects in violent quarrels and fights amongst themselves and a most infernal racket they make. As lodgers, they rank very far down the list in my estimation.

For some reason these bats frequently fly into the lighted rooms at night and come down with a heavy flop on the floor, from which they seem unable to rise. Some other small bats do not seem to mind the light in the least, but surge up and down catching mosquitoes and other small fry and, as they make no row and apparently do not live in the house, they are very welcome. Fortunately I don't seem to have any Desmond on my visiting list or amongst my permanent lodgers.

When I got sufficient light to see what was happening here in the night, I found that I possessed a veritable army corps of Tarantulas. Every night they sallied forth, each from his particular lair and each on his particular beat, moving with a stately deliberation that gave the impression of a slow-motion picture, - though they are capable of a fine turn of speed when the occasion arises. Being an ardent admirer of these mis-named 'Tarantulas', I gave strict orders to my household that they were not to be destroyed. They are the sworn foes of cockroaches and are quite harmless if not treated roughly, - I frequently let them run over my hands and several of them have acquired names, - I won't swear that they know and answer to them, but I like to think they do. They are not as numerous as formerly, but I still have several.

Geckoes (24-hours) are another numerous clan and one that I am also very fond of. I have taught my family to spare them. They are a bit sceptical of my statement that they are absolutely harmless and there are some uneasy squirmings when one draws near, but at least they don't attack them on sight with a broom, which seems to be their sad fate in most households. I admit it is a bit unnerving when a pair, engaged in a duel on the ceiling, land with a flop on one's head, - a not unusual occurrence.



Jackass' but they are useful beasts and should be preserved.

There are scores of little house lizards popping in and out of every cranny all day long, -cheerful little chaps they are and give me a lot of amusement. From the moment they hatch from the tiny hard-shelled egg they are simply packed with energy and don't seem to waste a moment of daylight hours.

Of the rats I can speak only with profound contempt and dislike. Thanks to cats and traps, they are considerably less numerous than formerly and I shall be only too happy to dispense with those that remain. Curse them! -they eat my soap, -even carbolic soap and anything else they can get hold of and yet some of them are so infernally smart that the choicest of rat-provender fails to tempt them when placed in a trap. They get up in some inaccessible place and sing insulting 'calypsoes' at the cats.

Tree frogs ('Flying Crapeauds') are occasional visitors, leaping wildly about. I know of no better indoor exercise than trying to catch one. Their vocal exercises, with the advent of rain, are deafening.

Giant Toads ('Crapeauds') patronise the front steps and insist on making beds in my choicest boxes of seedlings. I occasionally boot one down the steps in exasperation, but they don't seem to mind and are soon back.

At one time I had a large collection of snakes on the premises garnered about the estate, but commissariat difficulties made me let them go. -They ranged from 'Boucan snakes' to boas and, at one time, I had eleven different kinds. One was a real pet, -a 'whip-snake' named 'Terence' who seemed to really like being handled. My eldest daughter was in the habit of wearing him wrapped two or three times round her neck as a necklace and he was quite content to stay there. He is still with us, - (in formalin) - he passed away peacefully 'regretted by all'.

The rest of my menagerie consists of domestic animals, -dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea-pigs, ducks and fowls. Of these I propose to deal with one only, -the latest arrival, a Siamese kitten 'Johnny Ah-Wah'. He is the most amusing cat I have ever come across but, alas!, he is the cause of the great diminution in the number of the other lodgers referred to at the beginning of this article. -If he would confine his attentions to the rats and cockroaches, I would have nothing to say: -I don't even mind his killing bats, (He is the only cat I have ever met that will eat a bat), -but he also kills and eats the geckos and tarantulas! -The other day he pounced on 'Wilfred', -a prize Tarantula that I was fattening up for the next Live-stock & Pet Show, -it gave him a severe tummy-ache and serve him right, -but that doesn't deter him. Gilbert the Gecko and several of his progeny have met untimely ends and dozens of house lizards. If he keeps on at this rate, it looks as if the whole menagerie will eventually be comprised in one individual.

'Oh! -I am a cook and a captain bold  
And the mate of the 'Nancy' brig,  
And a bo'sun tight and a midshipmite  
And the crew of the captain's gig'

'Old Bill'

(H. Martyn Skinner 'verdant Vale' Couva)





# BAHAMAS PLANT DOCUMENTATION MILESTONE

*By Reynold C. Boyce*



**I recently returned from a trip to the Bahamas, partly on a family holiday but especially to advance my Caribbean Wild Plant documentation project started way back in the 1980s.**

I was forewarned by friends back here not to expect much biodiversity in the Bahamas as that country was mainly an American Beach and Casino Gambling Resort.. But low and behold I was in for a pleasant surprise. The country houses 26 national parks covering “700,00 acres of land and sea” according to the Bahamas National Trust, an NGO that administers parks and museums throughout the 70-island nation. In fact, in New Providence Island, where Nassau, the capital is situated, I was able to visit four well-maintained parks which enabled me to photo-document over 30 flowering plants during my 9-day visit. This amounts to the largest short-stay collection with the possible exception of my Jamaican visit.

I can proudly state that I have now traversed island sites in the South (inc. Curaçao), the East (from Grenada to Anguilla), the West (Jamaica) and now the Northern Caribbean (Bahamas) which have netted me over 980 separate plant species in my Photographic slide (Excel & Access) data-bases.

Being fully aware that this is a mere fraction of the native species in the wider Caribbean region, and that some in my collection are introduced species, yet I am hoping to use these as a random sample to gage the level of species /genus evolution and dispersal. For far too long we have been hearing that T&T and other “continental” islands in the south house have totally separate biota from our eastern, western and northern “oceanic” neighbours. I feel this is an over-exaggerated position as cursory observation demonstrates that there is more of an overlapping of species than is conventionally accepted. In fact, I look forward to establishing a more accurate sample when I get to visit Hispaniola and Cuba to expand on my

western, sub-regional data and cross over the 1000 native species threshold.

Previous bio-inventory trips to Monsterrat, Anguilla and Grenada have already been written and printed in the Field Naturalist Quarterly Bulletin over the years. Hence for a fuller appreciation of the project see:

*Monsterrat: A Naturalist Surprise* – January to March 2008: Issue 1/2008

*A biodiverse Anguilla* - October to December 2010: Issue 4/2010

*A Revitalised Grenada and its Anolis Lizards* – Jan. to March 2012: Issue 1/2012

Insights into the methodology used were presented at a *Members Evening* session of the TTFNC back in 2006 and printed in the Bulletin under the heading:

*Cataloguing Caribbean Plants* - July to September 2007: Issue 3/2007.

My first contact of Bahamian wildlife came just outside our guesthouse room. There on the backyard trees and pilings were the head-bobbing of unmistakable *Anolis* lizards. On closer examination they appeared to be *Anolis sagrei* on its home soil.



*Anolis sagrei* lizard. Photo by Reynold C. Boyce



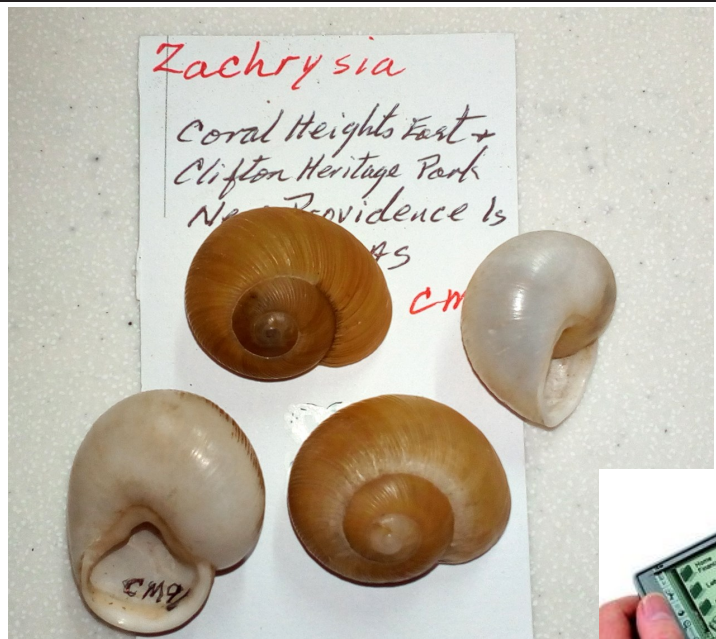
*A. sagrei* is noted for its extensive dispersal/colonization of Florida and areas increasingly up the Eastern States of the US where it has all but displaced the lone American Anolis, *A. carolinensis*, which has had to perch further and further up tree trunks for survival. Sightings have since been as far afield as Hawaii, Taiwan and many other countries not known for Anolis habitation but for being strong trading partners with the USA. Of late *A. sagrei* has been sighted here in Trinidad after having taken up residence in neighbouring Grenada. So it was nice to capture on film original natives in their true phenotypic glory.

I started my first morning's foray in the direction of the closest beach. This took me along the suburbs of Coral Heights East and West, where I netted a variety of beautiful flowering plants especially in vacant lots. Three species that fascinated me on this walkabout was the paperbark tea tree (*Melaleuca quinquenervia*), the cup of gold shrub (*Solandra nitida*) and the white flowering vine (*Jasminum fluminense*). Although I later found them to be introduced /invasive species they nonetheless fired my floral-hunting enthusiasm over the next nine days.

I eventually arrived at neighbouring Coral Harbour Bay. Walking along the sandy beach I came upon many prominent plant species like: beach cabbage (*Scaevola taccada*), the ubiquitous whistling pine (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) and the red mangrove (*Rhizophora mangle*).

Being a long-time shell collector I immediately gravitated to a rocky outcrop, jutting out 50 metres or more into the sea: dividing the sandy beach on the one side from a swampy estuary on the other. Being Lucky to be there at low tide, I walked along the outcrop unearthing freshly opened / scraped specimens of the gaudy asaphis bivalve (*Asaphis deflorata*). These appeared in various shades of pink exterior and purple interior with both valves still attached as if recently plucked by the swarming sea birds. I had previously collected specimens of this species from a rocky bay in Chacachacare but these were smaller and less colourful.

While on the topic of molluscs, there was a multitude of Cuban caracole (*Zachrysia provisoria*), a globular snail shell, strewn throughout suburban



**Cuban Caracole.** Photo by Reynold C. Boyce

backyards of the island. These had previously been seen in Barbados (also a heavily limestone island) but were of a smaller and less striated variety. Visiting some fisher folk in the suburb of Cable Beach, where there were palm trees lining the pavement, I was pleasantly surprised to see many live, brightly-patterned tree snails (*Drymaeus multilineatus*) at varying heights, cemented on the palm trunks. A more exciting find was the discovery of a specimen of the lone endemic species, *Opisthosiphon bahamensis*, within a limestone outcrop, in one of the soon to be described National Parks.

Of the four National Parks visited in New Providence Island by far the most spectacular was



**Tree Snails.** Photo by Reynold C. Boyce

the Primeval Forest National Park. This small, 7.5-acre park in the south western part of the island, exists as an oasis of evergreen forest amidst an island where swampy marches and secondary woodlands predominate. The topography is heavily limestone with a maze of boardwalks, bridges and even an aluminum, spiral staircase traversing down a deep limestone cavern. In fact, the Park Office / Visitor's Centre is built over a deep limestone sinkhole which is covered over in thick glass and lit-up below to the delight of visitors.

Some of the predominant plants there were wild guava (*Tetrazygia bicolor*), the ramshorn (*Pithecellopium keyense*), wild coffee (*Psychotria nervosa*), small leaved blolly (*Guapira discolor*) and the infamous poison wood tree (*Metopium toxiferum*) together with a plethora of palms, ferns and exotic grasses like the bamboo grass (*Lasiacis divaricata*).

A park of biodiverse importance is the Bonefish Pond National Park. Built around 1,235 acres of wetlands it is viewed as a nursery for water fowl, conchs and fishes of which the bonefish (*Albula vulpes*) is locally popular. One of the amazing features is the size and length of the wooden boardwalk, extending over 100 metres amidst shallow seawater and an extensive mangrove estuary. Information plaques are strategically placed to educate visitors about the type of fish below and the type of salt-tolerant plants above. Coming from Fishing Pond this struck me as an ideal model to copy if ever the authorities could be persuaded to

rebuild our perished boardwalk.

Besides the three common types of mangrove some of the exotic plants around were the wild thyme (*Rhachicallis Americana*), black torch (*Erithalis fruticosa*), bay marigold (*Borrchia arborescens*) and the unique wild coral (*Salicornia virginica*) which, growing out of brackish water, develops pigmented stalks instead of leaves for photosynthesis. Finally on drier marshland, I was lucky to discover the beautiful endemic Bahamian passion fruit (*Passiflora bahamensis*).

Of the other two parks visited, the Clifton



**Wild Coral.** Photo by Reynold C. Boyce

Heritage Park was mainly a walk-by Cultural Museum of Plantation relics. It displayed remains of plantation owners (Loyalist) houses and various Amerindian (Lucayan) artefacts. Foremost however, were the slave quarters which were meticulously restored together with beds and other simple furniture used for everyday living. However, while relishing the well-guided anthropological tour, my eyes remained roaming along the trails for exotic flowering plants many of which were also preserved as part of the park's bountiful display. Three plants that stood out in this semi-scrub woodland were: the lancewood tree (*Ocotea coriacea*) evident with its purple-red berries, the Bahama senna shrub (*Cassia chapmanii*) and one of the most eye-catching, delicate herbs, the marsh gentian (*Eustoma exaltatum*).

The last visited park was the Retreat Gardens, an 11-acre nature reserve of hardwood forest in the



**Bonefish Pond National Park Boardwalk.** Photo by Reynold C. Boyce



midst of Nassau's Northwestern suburbs. It was originally owned by Mr & Mrs Langlois, an English colonial couple who travelled the world collecting over 170 species of rare, exotic palms which they transplanted on their estate. The estate was eventually bequeathed to the National Trust which converted it to its headquarters in 1977 and built a maze of walking trails for visitors to view and enjoy the palms together with the variety of local flora. I was fortunate to be offered a personally conducted tour by Ms Shannon Yates, the assistant curator, who extended me the courtesy of historical and biological (IDing) information once she learnt of my affiliation with the TTFNC and the nature of my plant research. Two local species struck my fancy: the red cedar tree (*Juniperus bermudiana*), and the bromeliad (*Tillandsia flexuosa*) that was growing, tastefully, in a hanging basket much like an orchid.

In closing I must state that all the parks were manned by very friendly and helpful guides and support staff who were willing to go the extra mile in IDing plants and providing other useful information. Special thanks go out to Ms. Tina Bethel, her family and friends who went beyond being guest house hosts to being our real tour companions in driving us around, not just to parks, but to restaurants and supermarkets.

For those willing to view images and information on the plant species outlined you can visit the website: [Levypreserve.org](http://Levypreserve.org), the official information site of Leon Levy Native Plant Preserve, the premiere botanical organisation in the Bahamas. 🐞



**Marsh Gentian.** Photo by Reynold C. Boyce



**TTFNC QUARTERLY BULLETINS & INDEX ONLINE LINK :**

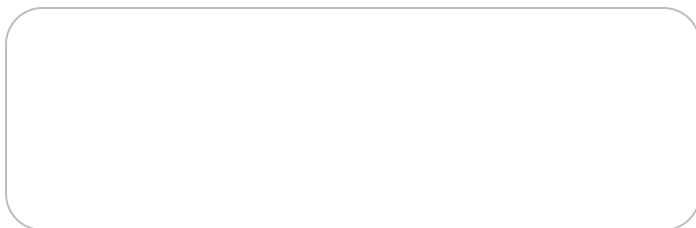
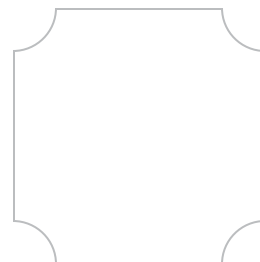
[www.ttfnc.org/publication/field-naturalist/](http://www.ttfnc.org/publication/field-naturalist/)



## Management Notices

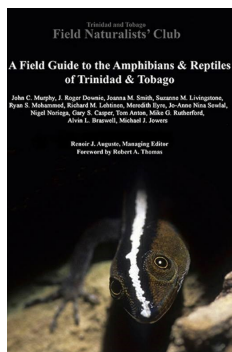
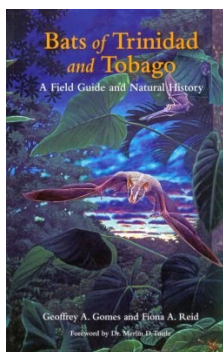
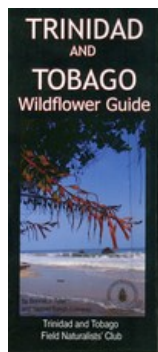
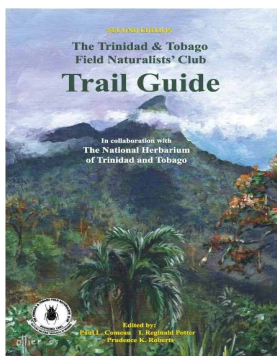
**NOTICE FROM THE EDITORS:** Do you have any natural history articles, anecdotes or trip reports that could be published in *The Field Naturalist*? We welcome contributions from members. Please email your ideas or finished pieces to [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org). We look forward to hearing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

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 (*prices shown are those paid when purchasing directly from the Club*):



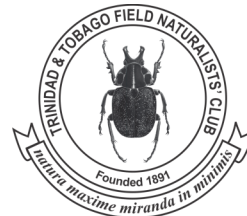
TTFNC Trail Guide (\$150); T&T Wildflower Guide (\$50); Bats of T&T (\$200); Field Guide to Amphibians & Reptiles (\$180); 2018 Calendar (\$25)

## MISCELLANEOUS

### Your 2018 or 2019 Annual Membership Fees are Due:

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

**Did you know?** It is now possible to renew your membership online?  
See [www.ttfnc.org/funding](http://www.ttfnc.org/funding) for details. You can join the club this way, too!



### Submission of articles and field trip reports:

1. All articles must reach the editors by the eighth week of each quarter.
2. Electronic copies can be submitted to the editors at: [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org)  
or directly to the editors or any member of Management. Please include 'QB2019' in the email subject label.