



# THE FIELD NATURALIST

Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

January – March 2019

Issue No: 1/2019



## BIRD REPORT JANUARY 2019 QUITE A TRIP!



by Matt Kelly

A friend of mine, who is actually also a birder, has a name for the time of our meet-up at the Valpark Shopping Plaza; he calls it “Stupid O’Clock!” Yes, our meeting time today was 4:30 am, and sometimes I do question the sanity of birding. Ah, but the day was to prove it was worth it!

According to the TTFNC Hiking Guide, the summit of Morne Bleu stands at 848 metres (2781 feet) surrounded by Montane Forest, and is the fifth highest summit in Trinidad and Tobago. Its name relates to the cold condition that surrounds the mountain, which sometimes appear misty blue. I knew the first and second highest peaks in Trinidad,

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Trinidad Piping Guan, locally known as the “Pawi” (*Pipile pipile*). Photo by Devan Mulchansingh

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#### 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



## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!



The club warmly welcomes the following new members:

Christianne Zakour  
Vikhana Maraj  
Dianne Richardson Lestrade  
Camille Pagee

Rea C Raghunanan  
Miquel Garcia  
Salma Rahaman-Ramatally  
Keron Morean

Kerresha Khan

**Congratulations** are in order to past TTFNC secretary and The Field Naturalist editor, Amy Deacon, and fellow club member, Aidan Farrel on the birth of their son Ferdia. As seen in this photo, Ferdia is already a budding nature enthusiast, as he views a leatherback turtle at no more than three months old! A future TTFNC junior member in the making. 



*Photo courtesy Amy Deacon*



**L to R: Elizabeth Seebaran , Dr. Stuart Millar, Dr. Feroze Omardeen, Prof. Doug Fraser (this is Doug's 161<sup>st</sup> trip to Trinidad!), Matt Kelly, Devan Mulchansingh, Brian D'Abreau, (seated in front): Vanessa Aberdeen, Nicole Gomes. Photo by Matt Kelly**

*(cont'd from page 1)*

but wondered what the third and fourth were? I got my answers from Glen Wilkes. The five highest peaks in Trinidad are:

- El Cerro del Aripo - 940 meters (3084 feet)
- El Tucuche - 936 meters (3072 feet)
- "Pico Escondido" or "Hidden Peak" (over 3000 feet)
- Chaguaramal - 859 meters (2817 feet)
- Morne Bleu - 848 meters (2781 feet)

Glen says the current information has been mostly gleaned from the "Land Surveyors' Handbook" (published in 1933), but much information is uncertain. He will be working on getting Trinidad's three highest peaks more accurately described. But that is another story...

Our group meandered our way up the Arima-Blanchisseuse Road in the dark. The word, "Blanchisseuse" comes from the French, meaning

"Washerwoman". We stopped once in hope of hearing a mottled owl, which is very possible here; no luck. Our group of nine parked at the bottom of the road to the TSTT Morne Bleu Textel Station (Tropospheric Scatter Station) in the dark. Tropospheric scatter, is a system developed in the 1950's to bounce microwave radio communications off the troposphere (in the upper atmosphere) to reach an area up to 300 km.

It was very cool this morning, with light misty drizzle, after a heavier rain, with very thick fog, or more precisely, we found ourselves in heavy clouds. We were targeting the short-tailed nighthawk, but had no luck. As we walked up, Prof. Doug Fraser may have seen a spectacled owl fly off the electrical wires. As the struggling daylight began to break through the clouds, our luck started. We first had a pair of hepatic tanagers inside the TSTT compound,

followed by a plain-brown woodcreeper, and great looks at a male collared trogon.

After daybreak, as our group moved down the road back to the cars, we came upon three Trinidad piping guan, locally known as “pawi” in the low treetops right along the road. The pawi is critically endangered, and “endemic”, meaning they’re found nowhere else on earth, but in Trinidad! They appeared to be mostly untroubled by our presence. At least one was seen eating young leaves in its tree. We could not identify the tree. Previous studies have shown the pawi to eat a diet of fruits, seeds and a variety of leaves, and sometimes even insects. They rarely come down from the treetops, not even for water, as they can drink from arboreal bromeliads. We had some great views, and many photos were taken, before these large avian wonders sauntered silently off through the treetops together.



**Another shot of the Pawi.**

*Photo by Devan Mulchansingh*

Stuart offered the group a lift in his truck to the Las Lapas junction. The whole group loaded in. Once there, we walked down Blanchisseuse Road towards Brasso Seco to check “The Birdiest Tree in Trinidad”, which is a tall *Trema* tree (*Trema micranthum*). We had great luck there viewing many foraging species, as the tree was fruiting. Among our discoveries were the Olive-striped Flycatcher (at least two) and a pair of Summer Tanagers. Devan caught a photo of a flyover of a Plumbeous Kite, which is very rare for this time of year.

From the Las Lapas junction, we walked down Lopinot Road, and were rewarded with many more birds to add to the day’s list, including a gray-throated leaf-tosser and a pair of yellow-legged thrush. We also identified the call of an ornate hawk-eagle, close by in the canopy.

We were quite elated with the morning, and the walk back to Morne Bleu access road passed rather quickly. This certainly was “Quite a Trip!” The following are the 53 species identified, by visual identification and/or calling, as well as quantities found on this trip: (\* = Rare):

- 3 \*Trinidad Piping-Guan (“Pawi”), *Pipile pipile*
- 7 Short-tailed Swift, *Chaetura brachyura*
- 1 Rufous-breasted Hermit, *Glaucis hirsutus*
- 1 Black-throated Mango, *Anthracothorax nigricollis*
- 3 Blue-chinned Sapphire, *Chlorestes notata*
- 2 White-chested Emerald, *Amazilia brevirostris*
- 1 \*Ornate Hawk-Eagle, *Spizaetus ornatus*
- 1 \*Plumbeous Kite, *Ictinia plumbea*
- 1 Gray-lined Hawk, *Buteo nitidus*
- 1 Zone-tailed Hawk, *Buteo albonotatus*
- 1 Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, *Glaucidium brasilianum*
- 2 Green-backed Trogon, *Trogon viridis*
- 1 Guianan Trogon, *Trogon violaceus*
- 2 Collared Trogon, *Trogon collaris*
- 5 Channel-billed Toucan, *Ramphastos vitellinus*
- 1 Lineated Woodpecker, *Dryocopus lineatus*
- 1 Golden-olive Woodpecker, *Colaptes rubiginosus*
- 30 Orange-winged Parrot, *Amazona amazonica*
- 1 Barred Antshrike, *Thamnophilus doliatus*
- 1 Black-faced Antthrush, *Formicarius analis*
- 1 \*Gray-throated Leaf-tosser, *Sclerurus albigularis*
- 1 Stripe-breasted Spinetail, *Synallaxis cinnamomea*
- 2 \*Olive-striped Flycatcher, *Mionectes olivaceus*
- 3 Yellow-breasted Flycatcher, *Tolmomyias flaviventris*
- 1 Euler's Flycatcher, *Lathrotriccus euleri*
- 1 Tropical Pewee, *Contopus cinereus*
- 1 Great Kiskadee, *Pitangus sulphuratus*
- 1 Tropical Kingbird, *Tyrannus melancholicus*
- 2 Bearded Bellbird *Procnias averano*
- 2 White-bearded Manakin, *Manacus manacus*
- 12 Golden-headed Manakin, *Ceratopipra erythrocephala*
- 1 Gray-breasted Martin, *Progne chalybea*
- 1 House Wren, *Troglodytes aedon*

- 5 Rufous-breasted Wren, *Pheugopedius rutilus*  
 1 Long-billed Gnatwren, *Ramphocaenus melanurus*  
 2 \*Yellow-legged Thrush, *Turdus flavipes*  
 1 White-necked Thrush, *Turdus albicollis*  
 2 Spectacled Thrush, *Turdus nudigenis*  
 2 Violaceous Euphonia, *Euphonia violacea*  
 2 Crested Oropendola, *Psarocolius decumanus*  
 1 Northern Waterthrush, *Parkesia noveboracensis*  
 3 American Redstart, *Setophaga ruticilla*  
 2 \*Hepatic Tanager, *Piranga flava*  
 2 \*Summer Tanager, *Piranga rubra*  
 6 White-lined Tanager, *Tachyphonus rufus*  
 2 Blue-gray Tanager, *Thraupis episcopus*  
 15 Palm Tanager, *Thraupis palmarum* Estimate  
 2 Speckled Tanager, *Ixothraupis guttata*  
 8 Bay-headed Tanager *Tangara gyrola*  
 1 Blue Dacnis, *Dacnis cayana*  
 3 Purple Honeycreeper, *Cyanerpes caeruleus*  
 1 Blue-black Grassquit, *Volatinia jacarina*  
 18 Bananaquit, *Coereba flaveola*

\* = Rare

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 Wilkes, Glen, 2019, Personal Communication, February 1, 2019.

For Further information regarding the pawi:

Pawi Study Group, <http://pawistudygroup.yolasite.com/>

The Online Guide to the Animals of Trinidad and Tobago  
 Pipile pipile (Trinidad Piping-guan or Pawi)  
[https://sta.uwi.edu/fst/lifesciences/sites/default/files/lifesciences/documents/ogatt/Pipile\\_pipile%20-%20Trinidad%20Piping-guan%20or%20Pawi.pdf](https://sta.uwi.edu/fst/lifesciences/sites/default/files/lifesciences/documents/ogatt/Pipile_pipile%20-%20Trinidad%20Piping-guan%20or%20Pawi.pdf) 



## DISCOVERING A NEW SPECIES – THE TALE OF THE TOBAGO STREAM SNAKE

by Renoir Auguste



**As a child growing up I had an interest in animals.** I found joy in observing wildlife in their natural habitat which, for the most, part at the time was on television. It was a passion that would stay with me to this day. One of the dreams of any aspiring zoologist is discovering new species not known to the human population. Could this be a dream that a 'young' naturalist can materialize, along the likes of the past great naturalists?

This story can begin at many different points, but perhaps one of the key moments that lead to the discovery started at the first annual Trinidad and Tobago Bioblitz in 2012, organized by Mike Rutherford. At the time, I was generally interested in animals. I left home one Saturday morning to go to the Bioblitz. I hardly knew anyone participating then, just a few people. Initially, I decided I would join the bird group to help with surveys. I was no expert but I wanted to be involved doing what I like to do. I knew no one from the bird group, so for a

little while I stood there at the meeting point aimlessly. But faith was to play its part. My two time project supervisor Adrian Hailey saw me and asked if I wanted to join the amphibian and reptile group. I did not hesitate. It was then I met John Murphy, author of the 1997 book "The Amphibians and Reptiles of Trinidad and Tobago". I was out with THE experts on T&T herpetofauna. It was a fantastic experience as we saw some reptiles and I even helped by spotting a few lizards. That first Bioblitz left a lasting impression on me, and I especially thank the three persons aforementioned for that. Any young aspiring naturalist needs good mentors and they all were and still are.

As the years passed on, I found myself a bit of a niche. I decided to stick with doing herpetofauna surveys for the Bioblitz, which ultimately led to my becoming an unofficial local 'herpetofauna expert'.



**The Tobago stream snake.** *Photo by Rainer Deo*

During the years since the first Bioblitz, I kept in contact with John Murphy. He regularly visited Trinidad since and we have had many adventures, including one time having our vehicle stuck in Brasso Seco. However, the crux of this story came about in 2016. John Murphy, Alvin Braswell and I were in Tobago in June of that year. We decided to go over and look for reptiles mainly in and around the Main Ridge Forest Reserve. One morning, while walking along one of the trails, we saw a snake and Alvin quickly grabbed it. As we looked at it, we knew it was something unique right away. With our permit from the Tobago House of Assembly, we took the individual back to our cottage to take a closer look and photograph it. We also took its DNA and the specimen is now a voucher at The University of the West Indies Zoology Museum. After the genetic results came in, it was official – a new species never before recorded!

The academia process then went forward, whereby John with the help of colleagues from

abroad, and I locally, put together a paper that came out in January 2019 (Murphy et al. 2019 ZooKeys 817: 131-157) describing the new snake.

It was given the common name “Tobago stream snake” as the specimen was found near a stream. Although it is currently only known from Tobago (endemic) the possibility of its being discovered in South America by researchers cannot be ruled out. (Golden tree frog anyone?)

As authors describing this snake, we are among the likes of Linnaeus and others to describe ‘new’ species to science. It had actually happened. The young boy who had a passion for observing animals in the wild and dreamed of discovering new species was one of the co-discoverers to a new snake to science. Would it be the last? Although T&T is a relatively small twin island nation, the chance of discovering new species is still very possible. I encourage all naturalists, especially the young ones coming up, that you too can one day discover a new species! 🐛



## THE 17 YEAR OLD RECORD

by Kamal Mahabir



The team that did it! L-R: Sataish, Nigel, Kamal, Rodney. Photo courtesy Kamal Mahabir

**Matt Kelly, that venerable birder, first made me aware of it.** The record for most bird species recorded in one calendar day by the same party was 177. One hundred and seventy-seven! Some people record that amount in an entire year of birding. And who held that record? None other than birding legends Martyn Kenefick (the man who literally wrote the book), Dr Floyd Hayes and his son Brett way back in September (peak migration time) 2001 -17yrs ago. They had even broken their previous record of 167 set a year earlier.

Floyd and Martyn had done the North to Central (west) route starting at Asa Wright through the Caroni Rice Fields and ending in the mudflats-Brickfield, Waterloo and Orange Valley by evening fall and then unto Wallerfield for more night birds.

Matt and Feroze Omardeen – another birding legend – had already tried a few times before. However the times they tried, and when I came aboard, were done when Matt was available – December and March. In 2017 we made another

two unsuccessful attempts further compounded by logistical issues.

In 2018 a few major changes occurred. First, Feroze unfortunately opted out of the early morning outings and Nigel Lallsingh – another birding legend- was drafted in. The other major change was that we fine-tuned the route. The route change occurred by chance and it went like this. Early in January of 2018 Nigel and I decided to revisit Spring Trace, Erin for a spot of birding. Why revisit? Because a few years earlier, on a Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalist Club Field Trip to the Erin Savannahs, then President Darshan Narang had organised an early morning birding trip. Nigel had spotted blackpoll, black, white and bay-breasted warblers feeding on a flowering ficus tree. Three rare warblers on the same tree at the same time! So fond memories existed for us in this area. Coming back to the January 2018 trip, it was bitter and then very sweet. The ficus tree where we had found the birds was nowhere to be found as the

entire area had been cleared by the Forestry Division and young pine trees were sprouting. But—and here is the sweet part— Nigel spotted an extremely rare white-eyed vireo! In addition, a total of 70 species were recorded in the area.

To recap up to this point, Nigel was in, Feroze opted out and our route was changed from Talparo – Caroni Rice Fields and the mudflats to Erin, South Oropouche Swamp, Rahamut Trace and the mudflats. Mudflats occur at Orange Valley, Temple by the Sea and Brickfield. The basic intention was to get forest, grassland, raptors and whatever else may come in from the Mainland at Erin, the swamp and open grassland and Rahamut Trace, and shorebirds at the mudflats.

To be honest, our ‘big day’ was nearly cancelled. Recovering from a viral attack, the guys did not take it too kindly when it did not seem that my involvement was possible. Getting up at 2 a.m. and driving nearly 200km in one day with about five kilometres of walking, seemed very, very daunting. However, with Rodney’s coaxing and his enthusiasm, combined with Nigel’s disappointment about my not going, I had no choice but to change my mind. Thanks fellas!

So... for the sixth try, we were up at 2 a.m. on Friday 28th September, 2018. My wife provided two Thermos flasks of pure coffee, sandwiches and bananas and I was on my way. Rodney had graciously offered to drive and, after picking up Nigel and approximately four hours after I had awoken, we recorded our first bird – a white-tailed nightjar which had so thankfully sat on the Spring Trace entrance in Erin. We were disappointed to arrive so relatively late – sunlight was everywhere and the chance of spotting night birds, including the mottled owl which we had recorded on the first two quarters, seemed dim; or so we thought. Mottled owl or not, bad start or not, Nigel became animated when he observed a visiting blackpoll warbler high on a tree near us. We then were delighted to observe and photograph two blue-headed parrots – a first for us in this area. We continued harvesting bird species in this very fertile birding area, including the very shy but expected blue ground dove which was recorded here regularly. Owls recorded were ferruginous pygmy owl and tropical screech owl and we had given up on the mottled owl when from the deep trees the

familiar bark like call was heard as if to say “Count me too!” Sometimes you just need luck! Little cuckoo, squirrel cuckoo, guinian and green-backed trogons all came forward to be identified. As we were driving out, three grey-necked (cowled) wood rails blocked our way like a carnival band. Cautiously and happily the guys clicked away. Just as we were lamenting the fact that we did not record some common birds, up came a cocoa thrush and great kiskadee – birds we had not seen or heard for the morning.

As we were on our way to the doubles vendor at the corner of Erin Road, and armed with no less than 96 species from Erin, we spotted an all dark, kite-like bird in the distance over the tree line. Before we had time to safely stop and whip out the cameras it had disappeared. Possible black kite? Without good photographic evidence we could not be sure or record it.

La Brea was supposed to yield blue and yellow macaws, scaled doves and a possible crested caracara. Two blue and yellow macaws posed easily atop a rotten tree stump. Not so the scaled dove. We searched and searched and finally one fluttered away silently in the midday heat. The crested caracara was a no-show.

The next stop was the South Oropouche Swamp – a restricted access area – but passes were already secured. Sataish lamented about the lack of scarlet ibises, but more on that later. In any event, the “chink” of an early migrant the northern waterthrush was music to our ears.

As we were about to leave, we were informed of widespread heavy rains and flooding all over Trinidad especially South Trinidad. But where were the rains? Nary a drop was to be seen anywhere but that was about to change drastically very soon.

The drive from South Oropouche Swamp to Rahamut Trace proved frustratingly long as we encountered Friday afternoon traffic. An attempt to find an alternate route proved futile and we had to re-enter the traffic stream and encounter floods in the Rahamut Trace area. Water was all around but it seemed that the birds were everywhere. The extremely rare nacunda nighthawk was flushed out some distance away as was a blue-winged teal --two superb additions to the list. Other perfect ticks were given to a South-American snipe and an immature American golden plover. As expected a

yellow-breasted crane called from a waterlogged area, but where were the spotted tody flycatcher and pale-breasted spintail? After a bit of searching they were found, but now another problem loomed. It was great to see such rare species but how far away from the record were we? A rough count showed we were still about 22 behind and we only expected 10 species at Orange Valley. That certainly would not cut it – we were thinking that all we could muster was the 2000 count of 166. Now that the doubts began to creep in there and then, we realised how difficult it was to beat 177 and why the record stood for 17 long years! Now with each new bird we began to congratulate each other as if to summon courage and luck. Just as we were leaving Rahamut Trace, a spectacled thrush seemed to cheer us on – another common bird that we had not encountered for the entire day until now!

An aninga seemed to wave to us from the beleaguered Petrotrin Refinery Pond and we attempted to go to Carli Bay to quickly pick up a rufous crab hawk, but was petrified to see high flood waters at the start of the Carli Bay Road. Courageously, we pushed onwards to Orange Valley hoping to not get stuck in floods, but another disappointment awaited us. This certainly was not easy! Since the creek traffic had slowed us up

considerably, the high tides were fast approaching the mangrove and certain disappearance of most of the wildlife! So, we had to spot birds in a hurry if we were to break the record. Orange Valley, however, yielded its best to us including black-bellied plover, both black-crowned and yellow-crowned night herons, American flamingo, red knots, yellow-billed terns and then the highlight of the day – a Hudsonian godwit flyover! A few more birds at this point but still... short of the target.

At Waterloo, people were in the car park instead of the birds so we hurried on to Brickfield with fast fading light and the proverbial upcoming spring-tide that waits on no man. At Brickfield, a Wilson's plover equalled the record. Just then a flock of scarlet ibises flew south over the sea and there it was – record broken with our National Bird. What a coincidence! We finished at a new record of 183 and also included a small-billed elaenia at Brickfield.

What's the future target for a 'big day' attempt? Certainly 185 as we missed some common species like common pauraque, purple honeycreeper and savannah hawk. In conclusion, this record is dedicated to Matt Kelly who certainly envisioned it. Nigel Lallsingh, Rodney Jagai, Sataish Rampersad and me, Kamal Mahabir, merely executed his vision. Oh, the 17 year old record? It's broken! 

Geology Group Report, 27th January, 2019

## BRASSO VENADO– THE 'DRY' WATERFALL

By Reg Potter



**Once again we were privileged to have Philip Farfan, retired oil company geological manager to conduct the annual geological trip and provide his interesting explanations and anecdotes.** This year, the trip was to the Brasso Venado waterfall and the surrounding points of interest.

There were only two car loads at Central Bank and nobody at all at Grand Bazaar meeting points, so it initially looked like a small turn out. However, when we got to the Preysal meeting point, there was everybody waiting. I then was made aware that the Grand Bazaar meeting point had been consciously eliminated as it was redundant in this trip. Ten vehicles carrying 20 persons were now on the trip.

We went first to Flanagin Town. Took the Telemaque road towards Brasso Venado, ascended the north side of a prominent ridge and stopped first at the top in a small road cut near telecommunication towers installed at the high crest. To the north was a splendid view of the Northern Range. This was our first meeting for the day. As a point of interest, Philip mentioned that in Spanish the word "venado" and in French, the word "biche" both mean deer so this part of Central may have had good hunting in times past.

Philip explained, with his Kugler/Saunders geological map on display as usual, that we were on the northern side of the Central Range uplift which generally trends NE – SW. Rocks exposed here are in the type locality of the Miocene Los Atajos

Formation named after the local village. The beds here dip steeply to the NW and form a conspicuous ridge. Further north, under what we call the Caroni Basin, these beds are known to flatten out under the more familiar sand and clay sediments common in the Northern Basin. The Los Atajos Formation we saw consists of limestones and calcareous sediments that contain conspicuous polished pebbles that are predominantly black or white. These polished dark pebbles of various sizes, which were easily collected, have a superficial varnish of silica. Pebbles are not normally a feature of limestones and these, though evidently smoothed and rounded by some form of erosion, had acquired a silica desert glaze that could not be achieved by agitation in a river or coastal environment. Their presence indicates periods of erosion within an arid (desert) area similar to the climate in the Venezuelan Araya Peninsular that the club visited several years ago.

The limestones are harder and more weather resistant than the surrounding claystones muds and sands. The geological uplift and superior weathering resistance of the limestones in the Central Range result in many prominent landmarks in Mount Tamana and Brigand Hill, further east, and in Montserrat, Mayo and Gasparillo further west and, as well, all prominent features of the Central Range. The current hypothesis is that about 10 million years ago, the Los Atajos limestones were deposited in a clear relatively shallow sea that was mostly beyond the reach of normal river-borne sediment. These clear waters were replaced by the sandy and mud rich sediment carried by the proto-Orinoco river that covered the limestones. Within the Central Range, from Pointe-a-Pierre to Brigand Hill, the sediment, the limestones and the overlying muds and sands were later uplifted, folded and offset by faults that have brought different rocks to the surface in different areas. The decomposition of rocks releases minerals that are particular to that stratigraphic zone. The Los Atajos and the overlying beds of the San Jose Formation have the mineral apatite, found in fossil shells that readily weather to free phosphates that are essential for plant growth and may account for the region's reputation for growing Trinidad's best cocoa, the famous 'trinitensis' flavouring cocoa.

We travelled on east, along the Los Atajos ridge to McCarty trace which we entered, drove about

500 yards south and parked the vehicles. From here after meeting our guide, we walked the 'easy' route to the waterfall that Philip had surveyed in advance. This trail headed south west past a collection dam, and some crops and soon entered the forest along what was once a benched trail. We then turned to the east on a smaller trail down into the valley of a tributary to the main river then quickly into the main river valley itself. The party walked east, then north up the boulder strewn valley seeing clear water in pools, but no water flow due to the dry weather. Our guide told me that he knew from hunting that there is a cave in the area that one can enter - a future exploration opportunity for our club?



**The "dry" waterfall.** Photo by Reg Potter

After some 40 minutes we were at the waterfall which is quite a dramatic sight. A vertical wall, at least 40 feet high blocks the valley and extends away



**Members pose for a quick photo at the waterfall.**

*Photo by Reg Potter*

into the forest on either side forming a cliff feature for long distances. This cliff is not easy to ascend or descend and is the reason that we had parked so far from the waterfall so that we could descend in more gentle terrain. The waterfall was quite dry, which if anything was a bonus, since we were here to examine the rocks. Of course the waterfall is formed by erosion of the surrounding terrain, which being south of our Northern Range, consists largely of soft rocks, so the hard cemented limestone forms a relatively resistant layer. Philip demonstrated that the boulders in the stream valley fizzed when contacted by hydrochloric acid as expected for limestone. He is convinced that they were deposited in clear sea, where dirty (clay and silt) sediments did not reach. To my mind the colour of the stone being fairly dark grey, the bands of softer siltier, material between harder limestone layers and the presence of mineral concretions in the limestone appeared to be indicators of a more 'dirty' depositional environment, but that is just my personal feeling.

Most of the party returned the way we came in while a small group ascended the cliff on a less steep route on a spur beside the waterfall and were thus able to see the top of the fall. Here the ponded water is more stagnant and slightly less clear which is curious as it is only about 100 feet upstream. The walk back to the road is much shorter by this route

so we were waiting at the cars when the others arrived.

From the waterfall we drove to Tabaquite where we had lunch and visited a sawmill that, though closed on Sunday, had plenty of evidence of cutting up large logs of cedar and mahogany wood. This sawmill was purchased about 60 years ago from Philip's grandfather. It was of Belgian manufacture and we admired the simple mechanical methods of handling and turning the logs, and the old 'automatic' blade sharpener at one end of the shed. The sawmill is owned by a Mr. Seecharan who usually sits in an upholstered chair and observes when the mill is in operation. Operation of this and a newer, smaller sawmill is performed by his sons, one of whom lives at the site.

That marked the end of the very interesting field trip. Most departed by routes selected for their own travel and sightseeing plans, and three of us in Philip's vehicle elected to drive up the Montserrat ridge where there is a grand view of the Caroni plains and Northern Range, and, to the South, of the Central Range hills and Southern Range, all of which were beautifully coloured by the flowering immortelle trees under a true dry season blue sky. 🐜



**Members observing a stagnant pool of water .**

*Photo by Reg Potter*



*Your*  
Ideas and Observations  
A Quarterly Update



## Rare sighting in Cumuto

In December 2018 while out at night looking for herpetofauna in the Cumuto area, I came across this butterfly and photographed it. I put the photo on iNaturalist, and Lepidopteran expert Matthew Cook identified it as the Northern Antirrhea. He also mentioned that it is rarely seen in Trinidad.

Interestingly, Rainer Deo also put up an image of *Antirrhea philoctetes* on iNaturalist, photographed late December between Waller Field and Aripo Savannah, a little North of this observation. The local name in Trinidad is Queen of the Night, which is particularly appropriate given our observation by night. I have never seen this species alive myself.

-by Renoir Auguste & Matthew Cook 



Sighting of the rare Northern Antirrhea. 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



### JANUARY

#### EMA Air Quality Testing

Results from two EMA stations set up at strategic locations in St. Clair, Port of Spain and Chaguanas, Trinidad to monitor ambient air quality, have confirmed that air quality is at an acceptable level in these two areas, as it conforms to the air quality standards outlined in the Air Pollution Rules, 2014. The stations continually monitor ambient air quality for pollutants, such as particulate matter, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide and ozone.

#### Illegal Quarrying in East Trinidad

The Commissioner of State Lands and a team from the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries swooped down on two illegal quarries at Vega de Oropouche in East Trinidad in January. Two people were arrested near an excavator on the first site.

Other people escaped by running through a thickly forested area. At the second site, located at an area called Five Acres, there were four excavators on site but no personnel. All equipment and tools located on both sites will be seized and taken to the grounds of Camp Cumuto

#### New Snake Species Identified in Tobago

A previously unknown species of colubrid snake, which was encountered by researchers in 2016 in Tobago's Main Ridge Forest Reserve, has been formally described as *Erythrolampus pseudoreginae*. It was found by Renoir Auguste, John Murphy and Alvin Braswell.

### MARCH

#### Deforestation in South

Farmers were discovered to have chopped down more than 300 acres of forest reserve in Table-land,

Ecclesville and Navet and other parts of south Trinidad in order to plant crops such as pineapples and chadon beni. In the case of Tableland, rogue farmers have been identified and are expected to be charged for the offense. The Agriculture Minister has also launched a probe into the failure of the Forestry Division to combat squatting in the forest reserves.

## POACHING REPORTS

### January

- Image circulated showing a man with a dead Brazilian porcupine
- Severed heads of two red howler monkeys in the Mayaro area

### February

- Video circulated showing a man chopping and cooking an anaconda
- Self described poacher in Felicity reported that hundreds of scarlet ibises are killed and sold at five for \$200. Even the visiting flamingos are targeted and sold for \$400 and up.



## Herpetology Trip Report– January 18th-20th

# TOBAGO HERPING

by Renoir Auguste



**I went over to Tobago on the weekend of 18th-20th January 2019.** My objectives were twofold. First, I was asked to give a lecture on Tobago herpetofauna to students of the City University of New York (CUNY) who were visiting Charlotteville as part of their tropical ecology course. I decided to then also have the club herpetology trip carded for that weekend in Tobago prior to and in conjunction with the lecture. Perhaps I might find or come across something interesting that weekend to show them?

I was joined by a small group of three other persons as we arrived at the Main Ridge Forest Reserve at around 8 pm on Friday 18th. We then set off to look for nocturnal species along two trails – Gilpin trail and Spring trail. Along Gilpin trail, we observed all three species of *Pristimantis* frogs (*P. charlottevillensis*, *P. turpinorum*, *P. urichi*), including an amplexus *Pristimantis turpinorum* on a leaf about one metre off the ground and five metres from the nearest stream. There is sparse to non-existent data on the natural history of this frog, thus seeing a mating pair is a noteworthy observation. We also heard two glass frogs (*Hyalinobatrachium orientale tobagoense*) calling. The sole reptile we saw (and later heard) at Gilpin was the turnip-tailed gecko (*Thecadactylus rapicauda*).

We then headed off to Spring trail later in the night at about 12:30 am. As we entered the trail, we saw two snakes: the coffee snake (*Ninia atrata*) and

cat-eyed snake (*Leptodeira annulata ashmeadi*). The amphibians were not as active here during the time we searched.



**Turpin litter frog (amplexus pair).**

Photo by Renoir Auguste

We were then back to search in the morning, firstly again at Gilpin trail at around 7:00 am. Our main aim was to hopefully see diurnal snakes that are unique to Tobago. After no luck at Gilpin and seeing droves of tourists come in with guides, we then left and headed back to a day search at Spring trail at around noon. We were lucky this time. Not far from a dried up stream, we spotted the recently described Tobago stream snake (*Erythrolamprus*



The newly discovered Tobago stream snake. Photo by Renoir Auguste

*pseudoreginae*). This newly described species is currently known from nowhere else in the world – endemic to Tobago. It was a great find and one to closely coincide with the published paper on the snake which came out earlier in January. We had little luck finding other diurnal snakes. However, was that luck about to change?

As we walked along the Roxborough/Bloody Bay road that dissects the Main Ridge, a road kill snake was spotted in a drain. It was too far gone to be conclusively identified at the time. Nonetheless, its general scale and body pattern was similar to *Leptophis* snakes. There are two species of *Leptophis* snakes known from Tobago. The first is the green lora or parrot snake (*Leptophis coeruleodorsus*). The second is the Hailey's parrot snake (*Leptophis haileyi*). There is currently only one record of this snake's existence. We believe we may have come across the second. The specimen had a distinct light blue colour along the tail part of its

body. Apparently, the green pigment in the green lora is known to turn blue when it is dead. However, the green lora lacks green pigment along its tail. Thus the specimen we came across may have had a blue tail which would distinguish it from the green lora. Although, genetically, it is too far gone to decipher the species for sure, at the very least, this individual represents a possible second record of the elusive Hailey's parrot snake. Its small size (about one foot long) hints that this was a juvenile. Considering the Main Ridge's proximity to Roxborough, (where the sole record is from) it is unsurprising that this species would be found there.

The second part of the herpetology trip was in Charlotteville. On Sunday 20th I gave a lecture on the herpetofauna of Tobago to the visiting students and their lecturers. After a one hour lecture, I took the students on a field practical around the village. We ventured along trails within walking distance from the beach. It was also a good opportunity to

compare the species from the Main Ridge Forest Reserve to that from a village near the beach populated with people.



**Charlotteville litter frog.** Photo by Renoir Auguste

The one species we saw in abundance was the introduced Richard's anole (*Anolis richardii*). The sole amphibians we came across were the marine toad

(*Rhinella marina*) and ditch frog (*Leptodactylus validus*). We did manage to spot one snake, the Tobago racer (*Mastigodryas dunni*). Overall to be expected, as it is the dry season and searches were made during the day near an urban village.

Although not filled with many species, this weekend of herpetology did have its highlights. These included the mating pair of Turpin litter frog, the Tobago stream snake, and the possibility of the second specimen collected for the Hailey's parrot snake. I would like to especially thank Rainer Deo, Kyma Ali, Jenalee John for coming along for the Main Ridge part of the trip, and special thanks to Environmental Research Institute Charlotteville (E.R.I.C.) for inviting me to give the lecture to the CUNY students, and of course the CUNY students for indulging me as I talked about and showed them some of the unique Tobago herpetofauna. 



## TIME TO DEBUNK THIS “ANANSI STORY”

by Ian Lambie



That the Amerindian word “Iere” means “the land of the hummingbird” is without foundation. The opinions of two linguists, Dr. Keith Laurence, in an issue of the Caribbean Quarterly in 1967, and Dr. Lise Winer, in her book “*The dictionary of English/Creole in Trinidad and Tobago*”, published in 2009, both of whom did research on the meaning of the word “Iere” have concluded that the word meant “the island” or simply “island”, this with reference to the island which became known as Trinidad, and not “the land of the hummingbird” as we have been taught to believe. Further, in my opinion, the Amerindians would have been aware that there were many more hummingbird species on the mainland than on the island “Iere”.

Today we know that there are 17 species of hummingbirds recorded for Trinidad while on nearby countries there are many more species: Colombia (153); Venezuela (103); Guyana (38); Suriname (33) and French Guiana (30), to name a few. In the early 1970's, Dr. David Snow, a former Curator of Birds at the Natural History Museum in

the U.K. and Richard ffrench, the editor of “*A guide to the birds of Trinidad and Tobago*” both expressed an opinion for the reason why Trinidad has been known as “the land of the hummingbird.”

During the latter part of the 19th century, bird feathers were used extensively in the millinery trade to decorate the hats of fashionable ladies in Europe, and large quantities of hummingbird skins collected in South American countries were shipped to Europe via Trinidad for the purpose. Hence Trinidad became known as “the land of the hummingbird”, although the hummingbird skins had not originated from Trinidad but from nearby mainland countries.

Snow and ffrench hypothesized that as a result, Trinidad became known as “the land of the hummingbird”. This hypothesis is acceptable to me.

P.S. The opinion of Snow and ffrench was conveyed to me by Richard ffrench in 1973 

A 'Naturalist In' series

# WHERE THERE'S ICE AND SNOW AND THE WHALE-FISHES BLOW

by Chris K. Starr



Review of:  
Eleanor Mathews 2003. *Ambassador to the Penguins*. Boston: David R. Godine 353 pp.  
[47th in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see [www.ckstarr.net/reviews\\_of\\_naturalist.htm](http://www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm)]

**Robert Cushman Murphy (1887-1973)** was Curator of Birds at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Among his many field trips was the 1951 expedition that rediscovered the Bermuda petrel (*Pterodroma cahow*), which had been considered extinct since the 1620s. His magnum opus (Murphy 1936) is on South-American sea birds.

Murphy was an avid naturalist from a very early age, with a special passion for sea birds. He went beyond just learning the names of species and how to identify them, taking a keen interest in their habits. In other words, already in childhood he was far from being an ordinary "bird watcher" (i.e. one who eagerly lists birds but would not think to watch them).

In May 1912, an American whaling vessel began a voyage that would last almost a year. Provision was made for Murphy to join the voyage and storage space for his gear and specimens on board in exchange for partial funding from the American Museum and the Brooklyn Museum of Natural Science. The Daisy spent the southern summer

around South Georgia, reaching sub-Antarctic latitudes in November 1912 and departing four months later. It was Murphy's first time in the South Atlantic. He later wrote a book that is mostly about whaling (Murphy 1967), and his 1947 book is an edited version of his letters home to his newlywed wife during the Daisy expedition. The main part of *Ambassador to the Penguins* is a re-worked version of his Logbook by his granddaughter, supplemented from his copious notes and some of his many photographs. Murphy is treated in the third person in the book.

The background chapters amount to a biography of Murphy up to the time of the voyage, including an account of his courtship. The Daisy made several interesting stops along the way, including at the prison island of Fernando de Noronha. Of the 45 chapters, chapters 27-41 are devoted to the sub-Antarctic period and so form the core of the book.

Captain Benjamin D. Cleveland was no ordinary ship's master. On the one hand, he was much interested in natural history and contributing to the advancement of science. On the other hand, he was moody, vulgar and on occasion terribly unreasonable.

Murphy's account extends to the social aspects of shipboard life, including such things as quarrels among the crew (drawn from many different places

and backgrounds, as on the Pequod) and with the captain.

Murphy's account of the whaling enterprise was not very different from that given by Melville (1831). By 1912, old-style seafaring on sailing ships was almost at an end. While methods of sailing had hardly changed in a century, the number of ships was much reduced. Furthermore, the American whaling industry was nearing its end, as petroleum and electric lights were sharply devaluing whale oil and other products of the whale. Furthermore, British and Scandinavian whalers were already operating on a much larger, more mechanized scale. Murphy was consciously recording a disappearing way of life.

The voyage comprised spells of long monotony, punctuated by episodes of great urgency and exhausting labour. There is a close description of the difficult and very dangerous job of killing a huge whale. "It took immeasurable courage for six men [in a small boat] to approach a fifty-foot whale on its own territory." Murphy was fascinated by the immensely gory process of bringing a dead whale on board and stripping it systematically before tossing the great skeleton back into the sea. He found himself increasingly offended by the wholesale butchery.

The expedition sensitized him to the vulnerable state of the marine biota and its habitats, and he became a lifelong environmental campaigner.

South Georgia today has no regular human population and is occupied only by scientific personnel. However, a century ago there was a settlement of some hundreds, supported by the whaling industry that had existed there since 1790. There were several whaling stations, processing a huge number of whales. Even in its declining years, the business was still profitable.

The British government, which administers South Georgia, had at the time of the voyage recently introduced regulations to limit the hunting of whales and elephant seals (also valued for their oil) and to enforce the thorough use of the catch. Even so, it was immensely wasteful, and Murphy noted that, although it was illegal to hunt female elephant seals, most of those collected by the Daisy were females.

About half-way between the Equator and the

South Pole, the seas got really rough. In addition, there were hail and heavy winds. The sky was gray much of the time, and they had to keep a sharp lookout for icebergs.

The South Georgia archipelago at about 54°S and 37°W is both remote and inhospitable. The nearest other land is the South Sandwich Islands, a cluster of smaller islands about 520 km to the southeast. At 3528 km<sup>2</sup>, South Georgia is only about three-quarter the size of Trinidad, yet it rises much more steeply from the sea, and its highest point is three times that of Trinidad's highest. Its coastline is deeply indented with fiords (Headland 1992).

Much as I enjoyed this book, South Georgia is not a place I have ever wanted to visit. The island and its surroundings are often stormy and miserably cold, even in the summer. For example, at the height of summer in January 1913 Murphy recorded 13 days of rain and/or snow and 15 days of gale-force winds. Much of the land surface is permanently covered in snow and ice, and even the exposed areas are largely barren. There are no trees or even shrubs. Aside from grasses and a few other small flowering plants, its flora consists of mosses, ferns and lichens.

Despite this, the time in South Georgia was a golden age for the biologist Murphy. He established a daily routine of rowing from ship to shore, where he had a tent as a makeshift onshore workshop. Once on the island he walked about extensively including on skis and snowshoes. There were moments when he could see more birds than he would have thought existed on earth. He had a permit to collect any birds except the introduced



upland goose. Collecting must have been easy, as he found the nesting birds mostly quite approachable.

The sea birds included some that bred nowhere else, and nine species of penguins are at least occasionally present. Of these, the king penguin and gentoo penguin had substantial colonies. These held his interest more than any other group of animals, and he spent happy days watching their courtship, squabbling and brood care. Although they are highly dependent on the sea, it is also a place of great danger to them, and they typically nest well inland, often more than a kilometre from the shore, to which they must of course walk to go foraging. He even found a gentoo penguin graveyard, an inland pool with hundreds or perhaps thousands of dead penguins sunk in it.

Murphy also took the opportunity to explore some of the smaller associated islands. There are no native land mammals on any of them, but marine mammals abound. These include various seals and the baleen whales that the Daisy was there to hunt. Algae thrive in the summer, leading to great masses of alga-feeding krill, which in turn feed the migrating whales. Up to November, elephant seals remain many hundreds of kilometres out to sea, foraging for squid and fish during long, deep dives.

In all, he collected about 500 birds of 55 species, as well as a great many mammal skeletons, insects, arachnids, plants and other specimens. He was the first to show a connection between the patterns of sea-bird life and seasonal conditions among the various sub-Antarctic islands.

By the end of the Daisy's stay in South Georgia, Murphy was most definitely tired of the place and eager to get back to his newlywed bride and the comforts and certainties of home. Even so, he left the island with a feeling of regret, or at least sentimentality.

#### References:

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- Murphy, R.C. 1936. *Oceanic Birds of South America*. Vol. 1-2. New York: American Museum of Natural History 640 pp.
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*Boat*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin 176 pp.

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#### Addendum:

#### TOWARD A REAL NATURALIST LIBRARY

For many years the Club has been looking for ways to have a permanent, conveniently located headquarters. This would serve as a place for the Management Committee to meet, with the Club's records and other documents right there, so that no one would have to haul from somewhere else.

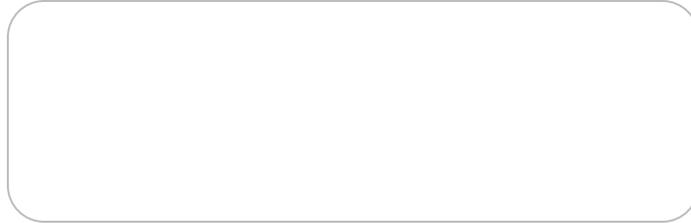
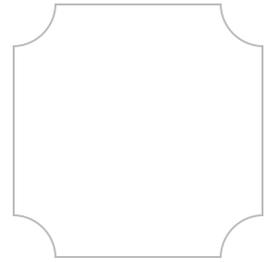
With volunteer staffing a couple of days a week, it would also be somewhere that new and visiting naturalists could come to discuss topics of shared interest and acquire Club publications.

As a major additional advantage, it would finally allow us to have a real library and reading room. This could be quite a substantial blessing, as the Club's "library" has long been stored in boxes, inaccessible and therefore quite useless.

I have no idea what is in those boxes, but let us assume for now that it is not much. With establishment of a proper headquarters with bookshelves and the books all in order according to the Library of Congress system, that "not much" would soon change. I guarantee it.

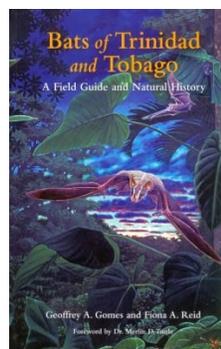
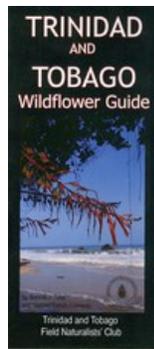
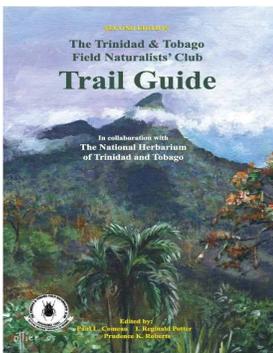
Some of you have been reading my series of reviews of naturalist-in books in these pages, (at least I certainly hope you have). I have personal copies of many of the books that I review, as well as some that I choose not to. They are sitting at home on my shelves, doing nothing. After all, I have already read them. I would be very happy to turn many or most of them over to a real naturalist library if one existed. And I am fairly sure there are other members in a similar situation.

So, it is my recommendation that the Management Committee make it a top priority to ensure that a suitable, long-term headquarters is a top priority is in place before the next AGM (9 January 2020). What should we call the library when it is inaugurated about a year from now? Possibly the Victor C. Quesnel Reading Room. Just a suggestion. 



## 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 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.