



THE FIELD NATURALIST

Quarterly Bulletin of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

April – June 2020

Issue No: 2/2020



Stay At Home initiative during the corona virus pandemic, April and May 2020

BACKYARD BIRDING

by Elizabeth Seebaran



Ruby Topaz feeding in Princes Town. *Photo by Rishi Goordial*

When the Corona Virus (COVID-19) pandemic put a damper on all outdoor activities just as we completed the March birding trip to Tobago, we were all forced, in possibly a good way, to become more creative to continue enjoying the birds from the safety and comfort of our home. Our windows, porches, and backyards were a ticket to a very under-appreciated bird show we had been missing out on all this time.

Back in late November 2019, on completion of the BioBlitz Tabaquite 2019 event, we had been reminiscing about what a fun and challenging experience the annual BioBlitz is usually. A BioBlitz

is an event that focuses on finding and identifying as many species as possible in a specific area over a short period of time. The Tabaquite BioBlitz took several birders on a 5am “before dawn” trek into the forests of the Central Range Game Reserve for the first time, bagging two mottled owls calling in the dark, lesser swallow-tailed swifts flying above and three black-tailed tityras amongst a myriad of other species. During the days following that BioBlitz event, we decided it would be interesting to do a similar 24-hour event but this time confined to our backyards. The response at that time was tremendous with bird

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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

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Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club*

April – June 2020

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!



The club warmly welcomes the following new members:

Neekash Ramnarine

Gemma Martyn

Kristal Maharaj-Habib

(Continued from page 1)

lists coming in from various parts of Trinidad. Birders who took part in that event expressed how pleased they were to find birds they had no idea were existent in their backyard areas before. Back to the present government-issued #StayAtHome order during the pandemic and the temporary cancellation of all field trips, the birding group decided it was about time to try another 24-hour backyard bird count or two.

Dates were set, notices were sent out and the #StayAtHome 24-hour backyard bird counts began. The first count took place on the weekend beginning at 4am on April 11 and ending at 4am on April 12. The second event followed two weeks later on 25th – 26th April. We also could not pass up the Global Big Day birding event hosted by eBird on Saturday 9th May—another 24-hour birding binge event—joining in with birders all over the world logging data and sightings onto the eBird site that is managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the world's largest biodiversity-related citizen science project. We counted the birds resident in our yards, those that visited and scampered away into the neighbours' yards, those passing through and displaying nesting behaviours, those that we heard but could not see, the birds that flew by and even the birds that showed up only in the night.

The backyard data was collected and compiled from the bird alert forum, as well as, from lists sent via WhatsApp. Birds recorded were grouped into the family classification and identified as either seen or unseen for the various surveyed backyard areas. The results were better than what we expected and birders who took part were again really pleased at the findings. Bird lists came in from all over Trinidad, unfortunately, none from Tobago, as Matt Kelly had already left and returned to the USA. Backyard habitats surveyed included the lower altitude forests of the Maracas Valley in St.

Joseph, drier forests in Chaguaramas, the foothills of the Northern Range at Petit Valley and St. Augustine, suburban residential areas in Arima and Chaguanas, the open country grasslands and freshwater marshlands in Debe, semi-forested areas in Princes Town, and the mix of residential and some woodland in Palmiste. Jerome Foster currently “stuck” in Dominica, also collected backyard bird lists scoring with West Indian specialties not found in Trinidad, including scaly-breasted thrasher, Caribbean eleania, zenaïda dove, and green-throated carib.

Some birds are well adapted and widespread in disturbed areas, benefiting from backyard flowers, fruiting trees and feeders. Palm and blue-gray tanagers, yellow oriole, crested oropendola, grayish saltator, greater kiskadees, spectacled thrush, tropical mockingbird, house wren, ruddy ground doves, rock (feral pigeons), and carib grackle were very common. Orange-winged



Scaly-breasted thrasher spotted in Canefield, Dominica.

Photo by Jerome Foster

parrots were recorded everywhere. Black and turkey vultures soared overhead. Some birds were less common, however, favouring backyards with more suitable habitat, including white-tipped dove, barred antshrike, boat-billed flycatcher, cocoa



(Left): Blue-gray tanager in Palmiste. *Photo by Kevin Foster;* (Right) Crane Hawk in Princes Town. *Photo by Rishi Goordial*

thrush, silver-beaked tanager, gray-breasted martins, blue-black grassquit, and yellow-bellied eleania.

Hummingbirds were found widespread in backyards close to forested areas, as well as in backyards with suitable native plants. Hummingbird feeders were also found to make a huge difference. Black-throated mango and copper-rumped hummingbirds were the most widespread reported species. Ruby topaz was reported throughout, being a fairly common breeding visitor from the mainland during January to August. Blue-chinned sapphire, white-chested emerald, rufous-breasted hermit, and long-billed starthroat were limited to north Trinidad locations. The white-tailed goldenthrout, a resident of lowland grasslands, scrub and freshwater marshes, had sightings only at Princes Town and Debe in south Trinidad. Sightings of the tufted coquette and the white-necked jacobin were limited to forested residential areas at Maracas Valley in north Trinidad. The least recorded species included the green-throated mango in a garden in Chaguanas, the green hermit at a forested residential area in the Maracas Valley, and the little hermit at the foothills of the Northern Range in Petit Valley and St. Augustine.

Forest birds were restricted to lists coming in from north Trinidad, with few sightings in Palmiste and Debe given suitable habitats in those areas. These included woodcreepers and woodpeckers, wrens, Trinidad motmot, rufous-tailed jacamar, violaceous euphonia, red-eyed vireo, piratic and streaked flycatchers, channel-billed toucan, yellow-crowned Amazon parrots, turquoise tanager, and


great antshrike. Whilst quite the opposite, birds that favoured grassy, marshy and swampy areas were restricted to the Debe lists given suitable habitat, with few random sightings around drains and waterways in Chaguanas, Palmiste and St. Augustine. These included herons and egrets, purple gallinule, limpkin, greater ani, masked yellowthroat, yellow-hooded blackbird, and large-billed tern.

Raptor sightings were mostly predictable and yet interesting. Locally rare crane hawks were sighted in Debe and Palmiste. A swallow-tailed kite soared overhead in Debe, an annual uncommon breeding visitor during February to August. Common black hawk and ospreys stuck to areas with water sources. White hawks were sighted over forested areas in north and south Trinidad. There was one record of a merlin in Debe, possibly the last for the season as the merlin is a common visitor up until early April.

Night birds were rarer on our lists, but the few sightings including a black-crowned night heron and a barn owl in Palmiste, and one common pauraque sighting and tropical screech owl sightings in north Trinidad. Ferruginous pygmy-owls were quite common in the day and the night throughout most areas.

Other interesting sightings included what looked like migrations of magnificent frigate birds from north to south as observed in Palmiste, and migrations of laughing gulls from west to east possibly to Tobago for breeding which is a common behaviour at this time of the year, as observed in St. Augustine. Saffron finches and green-rumped

parrotlets were observed searching for nesting habitat in the holes on electricity poles. A small flock of red-bellied macaws was also observed flying nearby in Princes Town.

We hope to continue collecting backyard birding data, making this initiative possibly more routine and part of this subgroup's schedule in the near future. 



(Left): Great Antshrike (male) in Petit Valley. *Photo by Brian D'Abreau.* (Bottom right): Swallow tailed kite seen in Debe. *Photo by Kris Sookdeo.* (Top Right): Zenaida doves spotted in Dominica. *Photo by Jerome Foster*



April– June 2020 STRATEGIC PLAN UPDATE *by Stephanie Warren-Gittens and Laura Baboolal*



Short term Goals

Club Outreach

The National Library Information System Authority (NALIS) Chaguanas, extended an invitation to the Club to produce videos to commemorate the International Day for Biological Diversity (May 22) and World Environment Day (June 5). These were posted to NALIS Chaguanas' Facebook page and subsequently to the Club's Facebook page.

Following the International Day for Biological Diversity video the subgroup leaders produced

videos on birds, fishes, amphibians and reptiles in partnership with NALIS. These videos that were produced on a weekly basis were also posted on the Club's and NALIS Chaguanas' Facebook Pages.

Visit the Club's Facebook Page to see the videos.

A copy of the full strategic plan can be requested by email to admin@ttfnc.org. Constructive comments and suggestions from members of ways to work towards achieving the goals are always welcome.



Junior Naturalists Tour, 22nd February 2020
POINT GOURDE TOUR WITH PRESENTATION
COLLEGE, SAN FERNANDO
by Christine Westmaas



Top & bottom: Snapshots from the Junior Naturalists tour along Point Gourde.

Photos by Nicholas Mohammed

In my capacity of school coordinator of the nature walk that Presentation College, San Fernando, undertook on Saturday 22nd February 2020 with Mr. Nicholas Mohammed and Mr. Dan Jaggernaut of the TTFNC, I would like to sincerely thank the Club and specifically Messrs. Mohammed and Jaggernaut for a wonderful experience.

Our group of 18 Form Six and Form One students, five teachers and one parent, found it to be a thoroughly enjoyable and enlightening walk. We received a wealth of information from our TTFNC guides on the flora and fauna of the area of Pointe Gourde that we explored, all delivered with infinite patience and good humour. The terrain that we traversed was well within the capacity of the members of our group and the duration of the activity was perfectly timed. Our students learned about the importance of safety and saw, first-hand, the results of wanton littering of our natural environment. The absolute necessity of preserving our trees and of promoting the wellbeing of our flora and fauna, in general, will remain as matters of priority in the minds of all of us. Some of the students have declared that they have been inspired to become 'guardians' of our natural wealth! Some have indicated an interest in applying for membership in TTFNC and they will

receive every encouragement from the school to do so, once they have the permission of their parents.

We were also happy to have the company of another TTFNC member, Jo-Marie Westmaas, who acted as an additional chaperone for the group. We wish to express our deepest gratitude for a morning well spent and our best wishes for the continued excellent work of the TTFNC.





Snapshots from the Junior Naturalists tour along Point Gourde. Photos by Nicholas Mohammed



March and April 2020

MONTHLY LECTURES RECAP

by Lauren Ali and Dr. Anjani Ganase



March Lecture Title: Sharks in Trinidad and Tobago by Lauren Ali

Institution: Department of Life Sciences, Faculty of Science and Technology, The University of the West Indies



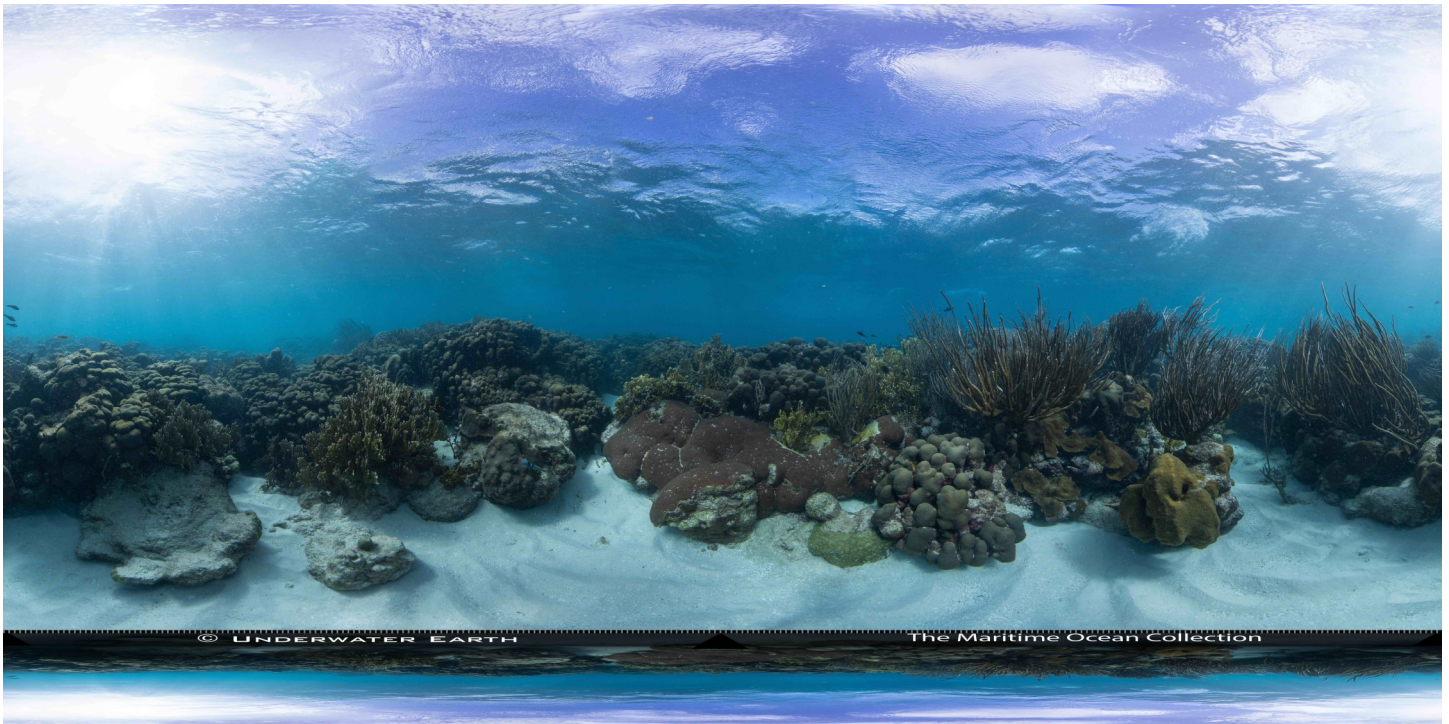
Lauren entertaining questions from members. Photo by Stephanie Warren-Gittens

Both globally and locally, shark populations are threatened by heavy exploitation, and management difficulties are exacerbated by incomplete data. Although information on sharks in Trinidad and Tobago has been collected in various forms since 1949, species specific data is limited. Early efforts

were aimed at expanding the shark fishery, while studies from the 1980s to early 2000s focused on characterising the fishery. Commonly landed sharks include large species like the endangered scalloped hammerhead, *Sphyrna lewini* and the blue shark *Prionace glauca*, but mainly consist of small coastal species such as *Rhizoprionodon lalandii*, *R. porosus*, *Carcharhinus porosus*, and *Mustelus higmani*. Recent advances in local shark research (2015-2019) are summarised below.

Harvesting small coastal shark species can potentially be more sustainable than harvesting larger species since they mature comparatively quickly. A study of relationships between size, sex and maturity in *R. lalandii* and *R. porosus* landed by Trinidad's artisanal fishery found that while *R. lalandii* generally matured at 56-60 cm, *R. porosus* generally matured at 56-70 cm. Most *Rhizoprionodon* sharks landed in the artisanal fishery were in the 56-60cm size range, likely due to gear selectivity. These findings indicate that the artisanal fishery may not have a heavy impact on the juvenile population, and has positive implications for sustainable fishing of *Rhizoprionodon* sharks, with proper management.

An investigation of Fishermen's Ecological Knowledge (FEK) revealed the scalloped



Coral Gardens. *Photo courtesy Dr. Anjani Ganase & the Maritime Ocean Collection*

hammerhead, blacktip shark, bull shark and smalleye smoothhound as the most commonly recognised species in the catch. Fishers observed an increase in sharks during the dry season and listed sharks as the fifth most valuable component of their catch. A knowledge, attitudes and perception (KAP) survey, investigating sharks and shark consumption, found that public knowledge about sharks was low, but that attitudes favoured sustainable use and conservation. Of those surveyed, 71.8% ate shark and 45.3% did so frequently enough to expose themselves to potentially unsafe levels of heavy metal contaminants. Finally, an exploratory observation of the stomachs of small coastal sharks found potential microplastics in all specimens examined.

April Lecture Title: Bringing Tobago Coral Reefs Online – The Maritime Ocean Collection by Dr. Anjani Ganase via Zoom

The Maritime Ocean Collection (MOC) is an online platform that allows virtual diving and explorations of Tobago's coral reefs from anywhere in the world. The project is a partnership between SpeSeas, the Project Operator, and Underwater

Earth, the designer of the Seaview 360 camera and online platform. The Maritime Financial Group is the sole funder of the project and the host of the online collection. Dr Anjani Ganase (SpeSeas) is the MOC Project Lead and a coral reef ecologist with a background in marine spatial ecology and the use of visual technology to observe coral reefs. Trinidad and Tobago is home to unique coral reef biodiversity that serve crucial ecological, economic and cultural roles. We hope that the MOC would strengthen the connection between people and coral reefs, showcase their importance and how we impact them by creating engaging virtual underwater experiences. We hope that the underwater collection of Tobago's coral reefs would increase awareness, engagement and education to instill a sense of stewardship of these fragile marine ecosystems. 🐌

**Editor's note - April's lecture was the first attempt by the Club at holding a virtual meeting due to COVID restrictions and regulations. it was well received.*



NATURE IN THE NEWS

A quarterly summary of local environmental news

by Kris Sookdeo



April

Two Diego Martin men were held in separate vehicles by Santa Flora police. One of the vehicles had 40 yellow crown parrots, four giant river otters and two capuchin monkeys, while the other had 25 yellow crown parrots. Reports indicate that 43 yellow crown parrots and the four river otters were found dead.

Twenty-five hectares of the Eccesville Windbelt Reserve in Rio Claro were bulldozed by rogue farmers. Agriculture Minister Clarence Rambharat believes the rogue farmers have police connections and forestry workers may be turning a blind eye. Just last December, another area nearby off MacMohan Road, was bulldozed and a large pond was dug to supply water for the crops.

May

A farmer of Jaipaulsingh Road in Barrackpore recorded video of white-winged vampire bats attacking chickens which were asleep in the trees. He indicated that some of the chickens bitten by the bats have since died.

June

Around 6.36 a.m. on June 2nd, suspected smugglers were apprehended as they dumped four wicker baskets drowning 22 caiques, 20 Hahn's macaws, and five orange-winged parrots. Seed finches and monkeys were reportedly saved. Three Trinidadian men - aged 21, 37 and 54 - were detained. For the 22 caiques and 20 Hahn's macaws, they were to be charged jointly for 42 offences of keeping protected animals without a permit. For the five orange winged parrots, they were to be charged with five offences under Section 6:1(a) for possession of a second schedule animal in the closed hunting season. Each caique, Hahn's macaw and orange winged parrot was said to fetch a price of \$500 on the black market.

Around 11.30 p.m. on June 24th, Moruga police officers on patrol along La Lune Road pursued a vehicle into La Fortune Road. The men in the vehicle escaped but police searched it and found

inside the trunk two plastic crates containing 14 blue and gold macaws, one yellow crown parrot, one orange winged parrot and four black-headed caiques.

Also in June, a Venezuelan national was fined \$93,500 for over 50 wildlife offences involving possession of monkeys, parrots and a macaw.

A new National Protected Areas System Plan has been approved. This plan is an update of the 1982 National Parks System Plan and places emphasis not only on important terrestrial areas, but also includes marine and freshwater ecosystems.

The protected areas are as follows:

- 92 terrestrial/freshwater areas (79 in Trinidad and 13 in Tobago)
- 40 coastal/marine areas (18 in Trinidad, 22 in Tobago) and
- 4 deepsea marine areas
- Proposed protected terrestrial/freshwater areas: 1,933 square kilometres (1,866 square kilometres in Trinidad, 67 square kilometres in Tobago)
- Proposed coastal and marine protected areas: 580 square kilometres (14 square kilometres in Trinidad and 566 square kilometres in Tobago)
- Proposed open ocean waters and deepsea marine areas: 15,600 square kilometres

Total area of proposed protected areas: 18,113 square kilometres

An amendment to the Conservation of Wildlife Act was introduced in the Senate in June which made adjustments to the composition of the Wildlife Conservation Committee and increased the maximum fine to TTD\$100,000. The bill (The Miscellaneous Amendments (No. 2) Bill, 2020) was assented to and is awaiting proclamation by the President.

Also in June, the Fisheries Management Bill was laid before Parliament in June with the intention of replacing the old Fisheries Act. Unfortunately, the Bill has now lapsed.





Bird Group Trip, 14th March 2020 TOBAGO TRIP....JUST BEFORE COVID-19

By Matt Kelly



Group photo at Gilpin Trace in the Main Ridge (Standing L to R): , Devan Mulchansingh, Anne Marie Sankersingh, Michael Boswell, Nadia Hosein, Elizabeth (Betsy) Mendes, Brian D'Abreau, Dennis de la Rosa, Matt Kelly, Kai Green

(Stooping: Elizabeth Seebaran & Lawrence James. [Absent: Alyx James]. *Photo courtesy Matt Kelly*

I was at the A. N. R. Robinson International Airport (formerly Crown Point International Airport) Tobago for the 6:10 am arrival of the inter-island airbridge flight. Eleven participants arrived from Trinidad, many of them had to get up for 3:00 am to make this flight. Elizabeth Seebaran made all the arrangements for this trip. While waiting for Elizabeth to get the three rental cars for the group organized, some of us couldn't wait to start birding. We were rewarded right at the airport terminal with some excellent views of the Caribbean martin, which winters in Tobago, but is rarely seen in Trinidad. We were off by 7:00 am.

Since it was really not far out of the way, I first brought the group past the Bon Accord Sewage Ponds, Tobago's hottest birding spot. I was keen to show the group a white-rumped (Eurasian)

whimbrel, which had been seen for the past month here. The whimbrel did not co-operate today, but we did get a quick look at a lot of ducks and other waterfowl. We got a quick tally of 17 species here. The purpose of the trip today, however, is to focus on Tobago's forest birds and the bird life of Little Tobago. As such, only 10 minutes were spent here.

After our next stop for T&T's "national breakfast" of doubles and aloo pies, we moved on, along Tobago's scenic Windward Road, past Roxborough and up to the Main Ridge. We stopped at a little clearing nicknamed, "Hummingbird Park". There was a common potoo living here for the past month or so, facilitating easy viewing. But, apparently he has moved on. We had some great sightings of many

forest birds, especially Tobago's version of the red-legged honeycreeper, feeding on the immortal flowers. We did tally 25 more species here.

I took the group into the Tobago Main Ridge Forest Reserve, the oldest protected forest reserve in the Western Hemisphere. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has Tobago Main Ridge Forest Reserve on its "tentative list" of potential World Heritage Sites. Their description is worth quoting at length. Some of UNESCO's description says:

"Tobago is the smaller, relatively north-easterly island of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, with a surface area of about 316 km². The Main Ridge is literally the backbone of the island, cutting lengthwise across two thirds of Tobago's surface. It encompasses 3958 hectares (9780 acres) of tropical rainforest specifically lower montane, lowland and xerophytic rainforest - and reaches a height of 604 metres. The majority of the forest reserve is lower montane, and is found at heights above 244 metres. This area receives the greatest amount of rainfall, the greatest exposure to wind and the lowest temperatures, making it an Evergreen Forest. The lowland rainforest is characterized by copious growth and is said to be the most prolific of all forest types, occurring here to a maximum of 366 metres. The xerophytic rainforest is found on the southern slopes of the Forest Reserve at heights above 244 metres, and is the driest compared to the other types."

The Main Ridge Forest Reserve is home to a number of flora and fauna; it is estimated that the rainforest provides habitats for twelve to sixteen species of mammals out of the nearly ninety mammal species in the Caribbean region, twenty-four non-poisonous snakes, sixteen lizards and two hundred and ten species of birds, the most outstanding being the bird species *Campylopterus curvipennis* - the white-tailed sabrewing hummingbird - that is both rare and endemic to Tobago. After the 1963 hurricane Flora, many of the flora and fauna populations dwindled or disappeared. The sabrewing hummingbird is one of the species that have been recovering since the incident. The bird was declared an Environmentally Sensitive Species by Trinidad and Tobago's Environment Management Authority in 2005. The ridge is also home to the ocellated gecko, an animal that is not found anywhere else in the



Seen on Little Tobago, the Ocellated Gecko *Gonatodes ocellatus*, endemic to Tobago.

Photo by Matt Kelly.

world.

The Tobago Main Ridge Forest Reserve is on record as the oldest legally-protected forest reserve, geared specifically towards a conservation purpose. It was established on April 13th, 1776 by an ordinance which states in part, that the reserve is "for the purpose of attracting frequent showers of rain upon which the fertility of lands in these climates doth entirely depend." The passage of the ordinance is attributed to Soame Jenyns, a member of the British parliament whose main responsibilities were trade and plantation. He was influenced by the ideas of the English scientist Stephen Hales who was able to show the correlation between trees and rainfall. It took Jenyns eleven years to convince the parliament that this was indeed a valid endeavour. Scientific American has commented "...that the protection of Tobago's forest was the first act in the modern environmental movement". This can be considered a landmark in the history of conservation and preservation of the environment. The living testimony is the survival of the Forest Reserve itself.

A unique feature about the fauna of Tobago is that although Tobago is an island, the fauna are continental in origin, since Tobago was once joined to the South American continent some one million years ago. Considerable endemism has resulted; for example, 31% of the birds that nest on Tobago are

endemics (*I have not heard this statement before about endemic avian nesting on Tobago, nor can I substantiate it*). Support of this unique biodiversity and exceptionally diverse ecosystem is of great value to humanity. In addition, it protects against soil erosion, encourages rainfall and provides significant carbon sinks.

David Hardy, of the Smithsonian Institution, devoted much of his life to the study of the flora and fauna of Tobago. Hardy, who is no longer among us, published his groundbreaking thesis on the natural history of Tobago. He surmised that if Tobago was ever linked with Trinidad, it was very far in the past. Possibly, Tobago once had its own direct land bridge to the mainland. Hardy gives many examples of Tobago plants, reptiles and amphibians, fishes and birds which share a more common affinity with the area about 500 km SW in Venezuela instead of Trinidad. He noted that 11 birds are not to be found in Trinidad, but again, can be found in this same region of Venezuela::

- Rufous-vented chachalaca (*Ortalis ruficauda*)
- White-tailed sabrewing (*Campylopterus curvipennis*)
- Striped Owl (*Asio clamator*)
- Red-crowned woodpecker (*Melanerpes rubricapillus*)
- White-fringed Antwren (*Formicivora grisea*)
- Olivaceous Woodcreeper (*Sittasomus griseicapillus*)
- Blue-backed manakin (*Chiroxiphia pareola*)
- Venezuelan flycatcher (*Myiarchus venezuelensis*)
- Scrub Greenlet (*Hylophilus flavipes*) [now called "Tobago Greenlet"]
- Variable seedeater (*Sporophila corvina*) [now called "Wing-barred Seedeater" and possibly extirpated]
- Black-faced grassquit (*Melanospiza bicolor*)

Regarding the "scrub greenlet" found in Tobago, in 2016 it was proposed that this species be split into three separate species. Hence, the Tobago scrub greenlet (*Hylophilus flavipes*), has been reclassified as a Tobago endemic, and is now called, "Tobago greenlet" (*Hylophilus insularis*).

Oh yes, back to our birding trip...I took the group next to the "Niplig Trail". Niplig is on the opposite side of the road from the famous "Gilpin Trail". "Niplig" is "Gilpin" spelled backwards. We ventured into the forest here by 9:45am. My targets

were the white-throated spadebill and a good view of a very active blue-backed manakin's lek. Just inside the trail, I used the playback of the spadebill. Low and behold, we had two appear right alongside of us! There was a cacophony of cameras clicking.

We approached the manakin's lek, and there were birds primed and ready to dance. But they didn't. I believe the number of people we had in their neighborhood made them wary and they sat this dance out. We also looked for the yellow-legged thrush. I recorded three as "heard", but they would not come out for us to see them. We also had the same results for the olivaceous woodcreeper. This was to be a recurring pattern today. We recorded 22 species here.

Next stop was the Gilpin Trace trail. I was surprised as to how many of the group had never been here. We again heard, but did not see, great black hawk, yellow-legged thrush, and plain brown woodcreeper. On the way out, the group got good looks at a pair of American redstart. Brian D'Abreau also spotted a young broad-winged hawk. We logged in 24 species here.

We birdwatched through a nice lunch at the Sunshine Restaurant in Bloody Bay, while logging 26 bird species from the deck. Then we scurried for the hour plus drive to Blue Waters Inn in Speyside. Speyside Bay is again covered with sargassum seaweed, which is heavily choking it. This has happened on and off for the past few years. Blue Waters is on the next bay, and was not nearly as badly affected by the seaweed. There, we met Zolani Frank, or "Z", who took us to Little Tobago. Once we arrived on Little Tobago, "Z" showed us some active nests of the Audubon's shearwater, which nests in holes in the embankments and ground. We then moved up the steep climb to the main lookout on the north side of the island. The bird life was stunning. After about 40 minutes of watching the red-billed tropicbirds, brown boobies, red-footed boobies, and magnificent frigate birds, I proposed a venture on some of the wooded trails to search for the scaley-naped pigeon, which has become resident here. This is the only place in T&T to find them. The group was still so captivated with the lookout, that no one wanted to leave. When Zolani sighted a yellow-headed caracara in his scope, he got no volunteer to take their eyes off the spectacular show.



Birds in flight (Left to right): red-footed booby; brown booby; red-billed tropicbirds.

Photo by Alyx James



(Left to right): Nesting red-billed tropicbird with chick; Caribbean martin and a brown booby. Photos by Dennis de la Rosa (left and right) and Brian D'Abreau (centre)

We also found a tropicbird nesting on the ground right next to the lookout. David Rooks, natural history master of Tobago, once told me that this very spot was one of the all time favourite places of David Attenborough. He used this setting in two of his nature video series.

"Z" allowed us to stay longer than we originally planned. We left the island by 4:30pm, as the group had to catch an evening flight back to Trinidad, with a 25-minute boat trip, and an almost 2-hour drive to get back to Crown Point. On the way out, I found three ocellated geckos (*Gonatodes ocellatus*). These lizards are endemic to Tobago and are found nowhere else on earth! It was a great day overall. The total tally of bird species identified for the day was 77 species (*contact author or editors for full list*). I'm sure that next time the group comes to the "Sister Isle", Little Tobago will be high on the list of places to (re)visit. We had a very long day, but a very great day.

Due to the coronavirus global pandemic, this will be the last TTFNC field trip until further notice. The Club cancelled the TTFNC Annual Tobago Trip scheduled for the following week.

Sources:

- Hardy, Jerry D. ("Dave"), 1982, Biogeography of Tobago, West Indies, With Special Reference to Amphibians and Reptiles: A Review, Bulletin of the Maryland Herpetological Society, Volume 18, Number 2, ISBN 0025-4231, pages 37 – 134

- Martin, Rob (October 1, 2016), Scrub Greenlet (*Hylophilus flavipes*) is being split into *H. flavipes*, *H. viridiflavus* and *H. insularis*, following the application of criteria set out by Tobias et al. (2010), Bird Life International, archived at: <https://globally-threatened-bird-forums.birdlife.org/2016/10/scrub-greenlet-hylophilus-flavipes-is-being-split-list-h-insularis-as-near-threatened-or-least-concern/> (accessed 28/03/2020)

- Murphy, John (et al), 2018, A Field Guide to the Amphibians & Reptiles of Trinidad & Tobago, published by the Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalist's Club, 336 pages


- UNESCO, 17/08/2011, World Heritage Sites, Tentative List (accessed 28/03/2020) <http://>

whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5646/

For all those who have not seen the mating dance of the blue-backed manakin, I offer the following videos taken from the same lek we visited that day:

- Blue-Backed Manakins Dance in Tobago by Matt Kelly - Feb. 26, 2020 - Part 1 [https://](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4jpl_4UWDM)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=O4jpl_4UWDM

- Blue-Backed Manakins Dance in Tobago by Matt Kelly - Feb. 26, 2020 - Part 2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sv0Mhj8HgOg>
- Blue-Backed Manakins Dance in Tobago by Matt Kelly - March 18, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39B9hXjhyA> . 

Book Review

JOHNSON'S "THE FEATHER THIEF: BEAUTY, OBSESSION AND THE NATURAL HISTORY HEIST OF THE CENTURY"

by Matt Kelly



The Feather Thief: Beauty, Obsession and the Natural History Heist of the Century

By Kirk Wallace Johnson (2019)

Published by Penguin Books, 336 pages

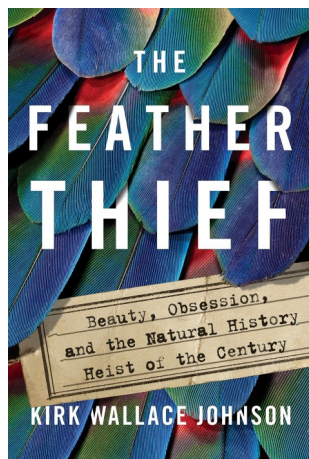


Image courtesy Amazon.com

"Man is seldom content to witness beauty. He must possess it."--Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare (Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, 1979) (from the book's opening page).

This could be the most improbable museum heist ever. Kirk Wallace Johnson, the author and a fly fisherman himself, takes us through an astounding story of nature, history, pluck, greed and the underground black market feather trade which still flourishes today.

On the evening of June 23, 2009, 20-year-old Edwin Rist, a student of the Royal Academy of Music in London, made off with 299 stuffed birds from the British Natural History Museum in Tring, worth an estimated £1 million. Many of the priceless stolen specimens were originally collected by Alfred Russel Wallace. The theft was to feed Rist's fanatical obsession with fly-tying.

On the night in question, Rist, a student and flautist at the Royal Academy of Music, finished a concert in London, then took a suitcase with


burglary tools and boarded an evening train for the 45-minute trip to Tring in Hertfordshire. Tring is home to the Natural History Museum, which was founded by Walter Rothschild, the second Lord Rothschild, who, using his vast wealth, collected a stupendous inventory of natural history specimens, one of the world's finest collections. The collection was given to the people of the UK in 1937, and now comprises a major section of the British Museum's natural history collection.

Late in the evening, Rist walked two miles from the station to the museum, and easily broke in. Once inside, Rist had the run of the museum. He bypassed an original collection of Darwin's finches, skins and skeletons of the Dodo and Great Auk. Rist was interested only in the specimens which had the most flashy coloured feathers. He took all the priceless specimens he could carry and made the trip back to his London apartment before dawn, with original 19th-century specimens of spectacular Cotingas, Resplendent Quetzals, Birds of Paradise and much more.

The author takes us on a tour of the life and times of Alfred Wallace Russel, who collected in the mid-nineteenth century in South America and the Malay Archipelago. We learn how collectors put many bird species on the road to a precarious existence. Then, we are introduced to the plumage trade, which brought many bird species to the brink of extinction, and beyond. At the height of the worldwide feather trade, bird feathers were worth more than their weight in gold. Rist learned about fly-tying back home, in upstate New York, where he

was introduced to the craft and was instantly “hooked.” He became a master fly-tyer and highly sought after in those circles. He strove to tie the ultimate flies; and he did. Through trade shows and the internet, he was ranked as world-class. He soon learned about and became active in the “feather underground” network of fanatical fly fishermen. In this world, the ultimate flies were for collecting, not fishing. These ultimate flies and the materials they required, were very high priced and often needed feathers from endangered and even extinct specimens.

Through his research and investigations, our

author is able to part the curtains for us to have a glimpse into this world. He also will leave you with many questions at the end. What happened to all the feathers? Does Rist still know of their whereabouts? What has the museum done to protect themselves from this ever happening again? This book will take you on a sojourn into the lives of the birds, their explorers and exploiters and the real-life underground feather mafia, which is still probably quite active today. It combines natural history with a real-life “who done it” mystery story. I recommend it for a most enjoyable read. 

A ‘Naturalist In’ Series

THE YEAR OF BORNEO. 1– KINABALU AND THEREABOUTS

by Chris K. Starr



Review of:

F.W. Burbidge 1880. *The Gardens of the Sun*. London: John Murray 364 pp. Reprinted 1991 by Oxford Univ. Press, Singapore. Available online at <http://archive.org/details/gardensofsunorna00burb>. [48th in a series on “naturalist-in” books; see www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm]

Borneo, with a land area of 748 thousand km², is the world’s third largest island, just a little behind New Guinea. The two are continental islands, Borneo sitting on the Sunda Shelf and New Guinea on the Sahul Shelf. They are both in the tropics – Borneo athwart the Equator – and to this day largely forested, so that with their large land area they have immense species richness and high endemism.

It is no surprise that both islands are home to a great deal of human diversity. The aboriginal peoples of Borneo, known under the catch-all name of Dayaks (or Dyaks) number more than 200 distinct ethnicities with a comparable diversity of languages and dialects within the Austronesian group along with Malay, Tagalog, Malagasy and hundreds of others. Already during the colonial period, immigrant waves of Malays and later Chinese had affected the ethnic composition of Borneo, so that it was and is very much a multi-cultural area. The customs and practices of the aboriginal Dayaks and

to a lesser extent the Malays and Chinese, have had a large place in naturalist-in books about Borneo. This is, in fact, the main substance of the earliest of these books (St John 1862-1863), whose opening sentence reads, “The wild tribes of Borneo and the not less wild interior of the country, is scarcely known to European readers.” St John’s extensive treatment includes four appendices on native languages.

In the colonial period, Borneo was divided between two European powers. Almost three-quarters of it, colonized by the Dutch, became the region of Kalimantan in what is now Indonesia, while all but a tiny piece of the rest formed the British regions of Sabah and Sarawak, now part of Malaysia. Because naturalist-in literature is almost entirely a product of English-speaking peoples, all books about Borneo in this genre are drawn from the former British-administered parts of the island. The vast region of Kalimantan has only a sparse presence in the biological literature.

This year’s naturalist-in reviews are devoted to books about Borneo. It is a very rich subject. Review no. 31, on Wallace’s *The Malay Archipelago*, has some Borneo component.

Frederick William Burbidge (1847-1905) was an English horticulturalist and horticultural writer with a life-long association with the Royal Botanic



Pitchers of four *Nepenthes* species in the Botanical Garden in Quito, Ecuador. Photo courtesy Chris K. Starr

Gardens at Kew. In 1877-1878 he was sent to Borneo to collect plants, with special attention to ferns and orchids favoured by European gardeners. His collecting in Borneo yielded about 1000 species of dried herbarium specimens, live plants and seeds. Among his most notable finds was the giant pitcher plant, *Nepenthes rajah*. The 170 or so members of this genus have a wide distribution, with their centre of diversity in Borneo and in particular on Mt Kinabalu near the northeastern corner of the island, the highest peak between the Himalaya and New Guinea (Luping et al. 1978). These remarkable plants form distinctive pitcher-like leaves into which they secrete digestive fluids. The inner surface of the pitcher is very smooth and slippery and furnished with downward-directed hairs, so that any insect that enters the vesicle is almost certain to fall into the fluid and end up nourishing the plant. Burbidge also added about 50 species to the known ferns of Borneo, including about 20 new to science. His collecting included ant-harbours of the genus, *Myrmecodia*, characterized as a "remarkably curious gouty-stemmed plant, parasitical on low jungle-trees". We will have more to say about these in the next review.

He and his assistants also collected many birds, using snares and blowguns with poison darts. It is striking that, for all his attention to individual plants, Burbidge showed little sense of landscape or vegetation patterns. Although I cannot be sure in the absence of an index, I noticed no mention of the dipterocarp forest, the predominant land biome in that part of the world.

The 16 chapters are a chronological treatment

in the manner of the 19th-century natural-history classics. There are eight full-page and 18 smaller illustrations. Because Burbidge was writing at a time when most of his readership had little opportunity to travel beyond Europe, he devotes the first three chapters to the process of getting there. Today's readers will prefer to largely skip over these and move to Chapter 4 with his arrival in Borneo.

Early on we encounter a remark that could have come from Darwin, Bates, Wallace or any number of Victorian-age exploring naturalists: "Setting forth for the first time in a new country, of which but little is generally known, is always exciting work, and as a rule things turn out to be different to what one had imagined they would be." To a botanist from Europe, this was a wonderland, about which he wrote lyrically. In entering any new area, he was in a state of constant expectation, not knowing what wonderful new fern or orchid or palm he might encounter around the next bend in the trail.

Aside from the climate, the cycle of the seasons is something that unavoidably strikes any newcomer from the North Temperate Zone to the tropics. In Borneo, Burbidge noted nothing comparable to the northern spring or fall, something that he found unsatisfying, remarking that "During a year's rambles in one of the richest and most fertile of tropical islands, I saw nothing really fresh or spring-like."

Burbidge had a low opinion of the socially dominant Malays as a whole, regarding them as "courteous, dignified, and hospitable", but dishonest. He was more interested in and favourably disposed toward the aboriginal groups. He noted that violent crime was uncommon, even though most people in

Borneo were beyond the reach of established law. Everywhere he went he remarked on local society and economy, although what he had to say about anything except plants and birds was superficial and vague. Dealing with native guides could be frustrating at times, as they were very wary of omens and would not continue if they met with a contrary.

Collecting expeditions in that period were subject both to facilitating factors and obstacles. The main advantage that they enjoyed was association with the colonial power and thereby with collaborating local chiefs, so that they could count on substantial local hospitality and assistance in most areas. This was important, as it was a very labour-intensive enterprise, requiring guides, porters and assistance in collecting. He employed one very agile man to climb trees for epiphytic plants that otherwise would have remained inaccessible.

The obstacles were both physical and social. There were very few roads outside of the main towns, so that travel was mainly by river in the lowlands. In the highlands, watercourses were of little use. Like St. John before him, Burbidge made two long ascents of Mt. Kinabalu by two different routes at a time when there were no maps of the route to the top. In contrast, today one starts from the national park headquarters at 1500m and ascends by a clear trail, so that there is no possibility of getting lost, with or without a guide. It is about like climbing El Tucuche three times, a fraction of what it must have been in Burbidge's time.

The first ascent was in a party of 32, including two horse-mounted hunters. Part of the way was a

series of hazardous river crossings. While riding water buffaloes across one river, Burbidge and one other were swept downstream; the buffaloes struggling to regain their footing. They were lucky to escape. He commented that "No one can possibly understand the danger of these swollen torrents who has not had personal experience of them. ...Adventures of this kind look tame when calmly written down after all danger is past, and when read by the comfortable fireside, but they are very real and exciting when one is undergoing them in person." On the same expedition, "We crossed the river twice, and now, at 8:30, all further progress seemed impossible, since we had to cross again, and this at a place where the river is a boiling torrent nearly five feet deep." As they waited for the river to subside, "the most gorgeous butterflies flit here in the chequered shade afforded by overhanging branches. Yellow, white and brown species vie with each other in activity." This is a nice illustration of the true explorer's spirit, always open to new wonders even in the midst of adversity.

I cannot resist one more example of his lyricism. "There, gleaming in the sunlight, like a scarlet jewel, beneath the great leathery aroid leaves, is a cluster of tubular *aeschythanthus* flowers; and here is another wee orchid, a tiny pink-blossomed *cirrhopetalum*, whose flowers and leaves scarcely rise above the bright carpet of velvety moss among which it grows."

While hazards from hostile natives or large animals, such as venomous snakes, were minimal, there were plenty of troublesome land leeches. They were sensitive to vibrations from approaching footsteps and would wave about to make contact. Under those circumstances, checking oneself for leeches is a standard part of any rest stop, just as checking for ticks is in some other tropical regions.

Chapter 15 treats tropical fruits, including a long disquisition on the durian. This fruit has the justified reputation of being both stinky and delicious, much more so than jackfruit. For the record, though, it is neither as stinky nor as delicious as people say, but don't take my word for it. This chapter is of little interest today, but for contemporary European




Left: Mt Kinabalu as seen from a distant mid-level locality.
Photo courtesy of the Star newspaper, Kuala Lumpur.

readers who would never set foot in the Asian tropics it made perfect sense to include it. Likewise, Chapter 16 on "Notes on Tropical Travel" provided much practical advice for the time, even if we can disregard it today.

The book has four appendices by specialists on plants and birds of Borneo.

References:

Luping, M, C. Wen & E.R. Dingley (eds.) 1978. Kinabalu: Summit of Borneo. Kota Kinabalu: Sabah Society 482 pp.

St John, S. 1862-1863. Life in the Forests of the Far East. Vol. 1-2. London: Smith, Elder 400 pp, 402 pp. Available online at the Biodiversity Heritage Library. 



Your
Ideas and Observations
A Quarterly Update


FLAMINGOS ON THE WEST COAST

by Elizabeth Seebaran



American Flamingo sightings were observed on June 6th 2020, between 8:30am and 9:30am

At Waterloo - 26 birds counted, four of which were juveniles from the grey plumage and appearing slightly smaller in size. At the same time in Brickfield - 11 adult flamingos were nearer to the mangroves northwards. No sightings were observed at Orange Valley.

Sightings on the west coast mud flats seemed to have started with a flock of about 200 individuals seen on the afternoon of Friday 8th May far south of Orange Valley fishing jetty. Pictures included are from sightings on the 6th of June. 



Top: Juvenile American flamingo – indicated by the grey plumage; Bottom: adult American flamingos.

Photos by Elizabeth Seebaran

Please send us your ideas and observations to admin@ttfnc.org for inclusion in the next Bulletin!



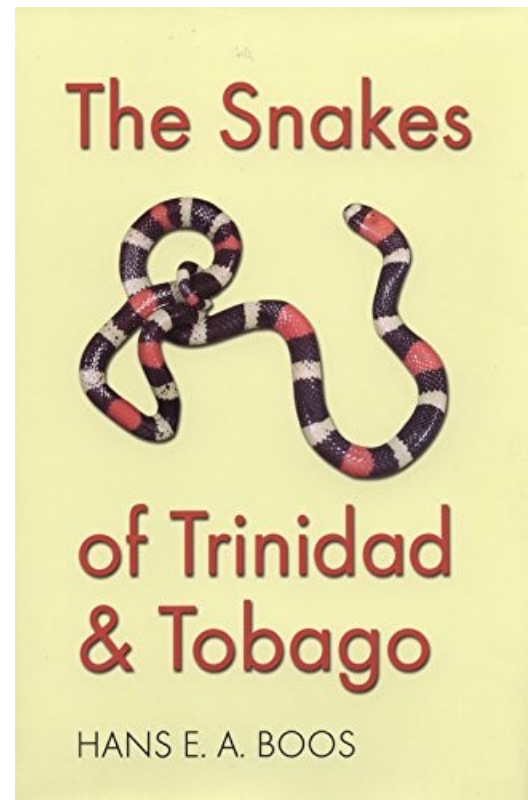
MEMORIAL TRIBUTE



Hans E. A. Boos. Photo courtesy <http://www.ckstarr.net/cks/2013-BOOS.pdf>


Hans Boos was a noted naturalist in Trinidad and Tobago with a special interest in reptiles. He was a past president of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club and an active member.

He was the former curator of the Emperor Valley Zoo where he made valuable contributions. Prior to this, he also worked as a zookeeper at the Taronga Park Zoo, Australia. He was also



The Snakes of Trinidad and Tobago by Hans E. A. Boos
Photo courtesy <https://www.amazon.ca/Snakes-Trinidad-Tobago-Hans-Boos/dp/1585441163>

successful in breeding many endangered or threatened species.

Hans Boos authored Snakes of Trinidad and Tobago, the novel Parasite, and Standing On My Head: Adventures of a Zookeeper Down Under. He also has authored over 100 scientific papers. 

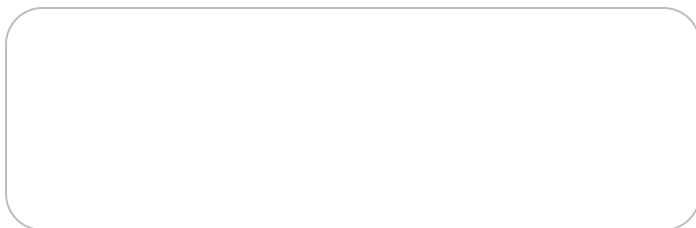
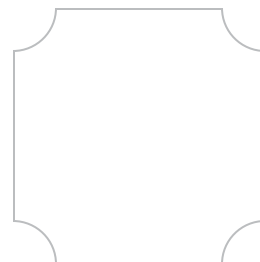
MANAGEMENT NOTICES

COVID-19:

Management continues to monitor and be guided by the Ministry of Health, with respect to developments in the COVID-19 pandemic and Public Health Regulations. As such, this continues to affect the Club's holding of physical lectures, Club trips and any activity that involves social gatherings, until further notice.

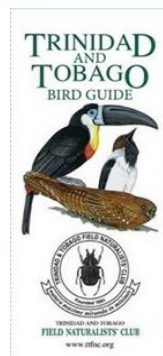
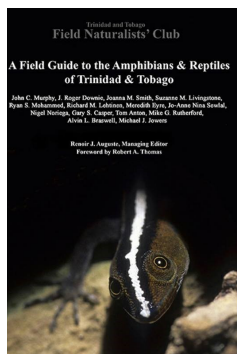
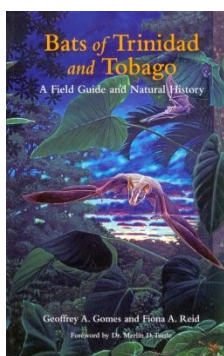
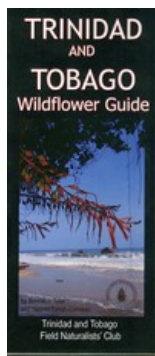
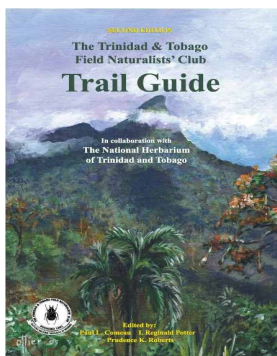
NPO Registration:

In August, the Club, registered with the Ministry of Legal Affairs as a non-profit organization, in keeping with the requirements of the NPO Act, 2019



PUBLICATIONS

The following publications are available to members and non-members (*prices shown are those paid when purchasing directly from the Club*):



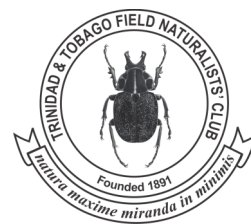
TTFNC Trail Guide (\$150); T&T Wildflower Guide (\$50); Bats of T&T (\$200); Field Guide to Amphibians & Reptiles (\$180); 2019 Living World Journal (\$60); TTFNC Bird Guide (\$50).

MISCELLANEOUS

Your 2020 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 for details. You can join the club this way, too!



Do you have an article to submit for the next QB?

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

or directly to the editors or any member of Management. Please include 'QB2020' in the email subject label.