# THE FIELD NATURALIST

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

**January – June 2021** **Issue No: 1&2/2021**


## General Club Trip, 28 February 2021

# FIRST CLUB TRIP IN ALMOST ONE YEAR

*By Nicholas Mohammed*

**Club members in front a large ficus tree at Las Hermanas Estate, Santa Cruz.** *Photo by Jeffrey Wong Sang*

**This trip was a first in two regards: the first field trip of 2021 and the first general field trip since the arrival of COVID-19 on our shores.** It may be due to the cabin fever and need to be outdoors again, that the 18 members who attended, were in the brightest of spirits and were rearing to go.

The estate, which is owned by fellow TTFNC member, Mr. Wayne Hutchinson, covers an area of roughly 200 acres of land which entails largely disturbed forest, and extends upwards into the northern range. The terrain entails flat to undulating land to the south and ascends to the mountainous regions in the north. Within the forested northern

## Inside This Issue



**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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**January – June 2021**

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# WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

## The club warmly welcomes the following new members:

Nicole Attin

areas are naturally and artificially occurring water features such as rivers and dams. A naturally occurring spring is also noted to exist within the boundaries of the estate.

On arrival at the Colibri Creative Center of Light, situated at the foot of the estate, all members were briefed on the trip's length, relative difficulty, and the required Covid protocols. The trip would consist of two parts: a gentle uphill walk to the midpoint of the mountain, followed by the downhill forest walk to return to the Center.

The first leg of the hike was full of laughter and

**Dan displaying a Dutchman's Pipe flower.**
*Photo by Nicholas Mohammed.*

'small talk' from members as they reveled in being outdoors with friends and colleagues again. Of course, the trip also involved the sharing of knowledge of the biodiversity of the area. Along the way, members saw a thriving rainbow eucalyptus tree, which sparked some conversation and sombre reflection of the one that was burnt at the Botanical Gardens. Large flowers of the Dutchman's pipe were also a star attraction for a while as the ones alongside the trail were extremely vibrant, making them perfect for some botanical snapshots. Overhead, there was also a pair of grey-headed kites performing a courtship display by fluttering their wings.

Dan Jaggernauth pointed out the abundance of coffee and cocoa trees alongside the trail and highlighted how nature could offer opportunities for economic growth and development in a sustainable way. He then brought attention to the numerous jamun trees and stated that the fruits can be made into a fantastic treat or a sweet healthy red wine; a claim members stated would require some testing to verify.

**Coffee seen on the estate.**
*Photo by Nicholas Mohammed.*

A young orb weaver spider was also spotted building its intricate web near to a small cluster of wild hops trees. As members were taking photos of the former, a small cluster of pepper shrills made their overhead presence known with their calls. Remnants of mangrove crabs were also spotted and Mr. Hutchinson reported that the estate is home to quite a few crab-eating raccoons. At the midpoint of the first leg, some members were treated to a quick treat from the sugar apple trees. Sandbox pods littered an area of the trail, and Dan was happy to explain the means by which one could take advantage of its diarrheic properties in pranking one's friends.

An abandoned and fallen bananaquit nest was

**(Top) Orb weaver spider & (bottom) remants of mangrove crabs.** *Photo by Nicholas Mohammed*.

spotted and Kris Sookdeo explained the numerous variants of the nests and their functions. A thick cluster of zebapique plants was also spotted and Dan explained the health benefits and some

**One of the eco cabins on the estate.** *Photo by Jeffrey Wong Sang*

members posited that its use in helping with respiratory issues, could be reason to study the plant in Covid treatments.

Near the end of first leg of the hike, a colony of orange-winged parrots made their presence known, as they loudly called before all settling onto some immortelle trees. At the end of the uphill walk, members were met with the two eco cabins built by Wayne and were invited in to relax a bit and take pictures. After a quick break to have some snacks and rehydrate, the downhill walk through a more forested trail began.

Along the way, remnants of the HardCore Caribbean's 2015 obstacle course were observed. Some members wondered if they had the strength to overcome the tire and rope ladders, but were willing to risk it. The trip then came to a quick break at a massive tree's buttress which had the botanical members in a small debate as to its identity. It was quite a sight to behold as they went back and forth, trying to identify the tree and validate their claims with talks of leaf types, bark composition, and sap consistency. In the end what was initially thought to be a silk cotton tree, was designated to be a member of the Ficus family;


**Dan as he tells the group about money bush.** *Photo by Jeffrey Wong Sang*

however based on its massive size, it was easy to see why one could be confused.

The trail then led to a small decline that required the use of a rope to aid in the downward rappel. It was quite an experience, with loud cheers and applause as each member made their way down. The effort was rewarded with a small break at a nearby dam, where members were able to dip their feet in, take pictures, and learn about the benefits of fish and tadpole therapy.

Upon return to the Center, all members were treated to some delicious homemade chai and some snacks. The entire trip took roughly 3.5 hours and was an amazing experience, which was a truly needed and welcomed escape to nature.

It should be noted that this report sadly does not cover all the fantastic sightings that were noted along the way as numerous butterflies, mosses, mushrooms, and other plants were seen. Though, in order to truly appreciate the sights and sounds, a visit to the estate would be warranted.

**Rappelling at the end of the trail.**
*Photo by Nicholas Mohammed.*

**(Top) View from one of the eco cabins at the Las Hermanas Estate in Santa Cruz; (middle) some flora and fauna observed.** *Photos by Jeffrey Wong Sang*

**The small dam, and other flora and fauna seen on the trip.** *Photo by Nicholas Mohammed.*

Bird Group Trip Report

# EL CIERRO DEL ARIPO—IN SEARCH OF THE ORANGE-BILLED NIGHTINGALE THRUSH

*by Elizabeth Seebaran*


**The sought after orange-billed nightingale thrush. This bird is common on the Cerro Del Aripo climb once above 700m and even around 850m, it sits on low branches and sings; distinct orange feet and bill, darker brown on back, lighter feathers on chest front area.** *Photo by Lawrence James*

**Nine birders turned up in the very early morning hours of Sunday 11th April 2021 for the much-anticipated field trip to El Cerro del Aripo.** This would be the first time the birding group has attempted to climb the tallest mountain peak of Trinidad in search of the much-coveted, altitude-restricted, orange-billed nightingale thrush bird, a lifer for many mostly due to the difficult terrain to try and attempt to find one. Though we initially started off with a much higher number of inquisitive and excited birders when the trip details were released some two weeks prior, the uncertainty and second thoughts as to attempting one of the most challenging hikes in Trinidad, coupled with availability to attend and some rains the day prior to the event, seemed to have unfortunately put off quite a few.

The El Cerro del Aripo trail goes to the tallest point of Trinidad summiting at 940m, located in the Northern Range. The trail, rated 5 (strenuous) in the *Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club Trail Guide*, features hiking through tropical montane forest that eventually gives way to elfin woodland towards the summit. The ridge tops are often shrouded in cloud and mist resulting in consistent condensation of moisture on the vegetation surfaces, attracting the presence of more epiphytes as one continues to climb higher, including air bromeliads and orchids, mosses and lichens.

The idea for this trip came during the earlier part of 2020 when TTFNC bird group member Michael Boswell expressed some interest to me in trying to find and photograph the orange-billed nightingale thrush and its other high-altitude restricted companion, the blue-capped tanager. At that time the pandemic was in full swing with a temporary halt on current field trips, however dry outdoor activities were still being allowed according to the Public Health Regulations at that time. With some extra reading from the *Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago* by Richard Ffrench and the *Field Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago,* we ascertained the orange-billed nightingale thrush to be a rather uncommon local resident of Trinidad (categorized as seen every 2-10 days according to *Field Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*), but confined to the higher parts of the Northern Range, rarely below 650m and mostly above 750m where it is said to inhabit the undergrowth, keeping lower to the ground and singing from exposed tree branches. The blue-capped tanager we also ascertained to be in such similar habitat at an altitude of at least 650m and higher, listed as an even more scarce resident (categorized as recorded less frequently than every 10 days, but more than 5 times per year, according to *Field Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*). I knew one birder and strong hiker, Lawrence James, who for sure had bagged both these birds on his expeditions up to the summit of El Tucuche, the second highest peak in Trinidad, also along the Northern Range, summiting at 936m, rated 7 (difficult) in the *Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club Trail Guide*.


**Blue-capped tanager on a palms with small black berries** *- Photo by Faraaz Abdool*

After some deliberation, the decision was made that Michael and I would be willing to try the daunting climb up El Cerro del Aripo trail, and also test it as a possible new birding field trip location for the Bird Group's schedule. We enlisted the help and experience of Lawrence James, who got Mario Russell on board, also avid birder, strong hiker and owner of Island Hikers hike group. For sure we knew we were in good hands, as both Lawrence and Mario had already summitted El Cerro del Aripo and were familiar with the trail and the hazards that can be expected, including encountering the deadly and venomous mapepire snakes that are common in the forests along the ridge. The possibility of getting lost on the climb was also very real, and fresh trail blazing using visible orange tape on tree trunks had to be done.

Our first attempt did not pull through the way we hoped in the dry season of April 2020. This confirmed that even though one can make the gentle climb along the La Laja – Paria Trace bench trail, that starts from the small bridge and waterfall towards the end of the La Laja South Road, where the official Forestry La Laja Nature Walk signpost is located (elevation 472m), and snakes along the Guanapo Valley all the way to the crest of the ridge of the Northern Range at the junction that can lead back to Brasso Seco northwards (elevation 655m), it will still not be sufficient elevation to attain the required altitude to find the bird. Because even though we birders turned back from the crest and walked back towards the parked vehicles feeling defeated, the hikers who went ahead of us eastwards along the actual ridge to eventually summit the peak at El Cerro del Aripo that afternoon, came back with good news that they did see the bird along the climb from at least 750m in elevation to about 850m in elevation and were able to get good sightings and photographs of it. With hearts stirred once more, we decided we had to try it again, and soon! Blindly setting another date for July 2020 with the wet season now on us, we made our second recon attempt. Even though the weather had held up earlier that week, on the actual day of our expedition and recon trip, the rains met us halfway up around lunchtime, with heavy cloud and mist rolling in along the ridge, making the going difficult with the frequent slipping and falling on wet leaves. This time though, we were successful, and with Lawrence's keen ear, we started to hear the

bird calling on the very first steep climb that goes to Peak #2 (that goes to an elevation of 754m) all the way to Peak #4 where we did not venture further. And although we spent some time looking on the plateau of Peak #4 (elevation 815m) we were unable to find the blue-capped tanager at that time. We wondered if there would have been more luck without the rainy conditions. With the excitement of the day and returning to the parked vehicles at 5:30pm from a full day of walking, we decided yes, we can make this an official bird trip once there was proper planning and communication about the risks involved, as well as choosing a date more within the dry season.

Fast forwarding to almost one year later in the dry season of 2021, here we were, a group of nine at 4:30 in the morning at the O'Meara Road north with our trip leaders, Mario Russell and Lawrence James, excited and ready to go. The convoy of 4x4s, SUVs and cars made its way, with Mario in lead, along the Arima-Blanchisseuse Road, taking the right turn up the La Laja South Road which crosses the divide from the Arima Valley into the Guanapo Valley, which was drivable for the most part, until the road becomes too deteriorated after a couple of bends, and the drivers of the cars and smaller SUVs had to park and hitch a ride in the larger SUVs and 4x4s. However, it wasn't too far from the small bridge and waterfall where the trail head started. After a quick registration and prayer, we began our walk around 6:25am. It seemed the rains from the day before perhaps had taken down a massive tree within one minute into our walk already! A little bit of manoeuvring was needed and then we were gingerly on our way again. We passed farmlands on the left and right up a steep drivable road that climbed in a northerly direction.

A blue-headed parrot came in from the valley to land on some scraggly bamboo branches within our reach. Birds that are characteristic to open, cultivated land habitat at forest edges, including streaked and piratic flycatchers, pale-breasted spinetail, blue-black grassquits, barred antshrike, and honeycreepers and tanagers were logged on our e-bird checklist. We also managed to get the white-necked thrush munching on some small berries from a tree along the trail in the morning sunlight and quite a few vocalizing Trinidad euphonias. Soon the open farmland ended, and we entered secondary forest that transitioned into more mature rainforest



**(Top): A blue-headed parrot.** *Photo by Lawrence James*
**(Bottom): White-chested emerald hummingbird**
*Photo by Elizabeth Seebaran*

as we continued to gently climb the bench trail. At a point along the now darkened trail deep within the forest we paused as a black-faced anthrush called ever so close on our right, down the steep edge of the trail. We peered ahead and even looked behind us and just like that, two of these very secretive forest floor birds walked right along the path within arm's length, and scurried up the steeper slopes on our left, above us.

As we continued along the trail, several hummingbirds were spotted, including the white-chested emerald and green hermit. Cocoa woodcreepers called incessantly and other persons ahead spotted the red-crowned ant tanager and managed to flush a chestnut woodpecker that was on a hanging liana in front of the group. Eventually after some hairpin bends, and gentle, increasing inclines, the bench trail finally crested the ridge

around 8:00am (earlier than expected, so we were already making some good headway with time) at a four-way junction, and we were met by a directional sign recently put up by Island Hikers. The trail continues down the northern slope all the way into Brasso Seco village. If one turned west through an overgrown climbing path, one would reach the top of Morne Bleu, the fifth tallest peak in Trinidad. And if one turned east this would be the El Cerro del Aripo trail to the tallest summit in Trinidad.


**The new directional sign post placed by Island Hikers.** *Photo by Elizabeth Seebaran*

After a brief rest and refuelling break, cameras tucked away and walking sticks in hand, we started the first of the real challenging climbs heading east along the ridge into undisturbed lower montane forest with Mario leading in the front and Lawrence taking up the back. There are a total of seven peaks, with the summit being the seventh peak. However, this trip was not going all the way to the Peak #7, but at most to Peak #4 and plateau where our recon trip focused on last year. The orange ribbons were still mostly there from last year's trail blazing. Peak #1 was a short steep climb up to an elevation of 663m, and then back down. Peak #2 was a very long and steep step-like climb, muddy and slippery in some places, with manoeuvring around some fresh tree fall, being careful not to lose the trail on several occasions. On the climb towards Peak #2, we started hearing it, the calls of the orange-billed nightingale-thrush, along the slopes of the ridge, but not quite sighting it as yet. We also distinctly heard the calls of an individual ornate hawk-eagle and Lawrence and myself paused to take a listen. Listed as a locally rare resident on the forested hills of the Northern Range, the ornate hawk-eagle is a sub-canopy percher and though it sounded so close, it may as well have been far away with the steep ridge slopes on either side making it difficult and dangerous to try and search it out.

As the group went on ahead higher up the climb towards Peak #2, Lawrence stopped to shoot some pictures of another white-necked thrush much closer to eye level this time. I decided I would trudge along ahead and take my time because of how slippery and steep this part of the slope was, with deep mud in some places. I stopped though when I could not ascertain the location of the next few orange ribbons in front of me, and doubled back without missing a few heartbeats waiting for Lawrence to catch back up. When he did, he excitedly called out to my location, and on finding me I learned an orange-billed nightingale thrush came in seriously close to where he was shooting the white-necked thrush, resulting in some spectacular photos, possibly the first anyone got for


**White-necked thrush spotted.** *Photo by Lawrence James*

the trip so far. Due to the terrain, we kept trudging along upwards till we reached the top of this peak attaining an elevation of 754m, identified by the

large horizontal fallen bois bandé (*Richeria grandis)* nursery log that now supports several trees and can be seen just off the trail on the right-hand side when approaching the peak.

**Bois Bande nursery log.** *Photo by Elizabeth Seebaran*

Peak #2 was a bit flat and took about 15 minutes to traverse. Now mosses and bromeliads were everywhere, including a short plant with broad leaves and red berries that I've been trying to ID for quite some time, which I believe may belong to the genus Rudgea (which has been later identified by Linton Arneaud as Rubiaceae family (*Notopleura uliginosa*). We continued to hear the orange-billed nightingale thrush calling occasionally along the sides of the ridge around us, taunting us. Feeling disappointed at missing the sighting Lawrence had earlier, I tried to pay attention to what I was hearing, trying to differentiate the various calls to locate another orange-billed nightingale thrush nearby to get a photo opportunity. No such luck and then we were climbing again, leg muscles still burning and not fully recovered as yet from the gruelling climb so far.

A short climb led to Peak #3 at 770m in elevation, where the vegetation began to change to more palms along the ridge, listed as tall Manac (*Euterpe broadwayi)* and short *Anare Geonoma* and Prestoea palms from the *Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists Club Trail Guide.* It was quite fascinating to observe the vegetation transition. And soon we were approaching the second steep and long climb up Peak #4 with views from the North Coast on our left. Gritty quartzite material usually occurs underfoot along this part of the trail, however with the rains the trail was now a mush of deep and slippery mud. Occasionally the calls of the orange-billed nightingale thrush would punctuate the forest air, teasing us, but we continued to trudge upwards. Getting weary of the climbing we paused to take some pictures of a morpho or emperor butterfly (*Morpho peleides)* that sat patiently on some leaves at eye level allowing us to get in really close even with cell phones.

**Morpho Butterfly.** *Photo by Elizabeth Seebaran*

We started to hear the voices of the group ahead of us and knew we had approached the top of Peak #4 at elevation 815m around lunchtime. Just a few more steps again and we would plateau off on this broad flat area of the ridge. Mario came back looking for us on the trail, exclaiming excitedly that almost everyone already got sightings and photos of the orange-billed nightingale thrush on the plateau. This was a lifer bird for all attendees except those of us who had spotted it on the previous recon trips. Nevertheless, as our target bird, we didn't hesitate to take in the sights and sounds of one of the most beautiful sounds of the forest. Walking up to finally meet the group, I stumbled upon Cyril Coomansingh who was able to use playback and encourage an orange-billed nightingale thrush to hang around inquisitively to finally get some photos and even brief videos while it preened in between singing. This confirmed that the bird can hang around with playback and maybe when we did try playback on the recon trip last year, we may have been using a

**(At the back) Cyril Coomansingh, Cornelius Felian (Carlos), Faraaz Abdool, Fayard Mohammed**
**(In the front): Michael Boswell, Selene Warren (stooping), Lawrence James, Mario Russell, Elizabeth Seebaran (up front)**
*Photo by Elizabeth Seebaran*

call not close enough to the resident birds here. What was also interesting, we were hearing bananaquits and spectacled thrushes from the farmland at the start of our walk all the way to this elevation on the ridge causing us to wonder what could be the reason(s) for the seeming strict altitude specialization of the orange-billed nightingale thrush?

Compared to our experience on this part of the ridge from a rainy misty day to one like today with more sunshine and clear skies, the birding was definitely more productive, because not too long in, as Faraaz Abdool sat still observing the canopy above, he was able to spot not one but a pair of the rarely sighted blue-capped tanagers, and excitement erupted, another lifer for many of us, except maybe for Lawrence! Pictures of the blue-capped tanager were harder to an extent, but we did notice it coming and going from some palms with these small black berries where it was feeding at the top of Peak #4. We tried out best to take record shots of it, and we would surely have one amazing story to tell when we returned! White-bellied antbirds also called incessantly around us from the steeper slopes off the ridge, and some playback was able to draw one or two in, but not for long as they retreated off the ridge again, their voices in the distance. Orange-billed nightingale thrushes continued to sing constantly all around us, expressing our victory that we were able to bag our target bird, and a bonus, the blue-capped tanager. There were a few other species around also including smaller tanagers, honey creepers and flycatchers. As Cyril used playback, two yellow-legged thrushes seemed attracted by the playback, and also came in to investigate, with almost eye-level appearances in the sub-canopy with their distinct yellow eye ring and yellow legs against black feathers.

Not too long afterward it was time to start heading down. After making our victory video around 1:30pm, Selene Warren, Lawrence and I gave ourselves a head start for the gruelling and calculated descent. One had to be really careful coming down Peak #4 and Peak #2, for other than the risk of taking the wrong turn and getting lost, one could easily go stumbling. Thankfully we made it most of the way down with walking sticks in hand when the remainder of the group led by Mario met us along the descent of Peak #2. Not too long after we came off the ridge at the crest and stopped for a brief water break. Not allowing the legs to get cold, we mustered up the remaining bit of strength and courage and made our way out of the La Laja-Paria bench trail back into the open farmland in bright sunshine and back to the vehicles at around minutes to five in the late afternoon. With the welcoming sight of the little waterfall and bridge, and everyone accounted for, safe and smiling, it was time to head home and give the good news to our fellow birders who couldn't make it as to what transpired and what they missed!

(Virtual) Art Group Report

# ARTISTS FLOCK TO 'LEARN TO DRAW BIRDS' WORKSHOP

*by Amy Deacon*

**Sketch & watercolour of a white-necked jacobin done by Olga Skarlato**

**In May 2021, Trinidad and Tobago found itself once again in strict lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic.** With fieldtrips and gatherings postponed indefinitely, and most of our members stuck at home, the TTFNC Art Group's response was to host an online 'draw-along' on Sunday 9th May 2021, led by the talented and acclaimed wildlife artist Edward Rooks.

Edward was born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago. He was an active member of the club as a young man, before emigrating to California. Many of his paintings feature the scenes and species of T&T. Indeed we were treated to a sneak preview of a large commission of Asa Wright Nature Centre nestled in the Arima Valley forests, which provided a fitting backdrop for the session.

At midday, one hundred people joined us live via Zoom and Facebook Live as Edward talked us through some simple steps towards drawing three of T&T's best-loved birds: a bananaquit, a scarlet ibis and a white-necked jacobin. Using only the simplest of materials – paper and pencil – and beginning with basic shapes, Edward showed us how a little anatomical knowledge could transform these shapes into well-proportioned, life-like portrayals.

Here and there, Edward used the three examples as a starting point to elaborate on how to draw bird feet, beaks, wings and tails, including lessons that could be applied to the drawing of most bird species.

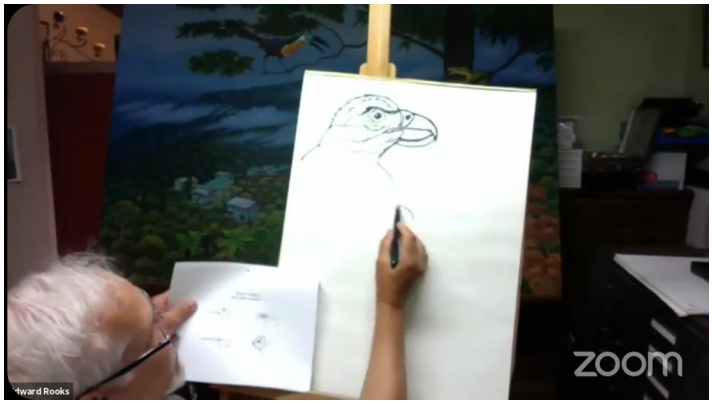
His experience running art workshops shone through in his engaging style and clear explanations. The session lasted nearly 90 minutes, but it flew by! By the end we all had covered our paper in feathery sketches; those who had registered for the event in advance had access to some accompanying diagrams and examples from Edward, which complemented the live demonstration.

After the session, it was exciting to receive

photos of people's sketches and see how beautifully they had turned out, and particularly nice to find out that children as well as adults had been taking part. Some people had even added some colour to their pencil sketches, to dramatic effect.

The Art Group is hugely grateful to Edward for sharing his time and expertise so generously – and especially for allowing us to post the recording on our Facebook page so that we could reach even more people looking for something fun, safe and productive to do during lockdown. At the time of writing the recording has been viewed nearly 2,000 times!

Thanks to everyone who took part, whether live or in your own time afterwards. The recording is still available on the TTFNC Facebook page, so please do check it out if you didn't get a chance yet. We very much hope this marks the re-awakening of the Art Group and look forward to your company at our next event!


**(Top): Scarlet Ibis sketch done by Ihsaan Soobratte (Bottom): Edward Rooks demonstrating how to draw a hawk via Zoom**


**(Top): The collection of sketches done by Amy Deacon; (Bottom): Sketches done by Niala Dwarika-Bhagat**

# USING THE QB TO CLIMB EL CIERRO DEL ARIPO

*by Eric and Matthew Gilbertson*

Editor's note:

The following article is an account of two foreign hikers, brothers Eric and Matthew Gilbertson, who visited Trinidad in 2012 on a mission to climb our highest peak, El Cierro del Aripo on their own. Interestingly, they came across the Club's Quarterly Bulletin (QB-1) 2011 publication, featuring a field trip report on El Cierro del Aripo and they used the descriptive trail info contained in that report to help them climb the peak. Permission was obtained from the authors to reprint their article. You can read more of their accounts of scaling the highest peaks in other countries on their blog 'Country Highpoints' here.

"**There aren't any rental cars left at all," the woman at the Budget car rental counter said, looking around guiltily. "But how can that be – I reserved one last week for this day**?" I replied in disgust, producing a printout of the budget car rental confirmation email I had received. That didn't seem to faze her as she went back to talking on her cell phone. It was doubtful any taxi would take us up the rough La Laja road we needed to drive on to reach our goal – El Cerro del Aripo, the highest mountain in Trinidad and Tobago – and there certainly wouldn't be any other cars on that lonely road to give us a ride. The clock was ticking too – we had given ourselves 24 hours on the ground to bag the summit, but that had already been reduced by three hours when fog delayed our connecting flight out of JFK. Any more delays could certainly jeopardize our chance of success, since we didn't really know if there was a trail or not to the summit, and jungle bushwacking at night would take a very long time.

"Did she mean no rental cars anywhere, or just from Budget?" Matthew asked me. It wasn't clear so we walked around a little and started talking to another lady. "Yes, we have a Nissan hatchback for $400 a day," she replied. "Four hundred US dollars?!" "No, Trinidad dollars. The conversion is six to one with US," she replied. Phew, that sounded more reasonable so I immediately accepted. After some standard paperwork she walked us out to the parking lot and showed us the car.

I had agreed to be the driver today and was already a little nervous. We had meticulously researched every mountain on this trip (six country highpoints in the Caribbean), with trip reports, driving directions, GPS tracks, and flight and car reservations, but had overlooked one small but important detail: Trinidad (and every other country we planned to visit as it turned out) follows a British driving system where cars drive on the left and the car steering wheel is on the right. I guess there was no way for me to actually prepare for this back in the US had I known it earlier, but it would still have been nice to know more than 20 minutes in advance. Luckily I don't drive very often, so you could say I started with a mostly clean slate and didn't have any US-style driving habits ingrained too deeply in my mind.

We were each travelling ultralight – with only a carry-on backpack each – so we threw our gear in the back seat and I took the wheel. After a few confidence-building practice laps around the parking lot I felt brave enough to take on Trinidad's roads, so at 10:45 am we pulled out of the airport toward the town of Arima. The first step was to fill up the gas tank. Unlike in the US, in the Caribbean they give you a rental car with a basically empty fuel tank and you're supposed to return it with the same amount of fuel that it started with. Also unlike the US, the gas stations in the Caribbean don't post their fuel prices. I found a nearby gas station and started filling up, with the goal of getting the tank half full so I could return it approximately empty. Half a tank is at least $20 US right? So $120TT dollars. I kept my eye on the pump gauge but after only $30TT it registered full! Gas was less than one USD per gallon here! I know Venezuela heavily subsidizes its gas prices, and since Trinidad is so close to Venezuela maybe they get subsidized too.

Our next step was the most critical one of the trip – getting to the correct trailhead/bushwacking start. There's actually very little useful information


**At the start of the La Laja the trail**. *Photos Courtesy Eric & Matthew Gilbertson*

online about routes up Cerro del Aripo, and I'm pretty sure after quite a few hours of research Matthew and I found absolutely everything. All of that had amounted to one sentence on mountain-forecast.com saying "start at the end of La Laja road," and one reference in a Caribbean hiking guidebook saying the route started past the Aripo caves (which were on the other side of the mountain from La Laja road).

Through a friend of a friend I managed to contact a local hiking guide in Trinidad, but I wasn't able to learn too much more from our interaction unfortunately. At one point I emailed him a planned route overlayed on a topo map of what I thought might be a way to the top, and asked if that was the route. His response was "I would guess so".

Finally Matthew had a breakthrough and found this report from a local field biologist: http://ttfnc.org/photojournals/2011-1.pdf. It looked like we should drive along La Laja road until we saw a scenic waterfall, then walk east along a ridge to the summit, possibly bushwacking or following a trail. That information was extremely helpful.

I started driving to Arima as Matthew navigated with our fancy new GPS. We had bought a new one specifically for this trip because there were no GPS topo maps available for the Caribbean, but with this new GPS we could load satellite images taken from online for navigation. Unfortunately those didn't tell us which roads were one-way, and it took quite a while to navigate through Arima. Finally we found the Arima-Blanchisseuse road and headed north. Thick jungle started replacing houses and we started feeling like we were truly a long way from Boston.

"Turn here, this must be La Laja road," Matthew pointed out. The road was completely unmarked and I don't know how we'd have found it without a GPS or a guide. Up to this point the roads had been in decent shape, with only a few potholes here and there, but this road was really rough. There were branches and potholes all over the place, and I had to drive pretty carefully since our car only had about 6 inches of clearance. We kept climbing higher and higher, passing a couple shacks but mostly pure jungle. We soon crested a ridge and started descending down into the Guanapo Valley.

Now came the critical decision – from Google maps (the only map source we had), La Laja road extended all the way down to the bottom of the valley. However, a small side road apparently cut

north along the top of the ridge. Would we follow the mountain-forecast.com route description to drive to the end of La Laja road? Or go with the field ecologist and take the side road? It seemed safest to trust the ecologist, so we soon turned left on a little dirt road. We caught glimpses through the trees across the Guanapo valley to what looked like had to be Cerro del Aripo. On this road we got our first glimpse of jungle wildlife too, when a big monitor lizard darted across the road.

We were both keeping our eyes peeled for any sort of waterfall, because this would be our only confirmation that we should start hiking. About a mile in we crossed a small bridge and indeed saw a waterfall, but it didn't quite match the picture in the ecologist's report. We debated back and forth whether this could be the same one. Maybe it's changed over the years from a big flood or something? The road kept going along the ridge, and we decided as long as it kept this elevation we should keep driving just in case. Soon I rounded a turn and the road got really steep. My wheels started spinning, so I backed up and tried again with no luck. "Looks like we're walking from here," Matthew said. I carefully backed the car up and pulled as far off the side as I could. It was 12:30pm and we had 5.5 hours of daylight left.

Outside the car it felt and looked surprisingly like a July day in Kentucky – temperature in the 80s, humid, with very similar vegetation. And there was mercifully no mosquito welcoming committee! We started up the road with a few liters of water, rain jackets, and a little bit of food. Just past the steep hill, after no more than 5 minutes of walking we saw another waterfall, and this one matched the picture exactly! Finally, we had physical confirmation that all our driving had been in the right direction. The road split here and we took the uphill direction, now following a GPS track Matthew had guessed at from satellite imagery. We passed a few "No Trespassing" signs and "Please Don't Pick the Fruit" signs as we walked past a few shacks and banana trees. Soon the road entered the woods and turned into 4WD territory, and then to a mere hiking path. It was pretty well-maintained with no blowdowns, so must actually be used occasionally.

We crested a ridge and the trail continued down the other side, but another faint herd-path looked like it continued east along the top of the ridge. This had to be the ecologist's route, and it was consistent with what we'd plotted on the GPS so we took it. This path certainly saw less traffic than the previous one, but was easy enough to follow because it always stayed on the top of the ridge. We hiked at a pretty fast pace, knowing we were still a mile or two line-of-sight from the summit and not sure if this path would fizzle out into a bushwhack or not. Around 2pm we hit a small clearing with a 1ft-by-1ft concrete block in the middle with the number "98" written on a small piece of metal. We searched around and the trail had indeed disappeared. Could this be the top? "This looks like the summit picture from the ecologist's report, but according to the GPS there's another local maximum 0.5-mile south on the ridge that might be taller," Matthew noted.

I looked at the GPS map and the point we were on and the one south were both enclosed in a 940m contour, but the one south had a larger area enclosed in the contour and thus had a good chance of being taller. However, obviously everyone who took the path we'd taken must have thought our current location was the summit, since the path ended here and there was an official marker here.

"I didn't come all this way to climb the second-tallest mountain in Trinidad and Tobago," I proclaimed. "Let's go climb that other one just to be sure."

Matthew reluctantly agreed, and we plunged into the jungle. If anyone reading this tries to repeat our route, definitely bring a machete. Every tree has a million little vines hanging tautly down from its branches to the ground, and each vine acts like a magnet toward your legs. The worst part about the vines is that you can't just power your way forward and break them – they're just too strong. With a machete we could have sliced our way through everything but as it was we had to carefully detangle ourselves each time we encountered the vines. Another piece of equipment you should bring – Kevlar gloves. Most of the trees are covered in ferocious thorns, so every time we tripped on the vines and flailed our hands out to catch something, we'd get impaled by the dang thorn trees.

Somehow we managed to plow forward, making slow but steady progress. The previous summit had registered 942m on our GPS and at one point Matthew noted a reading of 944m.

**"Victory!" The brothers at the summit.**

"Wait a minute," I said. "You're not on solid ground, though. There's 2m of roots and branches below you." That was another difficulty – solid ground was often hard to find with all the roots and plants. We pushed farther south along the ridge, though, until it felt like we were starting to descend again. Matthew whipped out the GPS and checked again. "948 meters! This is the real roof of Trinidad!" he exclaimed.

It was interesting to think probably very few people ventured to that location, given that the trail didn't extend to there. It's hard to know without a more accurate survey whether that was in fact the true highest ground in Trinidad and Tobago, but our measurements suggest it's the true highpoint. And SRTM data are consistent with our measurements.

We snapped some victory shots, collected some victory rocks, and started the long bushwack back. You'd think it would be easier on the return journey, but it seemed like the vines and thorn trees had just gotten more ferocious. Finally after half an hour we staggered back into the clearing at the false summit. We snapped a few pictures here just in case, and then continued west along the trail.

Somehow we lost the trail two or three times on the way back, but managed to re-find it each time. We soon reached the well-maintained trail, and then popped back out at the fruit farms.

"Shh," Matthew said, turning around. I heard the person too, probably a farmer picking fruit. We trod as quietly as we could, remembering the "No Trespassing" sign at the bottom. Luckily the farmer didn't see us, and we soon made it back to the car. It was 5:30pm, and we had 11.5 hours left before our flight to enjoy in Trinidad. We decided to best way to enjoy those hours would be sleeping. Our previous flights had been Boston to JFK 8pm to 9pm, then JFK to Trinidad 4:30am to 9am, with almost no sleep in between. We had a pretty ambitious schedule planned for the next four days as well (at least one new country each day), and this might be our only chance for a full night's sleep.

We wouldn't dare stoop to the level of paying to sleep, though. I took the wheel and we started driving back down La Laja Road until we thought we were pretty close to the main road. Then we found a nice wide part to pull off on, with a little farmer's path leading into the woods. I brought a tarp and Matthew brought a bug net and we rigged up a nice little shelter using sticks and paracord. We slept well from 7pm to 2:30am, then got back in the car and drove the 1.5 hours back to the airport.

**Trig station at the summit.**

Naturalist-in Series

# NIGHTSTALKING

*by Christopher K. Starr*

Review of:
Chris Ferris (1986): The Darkness is Light Enough: The Field Journal of a Night Naturalist. London: M. Joseph 373 pages.
Chris Ferris 1988. Out of the Darkness. London: Unwin Hyman 251 pp.
[51st in a series on "naturalist-in" books; see www.ckstarr.net/reviews_of_naturalist.htm]

**Chris Ferris's field studies of nocturnal wildlife started with an injury that caused chronic back pain.** This made it difficult for her to sleep except in short stretches, and for relief she took to roaming in the nighttime around her home in rural southern England. Over time her nature walks developed a closer focus, and she established a 320-hectare study area with two forests and three farms. She had good relations with the local farmers, who took an enlightened view of the wildlife on their grounds.

Each chapter of *The Darkness is Light Enough* is headed with a fine drawing of a wild mammal or bird in a typical activity, some almost like wood engravings in their use of white lines. Interspersed in the chapters are many indifferent landscape and vegetation photographs, evidently included in order to break up the text.

Going out during most nights became a way of life for some years. She was out in all kinds of weather, remarking on "Walking these sodden woods for the sheer joy of it." And in late September, "The trees are in turmoil tonight, bending and swaying helplessly as the wind's giant hand passes through...The surge and roar of the foliage, the occasional glimpses of sky, a momentary lull, then back with unseen ferocity, the storm rages once more." Like Ferris, the animals that she studied seemed not to mind being out in stormy weather.

*The Darkness is Light Enough* is not exactly a book about seasonality, but the chapters are arranged in diary form according to season, starting with the winter of 1980-81 and ending with the winter of 1984-85. Attention to seasonal changes in the environment and biota are mostly just in passing.

Rather, her subject is the lives of the european badger (*Meles meles*) and red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), with some attention to a census of the tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) population. Her studies were mentored by Ernest Neal (1911-1998), author of a classic long-term study of wild badgers. *Out of the Darkness* is a continuation of her study, as is a third book published in 1990.

The European badger is found in most of Europe and into western Asia. It has a powerful, stocky body with forelegs adapted for digging, which it uses to dig extensive burrows known as *setts*, with many entrance holes. These can be very durable and may be occupied across multiple generations. Even so, they are far from static, as new holes are added to the complex and some old ones are disused and overgrown. Some may be taken over by rabbits. This nocturnal mammal feeds on a broad variety of prey, especially earthworms and moles, as well as hedgehogs if they can master the trick of unrolling them to get at the vulnerable underside. It also digs for roots and bulbs and eat acorns and other nuts.

The red fox, *Vulpes vulpes*, is found across the Northern Hemisphere, where it is common in many places. It likewise occupies burrows in the ground, but is much less a creature of the subsoil. Much less

omnivorous than the badger, its main food is small rodents, but it also hunts rabbits, hares and many kinds of birds. The tawny owl is widespread in Europe with some presence in northern Asia. Like the badger and fox, it is a nocturnal predator that hunts a wide variety of prey.

As in long-term studies of chimpanzees, gorillas and lions, the human observer and wild creatures can in time become tolerant of each other. Likewise, badgers and foxes are smart animals that became curious about Ferris and accepted her as an unthreatening part of their environment. They would sometimes go on walks with her, rather in the manner of a dog, and on some occasions they were so trusting as to allow her to treat wounds. Her aim was to know the animals and their habitat thoroughly in all their seasons and moods. She observed all aspects of their lives except what took place inside the burrows. There was simply no low-tech way to make observations below ground. In some seasons she made rounds to check on the animals, often encountering familiar badgers or foxes much as one might meet acquaintances in a stroll around one's own neighbourhood.

Among the most engaging observations were of family life, including parents facilitating the development of their offspring's hunting skills. She was able to watch the young animals mature, gradually show more and more independence in coming out of the den and moving about. If successful, younger animals established families of their own, she came to appreciate the animals' individual personalities (after all, badgers and foxes are only human). Of a female badger, "The noise she is making rivals the sound of the rain driving on to the foliage under which I stand. It's a very fine night badgerwise! Think her son isn't far away, as I can hear a lot of movement in the copse behind me. Now he's appeared on my left and joined her on the field – two badger minds with but a single thought!" Her familiarity with badger and fox vocalizations allowed her on occasion to imitate them in order to communicate with particular animals.

When the Naturalists' Club is on a night field trip, we use our torchlights most of the time, only turning them off on occasion in order to feel the darkness around us. In contrast, Ferris made only very sparing use of her torch. She used a monocular, but no night-vision or infrared apparatus. Mostly she just relied on her own developed night vision, as would a badger or fox. Unlike other mammals, humans and most primates have colour vision, but this does not function under low light, so that Ferris was seeing the environment as the badgers and foxes did. In time she improved. If I understand correctly, the implication is that her vision became sharper on a purely sensory level, but I doubt that this is correct. What makes the night environment so very strange (even with a torchlight) is that our field of view is fragmented. We only see pieces of what is around us, and the trick is to learn to interpret the fragments. I believe this is what Ferris was able to do, as would a badger or fox.

This, then, is very hard-core nature writing, but who exactly is Chris Ferris? And where was her study area? I don't know. Her identity and study area are disguised, the various place names standing in for the real places (I think I know the county, but I won't tell you.) *Out of the Darkness* includes a double-page facsimile map of the study area. I say "facsimile" because it is imaginary, not representing the real study area. Given this situation, one can reasonably ask whether these books might be works of fiction, or at least highly coloured. However, I have communicated with British ecologists who know Ferris personally and have assured me that her accounts are reliable.

So, why the secrecy? The reason has its origin in a somewhat contradictory attitude of the English toward wild animals. They can be very sentimental toward some animals, while at the same time wantonly cruel toward others. We are all familiar with their mass mounted fox hunts, famously characterized by Oscar Wilde as "the unspeakable in pursuit of the uneatable." As far as I know, this practice does not endanger the red fox with extinction in Britain, but it remains ridiculous and

cruel. Despite legal restrictions, hunters often dug out setts to capture badgers for blood sports, and at one point Ferris came upon one of her badgers dying after being savaged by a hunter's dog. These hunters did not appreciate her guardianship of the very animals they were intent on capturing or killing, and Ferris was under frequent implied or explicit threat. The latter part of *The Darkness is Light Enough* is largely taken up with observations of and encounters with poachers and other destructive elements, as well as the struggle against their activities. In time Ferris and others were able to organize patrols by volunteers, somewhat in the nature of a neighbourhood watch, sometimes together with the local police or RSPCA.

*Out of the Darkness* is more closely focused on two families of badgers. One family is followed through three and the other through four generations with family trees shown. In this context the book is mainly about the struggle against illegal badger hunting.

In the period following that described in *The Darkness is Light Enough*, this fight increasingly enjoyed official and public support, backed by stricter protective legislation. And those engaged in the fight had access to monitoring equipment. It was no longer a one-woman struggle, a fact subtly indicated in the second book's title. Near the end of the book, Ferris's optimism is made plain: "At last the tide was turning. It has been so many years, so many hunters and so many badgers. But with all of us working together,

the wildlife round Oakley, and most especially the badgers, would at least have a sporting chance.'

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Your Ideas and Observations

**A Quarterly Update**

# DEFINING OUR GEOGRAPHIC MANDATE

*by Christopher K. Starr*

Recently, looking through back issues of the journal of the Nigerian Field Society, a counterpart of our club, it struck me that contributions were drawn not just from Nigeria but from many parts of West Africa. Contrast this with our own Living World journal. Since it became an annual in 2001, the journal has published 270 research articles and nature notes, aside from biographical pieces. Of these, 235 were based on material from Trinidad & Tobago. That leaves just 35, or 13% of the articles and nature notes on material from elsewhere in the Wider Caribbean, mainly the Lesser Antilles.

It is only right and proper that our research journal should have a bias toward our home territory, but the present bias strikes me as excessive. This is not a matter of whether it is fair but of missed opportunities. The journal would do well to take a broader, bolder view of its geographic mandate and this should be made explicit.

There is already a counterpart journal, the Caribbean Naturalist, whose focus is mainly Puerto Rico, the Bahamas and associated smaller islands. While the pages of the Living World must remain open to contributions drawn from throughout the Wider Caribbean, including bordering mainland areas, it would help its identity to have a clearer view of its main focus.

To this end, let me suggest an addition to the journal's mission statement:

"The Living World publishes original contributions on all aspects of natural history and the conservation of the living world in the Wider Caribbean region, with a principal emphasis on the Eastern Caribbean." This would broaden the journal's scope by making it plain that it is not just about these two islands and that articles and nature notes from throughout the region – especially the Lesser Antilles and northeastern South America – are cordially invited. If this is stated openly, more researchers working in the Eastern Caribbean outside of Trinidad and Tobago may come to see the journal as a good outlet for some of their results.

I predict that a well-expressed geographic mandate will also have a useful effect on some T&T-based contributions. Too often, in reviewing submitted papers, I have seen comments to the effect that this research was carried out in Charlieville or at the Asa Wright Nature Centre, for example, just that, as if the reader of course knows these places because nobody outside of Trinidad is going to read this journal. This kind of provincialism is of course caught and corrected in the editing process, but it wouldn't occur in the first place if everyone understood that the Living World is a real journal of interest to a widespread readership.

Your Ideas and Observations

**A Quarterly Update**

# WHERE ARE ALL MY FRUIT BATS?

*by Christopher K. Starr*

The short-tailed fruit bat, *Carollia perspiculata*, is found virtually everywhere south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and north of the Southern Cone, including here in Trinidad. Among its preferred roosting sites are the eaves of buildings and even inside buildings if there is not a great deal of disturbance. I am accustomed to having them both on the outside and inside of my house, and as long as they don't get too numerous or too messy they make for a nice addition. The little darlings even helped me to confirm that the seeds of one of our trees are bat-dispersed (Starr 2012).

Returning from a recent three-week absence two years ago, I expected to find that the bats had taken the opportunity of the extended undisturbed period to occupy my house in greater numbers than before. In fact, exactly the opposite turned out to be the case. Not only were there no bats in the bedrooms but there were none in the basement or even under the eaves outside. Not one. As of this writing, Obronikrom remains a bat-free zone.

I don't expect my bat population to be constant, but in the almost 20 years I have lived here the short-tailed fruit bat had been a constant and fairly abundant presence, yet somehow they had all just vanished. In the succeeding two years I have had the occasional bat roosting in the house, but nothing like it used to be. And I have no idea why. Gomes & Reid (2015: p. 219) remarked on a degree of volatility in the roosting groups, noting that "Larger roosts are arranged into clusters of bachelor males and clusters of females with a single territorial male. These associations are not stable over longer periods." However, they give no indication of migration or strong seasonality in numbers. I regret that I have not seen Fleming's (1988) monograph on this species in Central America.

In those times when snakes (*Corallus ruschenbergerii)* have taken up residence in the house they have certainly depleted the lizards and undoubtedly caught the occasional bat, but most of my bats roosted on ceilings and other inaccessible spots. There has been no sign of disease among the bats, nor is the weather unseasonable. So, what can it be?

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Starr, C.K. 2012. Swartzia pinnata (Fabaceae) seeds are dispersed by bats. Brenesia 78:84-85.

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

# UNUSUAL PREDATION BY A TOBAGO SNAKE

*by Matt Kelly*

**Evidence of the bee remains as stomach contents of the snake.** Photo courtesy Matt Kelly

**On January 30, 2019, I found a dead snake in the road near Little Englishman's Bay, Tobago, West Indies.** It was very much flattened and was evidently several days dead. The snake's stomach was burst open, and what appeared to be shiny, iridescent blue-green bees comprised a large portion of the stomach contents. I roughly estimated their number at more than 100.

The snake was about 100 cm in length. Eleven species of at least that size are known from Tobago (Murphy 1997, Murphy et al. 2018). Close examination suggested that it most likely was Ruschenberger's tree boa (*Corallus ruschenbergerii*). Based on photos of the stomach contents, the main component appeared to be bees of the genus Euglossa, known as orchid bees (D.W. Roubik and C.K. Starr, pers. comms.). No orchid bees *(Euglossa* sp.) are yet on record from Tobago (Starr & Hook 2003), but due to the discovery of these Euglossa-mimic flies, there is every reason to expect the presence of Euglossa bees there, and I am fairly sure that I have seen *Euglossa* sp. several times on the island, including on one occasion nesting in a dry dead log in the forest near Parlatuvier.

However, on examining a sample of the stomach contents that I sent him, Dr. Roubik reported that they were not bees at all. Rather, they were Euglossa-mimicking hover flies (Syrphidae), which he provisionally placed (on the basis of the indifferent-quality specimens that I was able to provide) in the genus Ornidia, most likely *O. obesa*.

This is a very enigmatic observation. In his many records of *C. rauschenbergerii's* diet, Boos (2001) lists only vertebrates, and records of both this species and other Tobago snakes of the specimen's size by not only Boos but also Murphy (1997) and Murphy et al. (2018) are likewise restricted to vertebrates.

We are faced, then, with three questions:

1. Had the snake really eaten a great many syrphid flies? The flies' position in the stomach area and the fact that they were all dead seem to allow no other conclusion. Flies of this family are not known to come to carrion.
2. What could have prompted such a radical shift in diet? Of course, if recent hunting had been exceptionally bad, hunger would drive animals

to unaccustomed feeding.

3. How could *C. raushenbergerii* or any other snake possibly capture a great number of agile flying insects such as Ornidia? As the name implies, this is typically an arboreal snake, and it is not out of the question that it might sit in wait in the canopy of an abundantly flowering tree to snap up these relatively large, robust flies, with no defensive capability except avoidance and flight, one by one.

It is my working hypothesis that the snake had eaten a bird or lizard, which had a belly full of Euglossa-mimicking flies. The chitinous outer skin of the flies may have not had time to digest in the stomach of this prey animal, before the snake ate it. There is nothing at all impossible about the known facts and where they appear to lead. Nonetheless, it is certainly outside of what is usual, and it marks the first time for this record on Tobago.

I thank Dr. C.K. Starr for criticism of an earlier version of this note, and for his continued discussion. I also thank Dr. J.C. Murphy, Graham White and Hans Boos for their discussion and comments.

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(David Roubik is an entomologist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI) in Panama.)

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# NATURE IN THE NEWS

A quarterly summary of local environmental news

*by Kris Sookdeo*

**January**

Trinidad and Tobago convenes Sea Turtle Task Force

A National Sea Turtle Task Force has been convened to serve for a period of three years. The members of the National Sea Turtle Task Force, chaired by the EMA, include representatives from the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of National Security, Institute of Marine Affairs (IMA), Ministry of Tourism and the Tobago House of Assembly. Non-governmental organisations are also part of the Task Force: Turtle Village Trust, Nature Seekers, Grande Riviere Tour Guide Association and Save Our Turtles. The list of academia rounding off the membership includes the University of the West Indies, the University of Trinidad and Tobago and the School of Veterinary Medicine.

Functions of the National Sea Turtle Task Force include:

- Overseeing and co-ordinating sea turtle research and conservation activities in Trinidad and Tobago. Provision of technical guidance to the Minister responsible for the management of the five marine turtles which have been designated as Environmentally Sensitive Species (ESS)— one of the key roles of this Task Force;
- Revision of the Sea Turtle Recovery Action Plan (STRAP) and the development of a long term action plan to address declining leatherback turtle numbers;
- Identifying funding for local programmes and projects;
- Collaborating with all national and international stakeholders and experts;
- Building public awareness.

Asa Wright Nature Centre & Lodge (AWNC) closes

In a statement on January 18, the AWNC announced that with the continued closure of the borders and the limited physical movement as a result of Covid-19, its management decided to terminate its eco-lodge business.

Fishermen and Friends win case over access to EMA reports

Environmental non-profit Fishermen and Friends of the Sea (FFOS) has emerged victorious in its legal battle with the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) over access to its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) records.

High Court Judge Devindra Rampersad ruled that a recent EMA policy, which granted limited access to copies of EIAs was unreasonable and improper. Previously, the EMA only allowed the copying of 10% of the report as it claimed that more access would breach third party rights under the Copyright Act.

Fisherfolk haul in cutlassfish for Chinese market

Scores of fisherfolk from across the country have crowded Alcan Bay and other areas off Chaguaramas hunting cutlassfish for the last three months. The fish which is spawning its eggs in rocky bays are caught when they venture out to feed. The fish is reportedly primarily being sold to Chinese buyers

**March**

Agriculture Ministry runs trials to grow Irish potatoes locally

Trials are being done to see if the Irish potato can successfully be grown in Trinidad and Tobago with trials being done at the National Seed Bank in Chaguaramas. Agriculture Minister indicated that similar trials had been done in the 1980s.

Suspected land grab in Chatham

Following reports of the clearance of forest near the Chatham Forest Reserve, the EMA released a statement expressing its concern about recent reports of illegal land occupation (land grabbing) in South Trinidad, in particular the Cedros area, where the virgin forest is being cleared. It noted that the EMA's investigations continue in tandem with the Forestry Division. At the time, the Agriculture Minister indicated that the matter was being investigated.

**May**

Government to green quarries, forest

In support of Trinidad and Tobago's Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) goals, Cabinet has approved the rehabilitation of 100 hectares of spent quarry lands by 2030 through community-based agroforestry, the rehabilitation of 100 hectares of degraded forest and the increase of forest carbon stock by 5% by 2030, all relative to the baseline of 2015.

The ministry said Cabinet has also agreed to:

- Improve productivity and Soil Organic Carbon (SOC) stocks in 500 hectares of cropland by 2030, compared to the 2015 baseline.
- Improve national data and develop a mechanism for the collection and management of land productivity, land cover and soil organic carbon (SOC) data for future monitoring needs.
- Achieve Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) by 2030 with no net loss for the whole land area of the country and all its land cover, compared to the 2015 baseline.

Land grab at Basil Trace

A group identified as the "Basil Trace Cocoa Farmers Movement," claimed to have been granted permission to cultivate cocoa in the area.

Spokesman for the group indicated that the group had approached the Ministry of Agriculture in 2014 proposing to establish a cocoa project. The group was told that no land was available, however they were offered information off the record that State land can be cultivated. The spokesman said the group was told that the land could be regularised if it was not located in a forest reserve, wildlife sanctuary or environmentally sensitive area.

The Commissioner of State Lands (COSL) has confirmed that legal action will be pursued against alleged land grabbers who are cultivating and occupying more than 200 acres of State land in Basil Trace, Mayaro.

# MEMORIAL TRIBUTE: Glenn Wilkes

**Glenn at the 2019 TTFNC Christmas Luncheon at Las Hermanas estate.** *Photos by Stephanie Warren-Gittens*

**Glenn Wilkes, who was a distinguished land surveyor, naturalist, and member of the Club for many years, passed away earlier this year on January 15, 2021.** Most notably, he kayaked around Trinidad more than once. A video presentation on his experience in 1985, delivered during a past Club lecture meeting, can be accessed on the Club's Youtube page here.

The following is an article written by Glenn on a January trip to Madamas published in QB 1998 Vol 2&3 :

Rather than face the long drive to Matelot, and an anticipated even longer drive back home, I had decided to travel up to Madamas by sea from Blanchisseuse. A friend, John McKell, who is also a keen sea-kayaker, needed little persuasion to join me for the weekend. Since this is the time of the year when the Trades blow strong and the seas are heavy, we planned to make an early start, but by the time we launched from the fisherman's facility at Lower Blanchisseuse, it was already 7:00am and we had to time the swells to get out of the narrow inlet.

We kept well out to avoid the inshore turbulence, and made course for the point that separates Petit Tacarib from Grand Tacarib. Both our boats, John's "Orion" and my "Islander" are well designed and constructed, and we made steady progress into the wind and waves. The swells varied between two and five metres, and the larger ones crashed spectacularly against rocks and headlands and thundered on the exposed beaches. There were lots of "Galea" jellyfish in the water, and John drew my attention to the fact that many appeared to be dead. We paddled non-stop, and by 10:00am we were off Madamas Bay. There appeared to be less lulls in the heavy seas, and when we had passed "Trou bouilli riz", there was no need to wonder about the name: "the rice was really boiling!" Madamas Bay is fairly deep close to shore so that the surf is heavy even with moderate swells, much less in the sort of seas that we are now

experiencing. Two months before I had dislocated my shoulder in the surf at Maracas Bay while practising "braces", and I was quite apprehensive of tackling those dumpers. We remained outside, scanning the seas for a lull, and edging closer to the shore when we thought it might be coming. During one of these maneuvers, I looked back and saw a bigger set bearing down. In a panic I raced back out, shouting to John to "get out of it." He didn't have time to turn around but his reverse gear almost matched my forward speed! We now decided to try the eastern end of the bay, which was somewhat protected. On the way there I spotted a large turtle, probably a green. It was definitely calmer in the lee of the cliffs, and the presence of a fishing boat hauled well out of the water was encouraging. During a lull I started in and was close to shore when I realized that there were lots of rocks, and without a good idea of the layout, it would be just as dangerous as landing on the beach. Once again we headed back out. It was now 12:00 noon, and we had been at sea five hours. If anything, the seas were getting rougher, so we reluctantly decided to head back down to Paria for a short break before returning to Blanchisseuse.

The wind and waves were now at our backs and we made good time back to Paria, landing with little difficulty at the river mouth. We ate lunch and rested a bit, but my mind was on the sea conditions, as I tried to visualize what the landing would be like at Blanchisseuse. None of the options there were really safe, and it was very significant that so far we had not seen a single fishing boat at sea. As I relaxed in my hammock, I was entertained by an interesting display of avian wing design and flight characteristics performed by a hawk, corbeau, man o' war and pelican. Even when I dozed, I was listening to the roar of the surf, and it seemed to be getting louder. By 3:00pm, even exiting the "calm" end of Paria looked as though it would be a challenge, and we postponed the final decision until 4:00pm. I walked up the beach, which was littered with dead jellyfish, and had a good look at the surf. There was no improvement, and it was going to be foolhardy to limit our options by returning to Blanchisseuse with a limited amount of daylight left. It made more sense to wait until morning, and hope for an improvement, or at least have the option of paddling to a safer landing at La Fillette or Las Cuevas. We pitched our tents and had a canned dinner, a poor substitute for the big cook-up that Dan was undoubtedly preparing at Madamas.

I awoke at 4:00am and took a walk down the beach. There was a beautiful starry sky that took my mind away from the surf that seemed unchanged. A large bird swooped overhead, and I thought it might be an owl, but in the beam of the torch it looked more likely to be an oilbird. By 7:00am we were packed and ready to go. John got off the beach in one go, but the on-shore swirl spun my kayak around the broadside on the beach, and I had to get out an relaunch. Although it wasn't calm, the conditions were definitely improved, and in fact ideal for getting a free ride with the waves. We reached the mouth of the Marianne River at 8:15am and both of us got dumped in trying to land, but taking into consideration the seas we encountered, once for the weekend wasn't bad. Moreover, I figured we'd had a more exciting trip than the hikers, that is until I heard from Compton!

## MANAGEMENT NOTICES

Monthly club meetings continue virtually via Zoom until further notice due to the current Covid-19 regulations and restrictions

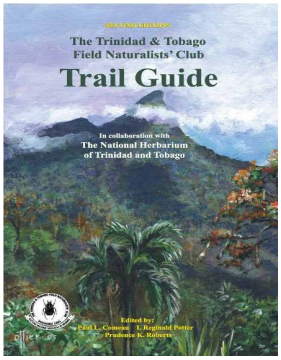
Club trips have also been put on hold during the period April-July 2021, due to Covid-19 regulations and restrictions, until further notice

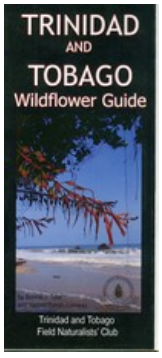
The Club celebrates its **130th anniversary** this year! If you have any reflections on the Club to commemorate this event kindly email your article to admin@ttfnc.org for your article to appear in QB3-2021.

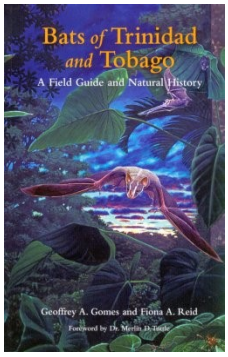
Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club
P.O. Box 642, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago

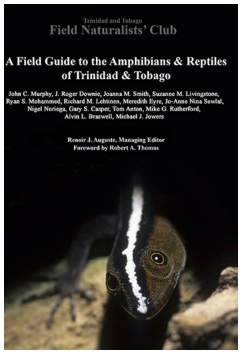
## PUBLICATIONS

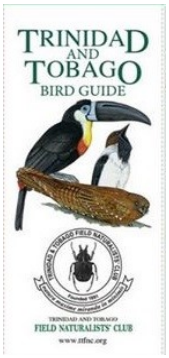
The following Club publications are available to members and non-members (*prices shown are those paid when purchasing directly from the Club*):

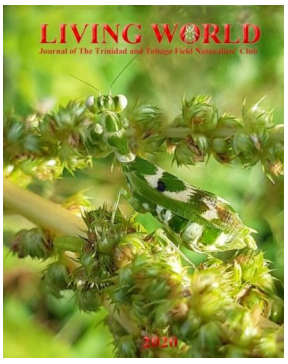













TTFNC Trail Guide ($150); T&T Wildflower Guide ($50); Bats of T&T ($200); Field Guide to Amphibians & Reptiles ($180); 2020 Living World Journal ($60); TTFNC Bird Guide ($50).

## MISCELLANEOUS

**Your 2021 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 'QB2021' in the email subject label.**