A SMALL fer de lance (Bothrops asper) on the trail.
PHOTOS BY KRIS SOKKEDRO

ROCK face along the trail to the Aripo Caves.

ENVIRONMENT

Learning about natural world

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The rain had however raised the water level a bit and we decided to stay at the mouth of the cave for a only few minutes in case the water level rose further.

The cave itself is very interesting. According to A realtor of the caves of Trinidad and Tobago by Paul Shaw, the cave is "structured on a series of levels, chambers and tunnels, created by water flow under conditions of falling base level, thus the upper cave system is largely dry, even during heavy rains. Access to the upper part is by scrambling down a boulder slope to a stream bed, but access beyond is limited by vertical drops of 9.2m and 15.2 m. A crawlway (low ceiling) has to be negotiated to reach the first section, comprising a waterfall, pool and terminal pot. Total vertical drop is estimated around 164 m." It would be very interesting to explore such a system but also very foolhardy given our lack of preparation.

Even above the roar of rushing water you could hear the inhabitants of the cave. Oilbirds make it their home and in the gloom you could just make out the shapes of the birds as they flittered about from their roosts.

Oilbirds make a terrible racket, complete with demonic shrieks and wails, and this has led to their local name of "diabolites". These large birds live their entire lives in the dark, leaving the caves only at night to feed on the fruit of forest trees. They are unique among birds in that they echo locate, allowing them to navigate their dark world. In addition to the oilbirds, a few bats could be seen. Paul Shaw listed three species of bat that inhabit the cave – Anoura geoffroyi, Chiropterus rubiginosus neotes and Glossophaga soricina – and noted that they roosted further into the cave than the oilbirds.

With our time up and not wanting to annoy the oilbirds any further, we decided to leave.

About an hour later we were passing the large limestone rock faces when someone found a snake. Of course it was a fer de lance Bothrops asper and of course it was right on the trail where several others had just passed. But this is part of the course on forest walks and many a "mountain hiker" are passed on the trails without being noticed. This particular specimen, a baby at just about 30 cm, was very reluctant to do anything and was very aggressive. It is sometimes claimed that the young individual, inexperienced and vulnerable, are more likely to deliver a full load of venom on biting. Whether this is true for the fer de lance in Trinidad I cannot say but we didn’t care to test it and quickly escorted the snake safely off the trail.

Cave exploration should never be attempted without training and proper equipment, however a visit to these natural attractions provides countless opportunities for a naturalist to learn more about the natural world. Extra care must be taken when a sensitive species, such as the oilbird, is present but the more we educate ourselves about areas such as the Aripo Caves, the better our chance of preserving it for future generations to explore and enjoy.

Aripo, Trinidad and Tobago, 24th April 2014.

The Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists’ Club

Field Naturalists’ Club at admin@ttfncc.org or visit our website at www.ttncc.org. The Club’s next monthly meeting will be held on April 10, 2014 at St Mary’s College. This month’s lecture: "The Lushflora in TT presented by Jasleen Acharma.

The public is hereby notified that Imago Mates Limited proposes to apply to the Environmental Management Authority (EMA) for a variation in the accordance with the Noise Pollution Control Rules 2001. For the Event / Activity described below:

Date of Event: Saturday 24th May, 2014
Description of Event/Activity: Fruit and Nut Festival Day