

ENVIRONMENT

On the trail of TT's land snails

A COUPLE of summers ago I was fortunate enough to have the time and opportunity to travel to ten different museums in the UK and The Netherlands.

The purpose behind my trip was to search the collections for any land snails collected from Trinidad and Tobago. I wasn't quite sure what to expect and although I had been in contact with the curators of these collections beforehand the general response had been "I don't know what we have from your country but you are more than welcome to come and take a look".

The plan was to visit each museum, look through their mollusc collections for certain species and families and see if they had any examples that had been collected in Trinidad and Tobago. Some collections had been databased and so were easier to search but others had to be done cabinet by cabinet, drawer by drawer and box by box.

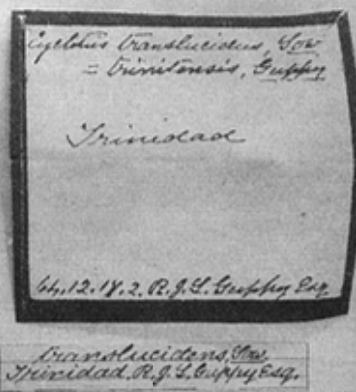
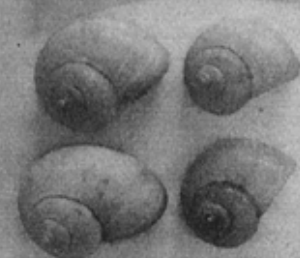
I started at the Manchester Museum based at the University of Manchester. With the help of the curator, Henry McGhie, I spent a day looking through the collection. The most interesting specimens I came across were in a small round glass-topped pillbox with a label saying from

British Museum (Natural History)

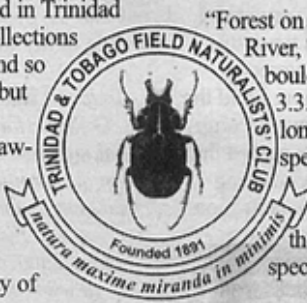
Examined on loan by: Dr. I. Richling

Loan no.: M619T

Date returned: August 2006



SPECIMENS of *Neocyclotus translucidus* in the Natural History Museum, London, which were collected by R J L Guppy, one of the TTFNC's original members and one of the first naturalists to work on Trinidad's snails. PHOTOS BY MIKE G RUTHERFORD



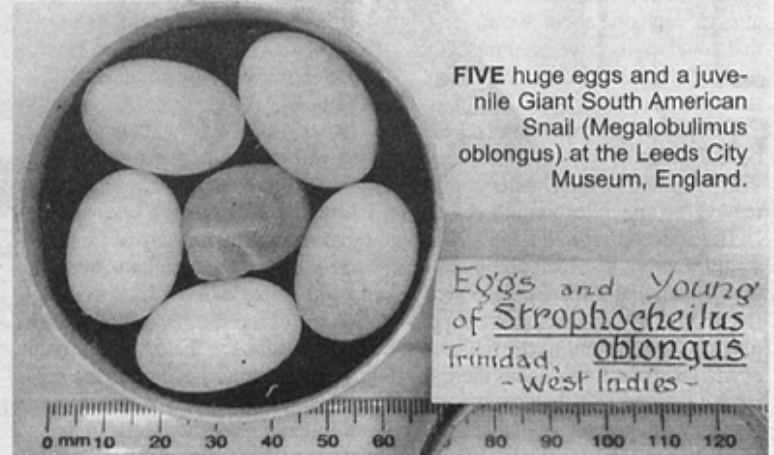
The Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club

"Forest on banks of Oropuche River, Trinidad, on limestone boulders. Coll. Ulrich 3.3.95". Inside were three long thin shells from a species called *Brachypodella oropuchensis*. These were the type specimens of the species meaning that these actual shells were the ones used to give the first description of this species. They were interesting because the list of shells from which I was working made no mention of this species.

I had a closer inspection and compared it with another snail called

Brachypodella trinitaria after which I thought instead of being a new species it might just be an ever so slightly bigger local variant. The origin of these shells was also of interest as they were collected by F W Ulrich, one of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists Club's (TTFNC) founding members, in 1895. This was the sort of thing I was looking for in a collection, a new question to investigate when I returned to Trinidad.

The National Museum of Wales in Cardiff was my next port of call. Their collections are the second most important in the UK, after the Natural History Museum in London, and were looked after accordingly. There was a dedicated department of



FIVE huge eggs and a juvenile Giant South American Snail (*Megalobulimus oblongus*) at the Leeds City Museum, England.

researchers investigating many aspects of molluscs. I was fortunate to have the help of Ben Rowson, the curator of terrestrial molluscs, who kindly searched the collections and brought the shells to me to work on. After a day and a half of searching we had found almost 80 lots of shells covering a wide range of species. Again the name Ulrich cropped up as one of the collectors.

Oxford University and Cambridge University natural history collections held some amazing specimens including the internal organs of an extinct thylacine, giant dinosaur skeletons and eggs collected (and accidentally cracked) by Charles Darwin himself. However, their shell collections did not turn up any great prizes and I only found three lots of specimens from Trinidad in Oxford

and had reached the same number in Cambridge.

I mentioned this to the Cambridge collections manager, Matt Lowe, and spurred on by the old rivalry between the two ancient universities he delved deeper into his collections and eventually found me one more specimen hidden in the spirit store.

Final tally for Cambridge was four lots of shells narrowly beating Oxford. Next I headed to Leeds and under the gaze of a stuffed chimpanzee I sifted through the collection of approximately 500,000 shells and found a good haul of specimens. There were several nice examples of the giant South American snail *Megalobulimus oblongus* including one of the albino subspecies found only on Tobago.

● SNAILS continues on Page 4B

ENVIRONMENT

378 lots of shells from 61 species from around TT

●SNAILS from Page 3B

Alongside the snail shells were several eggs, each one about 30mm long, that could easily have been mistaken for birds eggs but were in fact from the giant snail itself.

The part of my trip to which I had been looking forward to most was the visit to Naturalis, the Dutch national natural history collection in Leiden.

The collections building is a 20 storey warehouse which dominates the surrounding town. In the lower floors there is a fantastic museum displaying the full story of the multitude of life forms on Earth. I was there to meet a researcher called Bram Breure, an expert on several families of neotropical snails who has conducted a lot of research in the Caribbean. The first job was, like every other museum I visited, to examine the collection for any shells from TT. Bram and the curator of molluscs, Jeroen Goud, helped me go through the room full of cabinets and we soon gathered a large number of specimens. Strangely enough the first box of shells I picked up to photograph contained some *Subulina octona* collected by the TTFNC's very own Victor Quesnel. The shells were found back in 1955 in a compost heap somewhere in Port-of-Spain. I came across some other specimens collected by Quesnel later on and it was strangely comforting to be in a foreign land yet seeing familiar names. The details for collecting

location were better than most of the specimens I had come across in the UK; it is much more useful to have information such as "on trees, Brasso Seco, Trinidad" rather than just "Trinidad".

After I finished in Leiden I headed home to Scotland and returned to where I started my career, Glasgow Museums. I knew there were specimens from Trinidad here as I had collected them myself back in 2004. At the time I had found it hard to identify some of the species so it was with much satisfaction that I went through my old specimens adding in the correct names.

I found a few other shells in the collections including the freshwater snail *Marisa cornuarietis*, nothing particularly rare about this species but the site that it came from probably no longer exists – a stream running through Piarco Savannah.

The second museum I visited in Scotland was the National Museum in Edinburgh and the curator Sankurie Pye. The shells in Edinburgh came from a wide range of species and included several interesting specimens. There were some endemic snails which I hadn't come across in other collections. One was a shell collected in 1854 which was the earliest date I came across for a specimen in the whole trip.

The final stop on my tour was the Natural History Museum (NHM) in London. It was the biggest collection



SPECIMENS of *Subulina octona* which were collected on January 28, 1955 by the TTFNC's very own Victor Quesnel in a compost heap in Port-of-Spain. These specimens now reside at the Naturalis Biodiversity Centre, Netherlands.

I visited and I had some high hopes for finding good specimens. I met up with Jon Ablett, the curator of non-marine molluscs, who took me to one of the many basement stores hidden in the depths of the huge building. After showing me how the collection was organised he left me to my own devices and I got stuck in.

After two and a half days of searching I found 126 lots of shells including many type specimens. The most gratifying moments were finding several shells collected by R J L Guppy. He was another of the TTFNC's original members and one of the first naturalists to work on Trinidad's snails. From the 1860s to the 1890s he wrote many papers and described many new species, the

shells of which were mostly sent to the NHM. Although many of his types had been noted and put aside in the type collection I was very happy to discover several of his types that had been left hidden and unrecognised in the main collection. I told the curator and after consulting the original register from 1864 we agreed that these were indeed worthy of being added to the precious type collection.

My trip was finished and it was time to head back to Trinidad; in total I had found 378 lots of shells from 61 species collected in a wide range of locations in Trinidad and Tobago. The purpose of all this searching was to give me the background knowledge to write an up to date paper on the land snails of TT. Now that I had

a good range of photos and information about the snails other people have collected, it was my turn to get out into the bush and do some collecting of my own.

Today's feature was written by Mike G Rutherford, Curator of the UWI Zoology Museum. For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago

Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org. The Club's next monthly meeting will be held on May 8 2014 at St Mary's College, POS.

This month's lecture: "Shark Conservation in TT" presented by Marc de Verteuil of Papa Bois Conservation.