

ANS birding foray to Trinidad and Tobago yields 180 species and a good look at the natural history of the islands

By Bill Murphy



ANS foray participants at Mount St. Benedict, Trinidad. From left to right: Glenora Home, Betty Buescher, driver Rollin Adams, Linda Hutter, Marjorie Rachlin, Phyllis Morrow, Sally Ann Waldschmidt, Margaret Menkart, Dick Buescher, Bill Murphy

Our Audubon Naturalist Society group arrived at Piarco International Airport, Trinidad, just after sunset on Friday, February 1, 1991. A warm, humid breeze greeted us as we deplaned, and a crowd of Trinidadians further warmed the night with the hearty din they created while straining to glimpse loved ones arriving on our flight. Rollin Adams, our guest house driver, met us, helped load our bags, and soon we were en route to our accommodations.

Perched in the Northern Range 800 feet above the Plains of Caroni, the Mount St. Benedict complex consists of a monastery, a seminary, a convent, a drug rehabilitation center, a trade school, and the PAX Guest House. After negotiating a dozen hairpin turns, we arrived at PAX, where manager Victoria Soo Poy welcomed us

with icy rum punches and a savory West Indian dinner. We awakened on Saturday to the calls of ferruginous pygmy-owl, tropical screech-owl, and the tremulous whistle of a little tinamou. Breakfast was served in the dining room, which overlooked grounds dotted with mango, papaya, coconut, several species of palm trees, mahogany, Caribbean and Australian pines, as well as mountain immortelle, samaan, and bamboo. Common shrubs and flowers included *Croton*, *Impatiens*, *Lantana*, and *Coleus*. Overhead, black and turkey vultures were always visible. Bananaquit, tropical mockingbird, yellow oriole, great kiskadee, blue-gray and palm tanagers, hummingbirds such as the blue-chinned and copper-rumped and the larger black-throated mango, tropical house and rufous-breasted

wrens, bare-eyed thrush, and smooth-billed ani were common. Once we watched a long-billed gnatwren in the grapefruit tree outside the window, and one morning at breakfast we observed a perched white hawk. We often saw flocks of crow-sized crested oropendolas flying in perfectly level flight across the forested valley behind the guest house as they commuted to and from their six-foot pendular colonial nests.

After breakfast we explored the Mount St. Benedict area, walking slowly into the rainforest, where the temperature dropped quickly in the shade of the tall cecropia and kapok trees. Rainforests are among the most difficult of all habitats in which to bird, with a million visual distractions—fluttering and falling leaves, butterflies and other large insects, and day-flying bats. Most birds perch in the canopy, hundreds of feet up. At midday the heat added to our lassitude, so between birds we concentrated on leaf-cutting ants, webspinners, and bird calls. With the call of the yellow-breasted flycatcher in the background, we spotted a male lined woodpecker, a close counterpart to our pileated.

Our destination on Sunday was the Arima Valley, home to the world-famous Asa Wright Nature Centre. We parked there under a cannonball tree and walked down weatherworn slate steps past blue vervain and flowering poinsettias to the restored colonial mansion. From the veranda we enjoyed arms-length views of gaudy purple honeycreepers, iridescent hummingbirds, and five species of tanagers, including the plush silver-beaked tanager. Green honey-

creepers competed with little hermit hummingbirds at the lowest feeders, while purple honeycreepers vied with white-chested emerald hummingbirds at the higher feeders. In the nearby matchwood tree, a noisy flock of turquoise tanagers foraged on ripe figs, while a golden-olive woodpecker gleaned insects from the bark. Within minutes we had observed 30 species of birds, some of which are difficult to spot anywhere else in the rainforest.

Prying ourselves from the veranda, we began a slow descent through cocoa, coffee, and citrus trees to the Guacharo Trail, at the end of which lies Dunstan Cave and its world-famous colony of oilbirds (*Steatornis caripensis*). This bird, known only from caves in South America, is the sole species in the genus *Steatornis*, the sole genus in the family Steatornithidae. Oilbirds are distantly related to, and may represent a link between, the owls and the nightjars. The colony in Dunstan Cave is the most accessible known. En route we found a pair of white-shouldered tanagers, a boat-billed flycatcher, and the first of many common but easily overlooked golden-fronted greenlets. Among the 350 or more species of trees here were *Mora* and nutmeg. Streamsides were verdant with *Heliconia* flowers, including Lobster Claw and other relatives of the banana. *Anthuriums* were also common in the understory. As in temperate eastern North America, the background noises were largely produced by orthopterans such as tree crickets, katydids, and cicadas.

Far below the last stretch of trail runs the petit Guacharo River. Over the ravine undulated giant morpho butterflies which "shoot out lasers of scintillating blue light." The Guacharo Valley harbors tiny black cricket frogs and a primitive creature known as *Peripatus*, which

forms a link between annelid worms and arthropods.

At the primeval entrance to Dunstan Cave, lianas hang from tree branches hundreds of feet above, six-foot-tall elephant-ear leaves dwarf humans, and the sheer cliff face bristles with bromeliads. We carefully stepped from rock to rock to avoid wading and were soon able to observe about 30 oilbirds on their nest ledges within the fissure.

After a picnic lunch under a thatched roof at the Nature Centre, we tarried a little longer, picking up violaceous trogon and barred antshrike before continuing our drive. Birding our way slowly to the 2,800-foot-high summit, we

rufous-browed peppershrikes and the distant "pyork" of channel-billed toucans could be heard in the background.

Monday found us on an eastbound trek to the Agricultural Research Center in the foothills of the Northern Range. At a small wastewater treatment plant just off the highway, we located a yellow-billed tern (a South American species similar to our least tern), a flock of more than 30 least grebes and a floating grebe nest, yellow-hooded blackbirds, white-winged swallows, and many egrets. White-headed marsh-tyrants and pied water-tyrants zipped after small insects, and a masked yellowthroat skulked in the wet vegetation nearby. In the young sugarcane



Among the cattle and snowy egrets, this little egret (second from left) is distinguished in breeding plumage by its pair of nuchal plumes

found speckled tanagers and a zone-tailed hawk. The clanking, creaking bamboo, which flourishes in wet, high elevations, harbored several species new to us, including slaty-capped flycatcher. One of the best finds there was a tiny streaked xenops, which hung upside down, chickadee-like, as it searched for insects along tiny branches. The vireo-like, repetitious song of

adjacent to the ponds, male blue-black grassquits performed their courtship dance, jumping up a foot above a weed stem while buzzing "Zzzhhheeee!" The prize bird was an adult little egret in breeding plumage, complete with two long head plumes. A pair of yellow-headed caracaras labored past pursued by a merlin. A crab-eating raptor, the common black-hawk,

soared overhead. As for reptiles, at least two speckled caiman lurked on the mud banks.

The Agricultural Research Station is a great birding spot where we found some real rarities such as a displaying pair of pinnated bitterns and a beautiful white-necked (cocoi) heron. Unusual in a mountainous setting were magnificent frigatebirds. In an isolated tree perched adult male and female peregrine falcons. Red-breasted and yellow-hooded blackbirds sat in full view atop weed stems. We watched a pair of obliging green-rumped parrotlets as they examined the end of a hollow pipe. We spotted at least four rufous-colored savanna hawks during the morning, some perched with their long legs revealed and some in flight, showing bright orange wings and white tails with black tips. Southern rough-winged swallows and bam swallows foraged low over the fields. Several species of herps were in evidence, including *Tegu* and *Amaiva* lizards as well as geckos.

Continuing on to the town of Valencia, we paused to sample native drinks such as sorrel (a sweet anise-flavored drink), mauby (like bitter root beer), and local beers such as Carib and Stag while enjoying our picnic lunches. A sign outside said, "Licensed to sell spirituous liquors. Open any day, any time. Pay-first system."

After lunch we drove south through Sangre Grande, the largest city in eastern Trinidad, to Brigand Hill, and then on to Nariva. We stopped along the way at Bush-Bush Creek, where we had a rare opportunity to view bicolored cone-bills, a mangrove specialist, as well as an elusive American pygmy kingfisher.

At length we left the beach behind and entered the vast open basin of

Nariva Swamp, where we spotted a cooperative juvenile gray hawk perched like a lollipop on the remains of a palm trunk. Egrets and herons were abundant. As the day drew to a close, pairs of orange-winged parrots were seen flying to their roosts. We worked our way back to the coast to a stand of royal palms to await the evening spectacle, the communal roosting of scarlet-bellied macaws. The macaws land sideways on the single spire atop a palm tree, then slide down into the feathery leaves, where they utterly disappear. As darkness fell and tiny insectivorous bats appeared in erratic flight, we re-boarded the van and returned to PAX.

Wednesday was Central Lowlands day. One of our first birds was a striped cuckoo, a nest parasite of birds called spinetails. Vocal imitations of ferruginous pygmy-owls produced barred antshrike and several kinds of tyrant flycatchers, including southern beardless tyrannulet, yellow-bellied elaenia, and tropical pewee. Several pairs of highly territorial ruby-topaz hummingbirds buzzed us as we passed their domain, while two fly-by aningas and a gray-headed kite were great surprises.

We enjoyed our picnic lunches at LC's Store in Cumuto village, across the street from a *Casurina* tree loaded with pendulous nests of yellow-rumped caciques, which look like colorful grackles. Farther on, we parked on a roadside deep in the lowland Arena Forest and walked silently on soft humus, dwarfed by the mighty trunks of immortal, figs, kapok, and other species of trees. Vines hung everywhere, the light was dim, and birds were scarce. We found them all together in a giant multi-species flock, feeding in the canopy in a fruiting fig tree. Tanagers and bananaquits comprised the bulk of the flock, while somewhere in the

dense mass of leaves a pair of black-tailed tityras called. "Warbler-neck" soon took its toll, and we were very grateful when a buff-throated woodcreeper landed comfortably close to us, allowing a horizontal view. A pair of duetting rufous-breasted wrens sounded off nearby. As we left the hot lowlands for the cooler Heights of Aripo in the Northern Range, we saw a green kingfisher scanning the Caroni River from a bamboo twig.

We climbed the Aripo Valley by van, walking frequently and observing such species as white-bearded and golden-headed manakins, ochre-bellied flycatcher, and rufous-browed peppershrike. Flocks of turquoise tanagers dashed through treetops aflame with orange flowers, while across the valley a flock of scaled pigeons assembled in a bare treetop.

Thursday morning we relaxed and explored Mount St. Benedict before a hearty lunch, after which we drove to the very productive but odoriferous Port-of-Spain wastewater lagoons. There we met our Caroni guide, Winston Nanan,



Winston Nanan

who accompanied us to the one-square-mile set of four settling

ponds. Hundreds of birds awaited us at the ponds, including herons, egrets, equal numbers of greater and lesser yellowlegs, a lone black-necked stilt, wattle jacanas and common moorhens by the hundreds, fulvous whistling-ducks, and a total of 11 sora rails.

Later we boarded Winston's flat-bottomed boat for an evening trip into the Caroni Swamp, a tidal mangrove swamp composed primarily of three species—red, black, and white mangrove. Schools of *Anableps*, the "four-eyed fish," ogled us as we listened, and eared doves bulleted across the channel. From miles around, loose flocks of cattle egrets began flying on a beeline deep into the swamp. In a riverside red mangrove, a black-crested antshrike methodically searched the leaves for insects, while bicolor cone-bills twittered high in the foliage on the opposite shore. When we again began to motor along the channel, Winston took advantage of a falling tide to push the boat into areas dominated by exposed mudflats where numbers of shorebirds were feeding.

As the sun dropped, we anchored in a large, shallow bay dotted with greenish-black mangrove islands set against the steel-blue water, upon which were reflected the billowing, orange-tinted cumulus clouds and the rugged blue peaks of the Northern Range. It was easy to imagine that we were the only people on earth as we unpacked our snacks and relaxed to await the spectacle of the scarlet ibis. Soon a line of brilliant scarlet ibis flew into sight over the nearby mangroves. They were followed by flock after flock, perhaps 15,000 birds, until the mangrove islands in front of us looked like Christmas trees, with scarlet ibis on the top tier and cattle, great, and snowy egrets and little blue herons on the lower tiers. A lone glossy ibis winged past, a

species very rare in Trinidad, but with the excitement generated by its scarlet relatives, hardly a birder gave it a glance.

Tobago

Friday morning we took the 20-minute flight to Tobago. Having arrived hours before check-in time at the Kariwak Village, we refreshed ourselves with a snorkeling trip to Buccoo Reef before our Tobago guide, Adolphus James, arrived to drive us in his maxitaxi up the west coast to one of Tobago's very few swamps. On my last trip, Bon Accord Swamp had yielded Tobago's first Wilson's phalarope. This visit produced no rarities, but birding in an area covered mainly with mangroves, coconut palms, and guava trees, and sharing the area with skittish untethered cattle, was a real novelty.

Proceeding north along the coast, we soon arrived at the deeply rutted dirt lane leading into Grafton Estate, where a feeding station provides great photographic opportunities. Two immense mountain immortelles, their spreading branches covered with tentacles of night-blooming cereus, provide a canopy for much of the estate house. Several blue-crowned motmots were waiting when we arrived. Turkey-sized rufous-vented chachalacas stole through the vegetation and hopped through the tree limbs. Bananaquits and copper-rumped hummingbirds gathered around the sugar-water feeders. White-fringed antwrens were particularly confiding. We walked uphill along an old carriageway, past an abandoned copra shed where we viewed fruit bats hanging in clusters and making brief, silent forays before landing once more. All around us were cocoa, coffee, and rubber trees gone wild. We heard another Tobago specialty, the olivaceous

woodcreeper, and spotted a pale-vented pigeon in one of the immortelles. By twilight we probably had seen 50 blue-crowned motmots.

Our goal for Saturday was Gilpin Trace, a trail high in Tobago's Main Ridge. Here in a deep montane valley stand most of the large trees left on the island after Hurricane Flora passed through in 1963, thus supporting wildlife unique in Tobago. Our first stop in these very rugged mountains produced a fine variety of raptors: a pair of great black-hawks, several broad-winged hawks, and a merlin harassing the other raptors. Copper-rumped hummingbirds zipped by squeaking, orange-winged parrots sailed squawking over the peaks, and magnificent frigatebirds took the place of black and turkey vultures, neither of which is found on Tobago. The roadside was lush with many kinds of melastomes, seed-bearing plants that pioneer disturbed areas and forest edges and provide food for songbirds. Our primary goal was to view rufous-tailed jacamars, a bird the size of a blue jay, iridescent emerald green, with a three-inch, hummingbird-like beak. We watched while it made sorties from its perch to catch flying insects. No illustration could possibly capture the metallic gleam that radiates from a jacamar.

As we neared the summit, the temperature dropped and a steady breeze kicked in. Trees gave way to low ferns and brush that was wind-sculpted like seaside vegetation. At the Gilpin Trace trail head, walking sticks were stuck in the mud, a thoughtful provision for visitors. Within minutes we were deep in the most jungle-like habitat, with a solid wall of vegetation on every side. From the black canopy a hundred feet above us dripped the faint but fantastic song of the yellow-legged thrush, believed by

some to rival the song of the night-ingle. Rufous-necked wrens added their sweet sounds, and a Venezuelan flycatcher made a guest appearance, looking for all the world like a pastel version of our great crested flycatcher. From ahead of us on the trail came the display call of a blue-backed manakin. I called back to the bird and shortly had three or four males and one female in view directly ahead of us over the trail. This was the largest number of blue-backed manakins I had ever seen in my 21 visits to Tobago. We watched them until they moved off into the rainforest.

Our last day, Sunday, we headed for a wildlife refuge called Little Tobago Island, which lies off the northeastern end of Tobago. Our first stop was in a cocoa grove, where we heard scrub greenlets and spotted the endemic red-crowned woodpecker as we studied a "confusing fall warbler" working its way along the lower branches of a tree on the forest edge. It stayed around long enough for us to identify it positively as a blackpoll warbler, a first for our local guide and a first for me on Tobago. After making the two-mile crossing, we began our hike, which took us up a series of switchbacks. Little Tobago boasts a virgin dry forest that looks exactly the same today as it did 10,000 years ago. The trees are not gigantic; in fact, they are rather small, as is appropriate on a dry island. Underbrush is almost nonexistent, composed mainly of an immense herbaceous plant called *Anthurium hookeri* and several species of bamboo.

As we climbed we noted the nest holes of Audubon's shearwaters and stopped to watch a brown-crested flycatcher perched in a tree with reddish peeling bark—the "tourist tree," as the locals humorously call it. The eastern side of Little Tobago is rimmed with sea cliffs. From a

thatched shelter there we gazed down upon some 200 red-billed tropicbirds flying with incredible



Red-billed Tropicbird

grace over the crashing waves far below and brown boobies resting on cactus-covered rocks. From another promontory we could see the triple peaks of St. Giles Island, nesting site of the magnificent frigatebirds and red-footed booby. But literally at our feet sat mama red-billed tropicbird incubating her egg. Just down the trail, in the shade of an anthurium, sat another adult with a nestling. Seeing these birds of legend, for us species number 180, and being able to study them on land and not from a pitching boat, was a fantastic ending to a very successful trip.

Bill Murphy, leader of ANS foray to Trinidad and Tobago, is the author of *A Birder's Guide to Trinidad and Tobago*.