COVER: Orthaea apophysata is quite a common scrambling shrub in the thickets of the Aripo Savannas. It is a member of the heather family which is better represented in temperate latitudes. The tropical members are shrubs or small trees, often conspicuous through the brilliant red colour of the young leaves.

Photo C. Dennis Adams

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Mary Lou and I awakened gradually in the predawn stillness to a hollow sound like someone blowing over a bottle. The repeatedly whistled "hoot, hoot, hoot" of a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, perched low in a small grapefruit tree a mere ten feet from our bungalow, ushered in our first day of birding in Trinidad and Tobago.

Several months before, Dr. Donald Messersmith had asked me to lead the trip for him. With a wedding date only two months away, I had been hesitant to commit myself to an extended foray away from Mary Lou, but Don and I had reached an agreement whereby Mary Lou had been able to join the expedition in February as a paying participant.

Arrangements had been made for the tour members, 11 in all, to rendezvous at Miami for the 3 p.m. flight to Trinidad. For Mary Lou and me to catch the flight to Miami from the Baltimore-Washington International Airport on that Monday, would have necessitated our arising at 4 a.m., which we were most reluctant to do on a day we knew wouldn’t end until about 1 a.m. our time. Since I hadn’t seen my cousin Peggy in years, and because Mary Lou had yet to meet her, we used the opportunity to visit Peggy in Miami, flying in on Sunday afternoon instead of on Monday morning. Our visit was splendid, and the three of us thoroughly enjoyed our time together.

Monday afternoon we made our rendezvous with the rest of the group at the BWIA counter at Miami International Airport, left Miami on schedule at 3 p.m., and flew 4½ hours nonstop to the island of Barbados, the easternmost of the Caribbean islands and the hub of Caribbean air travel. Here we enjoyed a brief layover, relishing the windward-side tropical breezes. The last leg of the trip, from Barbados to Piarco International Airport in Trinidad, lasted only 40 minutes. We arrived at 9 p.m. Trinidad time, Atlantic Standard, an hour earlier than Eastern Standard Time.

After retrieving our luggage, which, as in all airports, was somewhat time-consuming, we proceeded through immigration and customs without incident, most of the luggage receiving only a cursory glance. As we stepped outside into the balmy tropical night, we were met by several drivers from the Asa Wright Nature Centre (Asa, a Scandinavian name with a tiny "o" over the "A", is pronounced "Ohsah"). The drivers loaded our luggage into the vans, we arranged ourselves for the drive, and then we were off to the Centre, which would be our home for the next six days.

Culture shock came immediately. Piarco Airport, like Dulles International Airport near Washington, D.C., was built quite a long way from the city it was built to serve, and the drive to the Asa Wright Centre took but an hour. The steering wheel was on the right; in Trinidad, driving is on the left, and the Eastern Main Road, over which we were travelling, reportedly has the highest fatality rate of any highway in the Western Hemisphere. This asphalt strip could be politely described as an unmarked, generous single lane without shoulders, the vegetation along the sides encroaching steadfastly upon the pavement, its progress being checked only by the weed-eating effect of vehicle tyres. The terrain was level, and sugar cane fields flashed by in the headlights. We noticed the sugar, coffee, and chocolate/cocoa factories near the airport, but these soon gave way to uncultivated vegetation and an occasional home.

After about half an hour we turned toward the town of Arima, which means place of water." Arima is a large city for Trinidad, with a population of about 20,000. It lies at the mouth of the north-south Arima valley, in which is located the Asa Wright Nature Centre, formerly Springhill Estate. Simla, a tropical research station built by the New York Zoological Society and now part of the Asa Wright Centre, is located four miles north of Arima, three miles south of the Centre.

As we passed through Arima, we saw throngs of spirited Trinidadians on the street-corners, singing and dancing to American music, especially Lionel Ritchie’s song “All Night Long,” which blasted from suitcase-sized radios or from home stereos whose speakers had been placed in the windows of the houses to provide
music for the neighbourhood.

The colours of Trinidad attracted our attention because they were radically different from those of our Washington, D.C., culture. The Trinidadians used bold reds, oranges, and turquoises in their clothes and muted pastels in painting their homes. Arima resembles tropical villages elsewhere—a central park surrounded by local market stands, stalls, and small businesses, with very small homes radiating outward from the city centre along crowded, busy streets. Smiling faces turned toward us as we passed, and the infectious mood of the people was decidedly one of peace and happiness.

A traveller reaches the Asa Wright Centre from Arima via the wild, switchback-ridden Blanchisseuse Road. Arima disappeared behind us rather suddenly; outlying suburbs are an impossibility when the roadside is vertical. Blanchisseuse Road soon became no more than a ribbon laced along the side of the valley wall. In some places it was overhung with ferns and bamboo, and in others, where the road has been carved out of the limestone mountainside, the cliffs shake wall stretched above us like green flannel, covered with an unbroken wrapping of moss over which ceaselessly trickled water from thousands of tiny springs.

With each switchback the road climbs higher and higher above Arima. Seven miles from Arima, at an altitude of about 1800 feet, a rustic lane branches to the left. Our driver turned here and proceeded down this intimate treelined lane, along the middle of which grew coleus and ferns. Half a mile farther we came at last to the Asa Wright Centre, a former British colonial estate house overlooking a splendid valley containing an unspoiled tropical rainforest. Our drivers delivered us directly to our bungalows, where we unpacked, showered, and collapsed into bed amid the twitters, squeaks, and chirps of a myriad of jungle creatures.

Each day at the Centre, the birdwatching guests follow a standard routine. Many of the tour participants arise well before dawn, birding by ear in the dimness, or in some cases, with the aid of a tape recorder. Since throughout the trip the temperature never deviated from the ideal by more than a few degrees, we never worried about what to wear—shorts or light slacks and a cotton shirt constituted reasonable, standard dress.

During our visit, several avid birders in their predawn rambles occasionally found a species or two that were new for the trip. The rest of us arose and dressed just before dawn to the hooting of the Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, whose call was supplanted minutes later by a dawn chorus of loquacious diurnal birds. The symphony included the wheezy, querulous “Que-ce que il dit?” of the Great Kiskadee, an impressive, stripe-headed, mustard-breasted flycatcher, and the grating, mechanical display call of the Crested Oropendola, a crow-size blackbird with a luminous yellow tail and beak and wonderfully blue eyes. The Oropendolas are colonial nesters, weaving magnificent 6-foot-long stockinglike nests in the tallest trees.

At dawn, flocks of Orange-winged Parrots flew screeching overhead, their shallow wing-flapping diagnostic, as they sought ripe fruit in the cool fastness of the higher elevations. We noticed that Orange-winged Parrots always flew in pairs, so we could recognize them at great distances by their pairing. From deep in the jungle came the owl-like hooting of the Whitedipped Dove and the melancholy, descending, four-noted whistle of the Black-faced Antthrush. The incessant wren-like song and twitters of the ubiquitous Bananquit filled any momentary acoustical void.

By 6:45 a.m. we all found ourselves on the verandah of the estate house, undoubtedly the most heavily birded spot in Trinidad. From here we could admire hordes of colourful birds as they fed on fresh bananas and...
oranges provided for them on wire birdfeeders. Tanagers were the most abundant, with numbers of Blue-gray, White-lined, Silver-beaked, Bay-headed, Turquoise, and Palm Tanagers in view almost all of the time, along with their smaller cousin, the Violaceous Euphonia.

All of the photographers present sought a good shot of the male Purple Honeycreeper, iridescent purple with a downcurved bill and unbelievably bright yellow legs, or a good shot of a Green Honeycreeper or Blue Dacnis. Yellow Orioles nested in a tree beside the verandah. Hummingbirds were always somewhere in sight — Black-throated Mangos, Copper-rumped Hummingbirds, Tufted Coquettes, White-necked Jacobins, Green Hermits, Rufous-breasted Hermits — either whizzing around in pursuit of each other or feeding at flowers.

Most hummingbirds seemed to prefer the flowers of the sensitive plant (mimosa) and bougainvillea, but the Tufted Coquette exclusively attended the blue vervain, and all species of hermits fed close to the ground on the blossoms of the various heliconias or on the honeywater at the feeder. Scaled pigeons hurtled with swift, direct flight across the valley as they seemingly attempted to minimize their exposure to our long-distance view. The Smooth-billed Ani could be heard mewing in the palm trees, and the tremulous, descending whistle of the ground-dwelling Little Tinamou was the only indication we had of its skulking presence in the darkest jungle haunts.

Always in sight but not nearly so vocal as our North American mockingbird were Tropical Mockingbirds. Golden-olive Woodpeckers frequently landed in the grapefruit trees in the garden, and just beyond them Channel-billed Toucans, with their blue faces, yellow chests, and amazingly large bills, fed on the fruits of the nutmeg tree. Bare-eyed Thrushes sang from the shadows or fed at the feeders, while the vireo-like Rufous-browed Pepper-shrike maintained a melodious chanting in the background.

Familiar to us all was the song of the tropical subspecies of the House Wren, whose melody is somewhat like that of our northern species but only half as long. Bananquets were everywhere; I designated them the official envos of the house sparrow to the tropics. Many species of insect-eating birds, particularly flycatchers, are drab, but the foot-long Black-tailed Tityra was gaudy indeed, with its vermilion beak contrasting with its conservative gray and black plumage. A more typically dressed flycatcher, always somewhere to be found police-whistling around the verandah, was the Yellow-bellied Elaenia, olive-gray with modest white wingbars and a slightly raised crest.

At 7 a.m., a maid would emerge from the dinning room and thrice sound the foot-high bell on the carport, the signal that breakfast was served. Within a few days we had all developed a Pavlovian salvation response to the ear-splitting sound of the bell. A few minutes later, regardless of where they had been when the bell rang, all persons present at the Centre, guests and staff alike, would file into the spacious dining room, the focal point of Centre society. A pirate's haul of binoculars, cameras with long lenses, and bird books would be deposited on a side table at the entrance, where they were convenient for a quick grab if an unusual bird appeared outside the dining room window.

All meals were served buffet style. Seating was at 10-foot-diameter round tables, each with a lazy susan bearing fresh-roasted Trinidadian coffee, tea, toast, and condiments, including a small bowl of yellow pepper sauce that shamed Tabasco and which, if not highly diluted, would completely extinguish sensation in the taste buds for hours afterward. The food was excellent, consisting of meats — usually ham, beef, or pork; vegetables such as squash or broccoli; rice, either with a separate sauce or with the sauce cooked in; a fresh, leafy salad, homemade bread, and usually a noodle casserole of some kind. Desserts were prepared with fresh fruits, ice cream, or pudding.

The overall aroma of the Centre during mealtimes was mildly Indian, with certain subtle herbal nuances that were exclusively Trinidadian. Partly because of the wide variety of excellent dishes that were prepared by the staff, the cuisine at the Centre was of the most enjoyable aspects of our visit despite our having to interrupt our fabulous birding to feast.

If one were fortunate enough to find a seat at mealtime with Mr. Eric Patience, manager of the Asa Wright Centre, or she had the added enjoyment of hearing his accounts of Trinidadian life. Mr. Patience, a wonderful gentleman in every way and an accomplished storyteller, worked for years as a civil engineer and helped design many Caribbean airports, such as those in Barbados, Grenada, and Tobago. His wife, manages the Centre's gift booth, where visitors can purchase postcards, stamps, decals, mugs, ashtrays, and other souvenirs.

Exploring Springhill Estate

It was at breakfast that the details of the day's outing would be discussed. The Centre maintains a schedule of standard field trips, and the day upon which a certain trip is offered depends upon the availability of a knowledgeable guide. Our schedule guide for the first tour, Edward Rooks, an artist and naturalist in his early twenties, had been to the capital city of Port-of-Spain the day of our arrival to have some dental work performed and had not yet returned. Knowing of my previous
birding experience at the Centre, Mr. Patience asked me to conduct a tour of the grounds for the tour participants. I was happy to do so, and we began promptly at 8:30, the standard departure time for field trips.

One could actually bird all day from the verandah and accumulate a respectable list of sightings, but we were also interested in becoming more knowledgeable about the layout of the Centre, so I chose to lead the group downhill along a path that crossed the garden in front of the verandah and then meandered into the rain forest.

Since we had seen most of the tanagers and other abundant species in the garden before breakfast, we were delighted to spot a pair of courting Lilac-tailed Parrotlets in a tree beside the verandah. These budgie-sized beauties were the only ones of their species seen during our trip. As we trekked down the path through the mango and grapefruit trees, we stopped to admire the blazing orange blossoms of the mountain immortelle trees 100 feet or more above us and the blue flowers of the jacaranda.

The immortelle was imported to Trinidad 300 years ago to provide shade for the coffee trees, which do poorly in direct sunlight. The immortelle’s galaxy of blossoms, along with those of the many native flowering trees, produce nectar that attracts birds.

High overhead, above the valley rim, a pair of White Hawks soared, and on later days they were joined by other birds of prey such as Ornate Hawk-eagles, Broad-winged Hawks, Short-tailed Hawks, Gray-headed Kites, and Common Black Hawks, the latter species with bright yellow legs and a white-branded tail. To say that Black Vultures were easily seen overhead would be an understatement. I estimated that about 100 were in view at one time over the mouth of the valley, and 10 times that number may well have been within binocular range but at a height that rendered them invisible to the naked eye. On one occasion, I glanced up just as a distant Magnificent Frigate bird flashed like an immense Barn Swallow across a puffy cumulous cloud and out of sight behind the valley wall.

As we entered the forest, Barred Antshrikes called from the middle level of vegetation, and my imitation of the call of the Ferruginous Pygmy Owl quickly brought into sight both the male, crested and boldly barred black-and-white, and the female, rusty and uniform in colour. We soon became familiar with the sight and calls of the more common birds and were able to concentrate on unfamiliar calls, such as a ventriloucal, metallic, anvil-striking “BOK” coming from deep in the forest. Patient searching during the next few mornings rewarded several persevering birders with full views of the caller, the much sought Bearded Bellbird. The male of this insect-eating cotina is white with black wings and a coffee-coloured head and has a beard of wattles hanging from his chin that look like black rubberbands. With each “BOK” these wattles quiver and shake. The noise made by the Bellbird must reach over 100 decibels at close range; we could hear the call a half a mile away through the dense jungle foliage.

The forest trail was well cared for and the walking was easy except for occasional patches of slippery clay. Rain fell in torrents daily between 4 and 5 a.m., leaving the foliage shining green and the vegetation lush, but because of the many levels of foliage the rain encountered on its descent, little moisture reached the ground. The soil was barely damp by the time we dressed and by 9 a.m. it was dry.

Along the trail we passed orange and grapefruit trees, bananas, mangoes, and fruiting Malay apple (pommerac), ripe with tart radish-red fruit and white flesh and a Hugh seed. As we entered the deeper jungle where the trees were festooned with twisted, draped ficus vines and a thick, cushiony carpet of leaves and fallen immortelle blossoms, the sunlight became dim and the birdlife less abundant.

Individual songs could be heard, but tracing the call to the singing bird was a real challenge. A musical, rolling song was found to be that of the Rufous-breasted Wren, which, along with the House Wren, accounts for half of the wren species in Trinidad. The Rufous-breasted Wren is related to the American Carolina Wren, which it resembles in appearance except for its rufous neck-band, heavily spotted with black-rimmed white spots. Another call, a repeated single blast, was traced to a Blue Jay-sized Plain-brown Woodcreeper, which looked like a gigantic, cinnamon-coloured Brown Creeper.

At one point along the trail the manager had built a rustic wooden railing upon which photographers could steady their cameras while photographing White-bearded Manakins performing their ritualized courtship display. Two species of manakins are found on Trinidad, the White-bearded and the Golden-headed. Neither species is found on Tobago, where a third species, the Blue-backed Manakin, is found.

Each species of manakin has its own peculiar courtship ritual. As many as twenty sparrow-sized White-bearded males gather at a special site in the jungle, called a "lek", where they fastidiously clear away all debris from the forest floor, then position themselves on twigs or vertical stems approximately one foot above the ground and engage in their performance. This interesting dance consists of their puffing up their white throats and flinging themselves at full speed.
from one straw-sized tree stem to another about a foot away, producing at the initiation of each transit a sound resembling a pistol shot. In ordinary flight, such as from shrub to shrub in the vicinity of the verandah, male White-bearded Manakins rustle loudly as if their wings were made of crepe paper.

In whatever forested area our field trips took us, we could count on the presence of ants, though seldom the wasplike and formidable army ants. Parasol ants were amusing as they expertly excised penny-sized circles of tree leaves, trotted down the trunks, across the trails, and into their anthills, all the while carrying their cargo like a green parasol over their bodies. A line of busy parasol ants resembled a miniature green river flowing across the ground. Once inside their anthills, these ants macerate the leaves and use the resulting material as mulch in which they grow a special kind of fungus, whose fruiting bodies provide them with food. This activity may be regarded as a bonafide kind of farming.

Other ants, possibly pharaoh ants, seemed to have an irresistible fondness for our vitamin C tablets, and they would chew their way through my ziplock baggies to get at them. Certain other ants relished my pinned insect specimens. The simple expedient of running a stick of Cutter's insect repellent around the table edges succeeded in curtailing the ants' expeditions into our belongings.

In day-to-day travels, however, neither ants nor other insects posed any problems to us. Having unwittingly discovered a haven of chiggers on my last trip, however, and having suffered the almost unbearable itching in consequence, I sprayed my lower legs with Cutter's before dressing each morning just for peace of mind.

Termites were also conspicuous inhabitants of the rain forest, not so much the insects themselves, which are the size of a rice grain, but their nests or termitearia, which look like massive brown gourds on the sides of tree trunks. With each termitearia were associated brown, hollow tubes running up the tree trunks. By staying within these tubes, the termites are protected from the dessicating effects of the sun during their forays to the ground.

The lunch bell brought our morning explorations to a halt. After a savoury lunch, we explored the entrance road, a birding walk along which, when combined with an hour on the verandah, can produce sightings of 90 per cent of the species to be found in the Arina Valley. Along this peaceful lane grow white-flowered coffee trees, some with ripe red berries clustered along the branches, and cocoa trees with their green, orange, and red striped pods hanging from the trunk. Impatiens flourish in the shade, and coleus is a common ground cover.

A Squirrel Cuckoo, with a tail half again as long as the body, was seen among the deep green cocoa leaves. And then another, "Oh, my!" Nestled quietly on a branch slightly above eye level and no more than thirty feet away was a male Violaceous Trogan, the first of many we would see. These birds are in the same family as the Quetzal, ventriquolous insect-eating birds with brilliant iridescent greens, scarlets and blues. After observing his sulphery belly and black-and-white banded tail for a considerable length of time, we moved on.

Appropriately enough, Cocoa Thrushes favoured this stretch of road, where cocoa trees abound. The Cocoa Thrush could have been named for either its appearance or habitat; top to bottom, front to back it's a chocolate bird.

In the open areas along the entrance road, Tropical Parula Warblers sang from the high canopy. These tiny butterflies of the bird world, strongly resemble their counterparts in America, the Northern Parula. In addition to this species we found Golden-crowned Warblers and representatives of our own neotropical migrant fauna — a single, rare Bay-breasted Warbler and many Northern Waterthrushes.

We sat spellbound watching as Crested Oropendolas continued to performed their vocal gyrations throughout the middle of the day. They could be seen at almost any time of day, heading across the valley in their characteristic level flight. We came to regard this species as a friend by the end of our stay — they were awake and clamoring before we were up, performed for us all day long, and some were still fussing after dark. Moreover, we saw them in places on the island when we were being deluged with new species, and our familiarity with them was most reassuring.

While staying at the Asa Wright Centre, one feels strongly compelled to adhere to local customs, all of which are delightful. At 4 p.m., for example, we reported to the verandah for the traditional teatime. This respite gave us an opportunity to
compare notes and share different views on such topics as bird and plant identifications, good trails, and photographic techniques. The sugar in the cakes and the caffeine in the tea were also welcome, coming as they did when lunch was a long way behind us and dinner still hours away. Were I to make one addition to the comforts at the Asa Wright Centre, it would be to add a soda/candy bar machine—it would generate a small fortune for some entrepreneur.

From 4.30 p.m. to 6 p.m., we were again free to roam the 200-acre estate, which is so extensive that it is impossible to get the feeling of having seen it all before. Certain sites, such as a dammed bathing pool in a deep but easily negotiated chasm, were magnets for nearly everyone. To experience the sight and sound of a waterfall spilling into a chilly pool in the heart of a steaming jungle rainforest is truly to experience the jungle. At 6 p.m., the bell sounded for cocktails. For this occasion we usually dressed up a bit, the women perhaps donning an especially nice blouse, the men changing from shorts and sneakers to slacks and penny loafers—nothing overly fancy, just natty clothes to keep the British flavour strong.

The cocktails were an aromatic concoction of rum, fresh-squeezed fruit juice, rum, Trinidad’s own Angostura Bitters, rum, sugar, and rum. Most of us were incapable of even the most novice bird identification after a few cocktails, so in spite of our fervid urge to continue birding until the last photon of sunlight was extinguished, we soon came to regard the predinner cocktail hour for what it was meant to be, a time for relaxation and fellowship. During cocktails we also had an opportunity to meet any new arrivals to the Centre and to pass on to them our newly acquired knowledge of the area.

Without hesitation I can say that the most welcome sound on any day I’ve spent in Trinidad has not been a bird sound; instead, it has been that most delicious peal from the dinner bell, three musical clangs that activate the saliva factories of everyone within earshot. As I described earlier, meals at the Centre were most enjoyable, and the many hours that had passed since lunch made the dinner especially appreciated.

There is a widely accepted tendency at the Centre to dawdle over dinner, and rarely would we finish before 8:30 p.m. From the dining room we would retire to the verandah for our “tally rally,” during which we would compile and summarize the bird sightings of the day and review identification marks and vocalizations.

As I mentioned before, some participants engaged in solo walks, and they often reported new species for the trip, so during tally rally we would grill them for detailed information on the sightings. Every adequately reported sighting was accepted, the only exception being that the birds seen only by the leader, me, were not counted on the trip list.

Because of that rule, a Gray-throated Leafscaper that I followed through the jungle for fifteen minutes appears only on my personal list, not on the trip list. Without having ventured more than half a mile from the verandah, our total for Day 1 was 70 species of birds.

To be continued.
COVER: A Blue-chinned Sapphire probes the blossoms of a blackstick (Pachystachys coccinea) in this enchanting illustration by the renowned Don Eckelberry. More of his work accompanies William Murphy's birding adventures which begin on page 18.

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n the second day of our stay at the Asa Wright Nature Centre we met our wonderful Hindu guide, Jogie Ramlal, a friend of mine from my visit the previous year. Jogie is first and foremost a man of peace, radiating satisfaction with everything in a delightfully good-humoured manner.

His plush Toyota is licensed as a taxi, for which he uses it when the mood strikes him if he is not otherwise employed leading a birding group. His expertise and knowledge of bird calls is phenomenal. With Richard ffrench ("ff" because "F" is "V" in Welsh), the author of the indispensable field guide, *Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*, and Ian Lambie, director of the Asa Wright Nature Centre, Jogie participates in Christmas and spring censuses of Trinidad birds.

Jogie appeared at the carport at about 8 a.m., ready to take us along the Blanchisseuse Road over the high Andrews Trace area and down the Caribbean slope of the Northern Range to the beach at Blanchisseuse. We spent about fifteen minutes getting organized, fetching forgotten lenses, suntan
lotion, etc.; on subsequent days this preparatory time diminished substantially. On this day we were afiend by 9 a.m. and shortly thereafter we were stopping to view birds such as the Slaty-capped, Boat-billed, Brown crested, Dusky-capped, and Streaked Flycatchers. A Collard Trogon, intense lilac pink beneath, thrilled us with a brief appearance, and several White-tailed Trogons were seen in the trees along the road.

Jogie displayed his expertise by whistling up numerous species, many of which were new to the group. A Golden-crowned Warbler showed itself off in a patch of sunlight. An individual of this species startled and mobilized the hardcore “listers” of the North American birding community several years ago with a surprise visit to Arizona, and here we were watching one preen only a few yards away.

Andrews Trace is a trail that runs along the crest of the Northern Range, through Rastafarian marijuana fields into which birders do not venture. Jogie feels it is unsafe to trespass there. At the crest, atop a radar antenna, perched two Black Vultures, and our first Tropical Kingbird and a male Blue-black Grassquit were perched atop the chainlink fence surrounding the radar facility. A Whitecheested Emerald Hummingbird was added to our list along with the Streak-headed and Buff-throated Woodcreepers, and in the denser parts of the rainforest we spotted the Golden-headed Manakin, most conspicuous against the dark green background. Overhead flew Gray-breasted Martins and Rough-winged Swallows, the latter species deceptively belonging to the same species as that in North America, but Trinidadian individuals boast an apricot breast and rump.

Further along the jungle path Jogie whistled up a Hepatic Tanager, known to the rest of us about an hour, and when in due course we arrived at the beach, we immediately set upon our box lunches, which consisted of meat sandwiches and cookies along with the inevitable and much welcomed fresh-squeezed fruit juice. Later Jogie carved open a few coconuts for us, from which we sampled fresh coconut meat. Hundreds of coconut palms grow along the beach at Blanchisseuse. Overhead patrol military formations of Brown Pelicans and squadrons of Magnificent Frigatebirds, and along the freshwater stream that enters the Caribbean on the beach are Green Kingfishers and teetering Spotted Sandpipers.

After thus relaxing and birding in the area for an hour, we began the drive back to the Centre with a stop at a grocery store in the microcosm that is Blanchisseuse. Jogie, aware of the universal human instinct to maximize profit, dickered as our agent with the salesperson to obtain fair prices for our purchases, which consisted mainly of beer and rum “for later.”

Along a ridgetop a few miles up the road, we were treated to an excellent view of a pair of Blue-headed Parrots adroitly opening seed pods in the crown of an acacia tree. While there, Jogie flushed our first Lineated Woodpecker.

The return trip continued with frequent stops, and despite the good birding, we began to look forward to tea time. At tally rally, the 28 species of new birds seen during the day brought our total to 98 species.
Wallerfield and Cumuto Village

Birds of Trinidad's mountains are spectacular, and it was with a twinge of reluctance that we left the mountains the next morning for a trip into the lowland savanna. During World War II, U.S. forces razed about ten square miles of jungle at the base of the Northern Range and built Wallerfield a short distance southeast of Arima. This area, now abandoned, is the only such habitat in Trinidad, and it offers the birder opportunities unavailable elsewhere on the island.

With Jogie again, we drove to Wallerfield as it is called, observing scores of Tropical Kingbirds hawking for insects from telephone wires along the East Main Road and thousands of Cattle Egrets consorting with water buffalo in fields on either side. Overhead at Wallerfield were oddly truncated Short-tailed Swifts and delicate Fork-tailed Palm Swifts, the latter species found only where the Moriche Palm grows. Migrant Yellow Warblers darted through the weed stalks, and Carib Grackles gleaned seeds and insects on the ground.

At one stop we caught a fleeting glimpse of a large brown-and-yellow raptor and later observed it at close range - a Yellow-headed Caracara, related to the falcons but resembling a vulture in feeding preferences. While waiting out a brief rainshower by enjoying lunch, we watched a Merlin sally forth from its perch on a dead tree. At first glance we thought the Whitewing Swallows perched on a farm gate were Tree Swallows, but when they flew the large white areas in the wings made their identification easy. Barn Swallows were also easy to identify.

Next to the shelter in which we were enjoying our repast, immensely long-toed Wattled Jacanas foraged with Lesser Yellowlegs and Common Snipe. An 8-foot-long snake, gray above and mustard-coloured below, slid across a field in which water buffalo grazed. Every so often it raised the front part of its body off the ground like a periscope, surveyed the area, then dropped back into the grass and slithered on. Later we found out that the natives call this non-

venomous snake "El Tigre."

Both Common Ground Doves and Ruddly Ground Doves picked gravel from the roadsides, and tiny Green-rumped Parrotlets were a challenge to observe as they dove through the underbrush until at last one accommodating pair perched in full view only fifty feet from where we stood. Further on, a little Striped Cuckoo looked for all the world like a miniature Roadrunner, except that it was perched high in a tree, an unlikely spot in which to find a Roadrunner.

One Trinidad specialty we were very much hoping to see was the Rufous-tailed Jacamar, a Blue Jay-sized bird with a long, tapered bill and iridescent metallic plumage like that of a Hummingbird. Jacamars nest like a Kingfisher in cavities in streambanks and feed on morpho butterflies and other aerial prey. It was in the Wallerfield area that we glimpsed our first individual of this species. Gray Kingbirds were common on telephone lines, and on barbed wire fences we saw Shiny and Giant Cowbirds and Red-breasted Blackbirds, the latter species looking like our redwings but with the crimson extending across the breast and belly instead of being restricted to the epaulets.

The village of Cumuto offers birders an opportunity to view one species that is not easily found elsewhere, the Yellow-rumped Cacique. This species is related to the Crested Oropendola, being a member of the icterid group, and it looks like a 50/50 hybrid of blackbird with oriole. Like the Oropendola, the Yellow-rumped Cacique builds colonies of foot-long hanging nests, like those of a Northern Oriole but stouter.

The Cacique colony at Cumuto is fortuitously placed in front of the police station, where it is afforded complete protection from bird trappers, the scourge of songbirds in Trinidad. Across the street from the police station is a store that sells such goodies as homemade ice cream.

Tally rally that night added 29 species to our list, bringing our total to 127 species.

Oilbird Cave and Caroni Swamp

No trip to Trinidad would be complete without a visit to the Oilbird Cave, which is also known as Dunstan Cave — after the man who first investigated the species in Trinidad — and as Guacharo Cave — for the vernacular name for the Oilbird. The species, unique in its family, is found only in Trinidad and South America. The Oilbird Cave is located on the grounds of Springhill Estate, at the bottom of a steep-sided, heavily forested ravine, and it is one of a very few easily accessible locations where Oilbirds can be seen.

Edwards Rooks, our scheduled guide, returned from Port-of-Spain, met us at 8:30 a.m. on the verandah and escorted us down the trail through the garden and subsequently down the quarter-mile trail to the Oilbird cave. The trail is steep and can be slippery, but the reward at the bottom is well worth the energy expended in the descent.

As we left the garden, we again viewed a pair of Ornate Hawk-eagles over the valley head, and this time more people saw it than had the first time. An Eared Dove was new for us. At the bottom of the ravine runs a cold, clear stream that disappears into a fissure, not really a cave, that is wide enough for two people to walk abreast. The creekbed in the cave is precipitous, and the flow of water is very rapid, so the guide places a ladder at a strategic location so visitors can safely negotiate the steepest drop, which is about four feet. We divested ourselves of shoes before
entering and proceeded to wade into the gloom of the cave, detecting the unmistakable, rich aroma of Oilbird guano. About forty feet inside the entrance, the light fades to darkness, and it is here that the Oilbirds nest.

An Oilbird is a chestnut-coloured, palmseed-eating, nocturnal bird about two feet long, with a three-foot wingspread. They have powerful hooked beaks and panther-like screams that reverberate from the cave walls. In darkness, the birds echo-locate with audible clicks, judging their distance with incredible accuracy. We were able to observe about twenty pairs of Oilbirds on their bowl-shaped nests, which they construct of hardened guano. Many young Oilbirds were also visible in the nests. It is for the exceptionally oily young that the Oilbird is named — villagers used to boil down the chicks for their oil, which they possess in vast quantities as a result of their oily diet of palmseeds.

During my brief visit to the cave I managed to squeeze off several excellent strobe photographs of Oilbirds on their nest along with an available light photograph of the cave entrance from the inside. The Oilbirds ignored the exceedingly brief strobe flashes.

After the Oilbird cave walk, which took most of the morning, we birded along the trail as we climbed out of the gorge, discovering in the process a moving river of army ants crossing the trail near the White-bearded Manakin lek. In the tropics, a number of birds — Antshrikes, Antvireos, Antwrens, Antbirds, Anthrushes, and Antpittas — are intimately associated with ants, especially army ants, columns of which move like three-inch-wide lawnmowers through an area, flushing arthropods of all kinds. It is usually upon these prey, not the ants, that the ant-following birds feed.

With this particular trail of ants was associated at least four Buff-throated Woodcreepers and three Black-faced Antwrens, with which we were fascinated, having observed them before only in the darkness of the understory of the rainforest.

After another topnotch lunch, we drove with Jogie down the mountain to the west coast to visit Caroni Swamp. Along the way we spotted our first Yellow-hooded Blackbirds. The Caroni Swamp is a vast expanse of tidal pools and mangrove swamps bordered by grassy wetlands. An enterprising man named Winston Nanan operates motorboat tours into the swamp, promising to show visitors

![Oilbird](image)

![Common Potoo](image)

Teal, several Osprey, Black-bellied Plover, Greater Yellowlegs, and Short-billed Dowitchers. A lone Peregrine Falcon flew into the setting sun. Pied Marsh-tyrants, White-headed Marsh-tyrants, and American Redstarts flitted about in the understory foliage, and a Ruddy-breasted Seedateer made a token appearance in the dry grass.

Winston was able to call up several groups of Bicolored Conebills, mangrove-inhabiting members of the honeycreeper family, which look like drab bluish warblers. We also heard a Yellow-throated Spinetail and a Clapper Rail.

As we made our way into the heart of the Caroni Swamp, Winston suddenly turned the boat around and headed back in the direction from which we had come, casually mentioning that he thought he had glimpsed a Common Potoo. For a person to "glimpse" a Common Potoo is equivalent to dropping a pencil and having it accidentally and correctly fill out a crossword puzzle before coming to rest, so I knew that he had located the bird previously. Sure enough, when the boat came to rest along the canal bank, the Potoo was so well hidden that many minutes passed before everyone had spotted it, even though it was a foot long and only forty feet away.

A Potoo looks like the broken-off end of a dead branch, and this individual was sitting in exactly the spot where the branch had broken off, making it nearly invisible. The nocturnal Potoo is related to the Whip-poor-will; both use camouflage plumage to conceal themselves during the day.

Father along, while scanning the mudflats for shorebirds, I glanced up and saw the first of a string of about 100 migrating Fork-tailed Flycatchers, their exceedingly long tails flying out behind them like tails on kites. When we finally arrived at the centre of the swamp, we waited in the stillness, the boat
rocking gently, listening to frogs and other noises of twilight, then
suddenly a pair of Scarlet Ibis burst into sight, followed without delay
by about 5000 more. The evening sky was resplendent in the intense
red flow of their feathers, and camera shutters clicked continuously
as the Ibis whirled and circled over the mangrove hammocks
where they roosted.

Few sights are as moving as watching a mangrove hammock
become decorated like a Christmas tree with thousands of scarlet
ornaments. On and on they came, in V's like geese, from every direction.
Occasionally a group would rise, circle, and come to rest again in
the tops of the mangroves, intensifying the already intense scarlet hue
in the section of the hammock.

Soon the darkness grew deeper and the evening show was over. On
the boat ride back to the launch site, Winston explained how the
Caroni Swamp had been established as a wildlife sanctuary by the
Trinidad government so the threatened Scarlet Ibis would continue to
use the area for nesting and roosting. The entire area had recently
been named a national park.

As he spoke, Winston pointed out nocturnal Boat-billed Herons
flying laboriously across the canal in front of us. This long-legged
wader possesses a bill that is enormous in relation to the size of
the bird’s head, and it looks more like a shoebox than a bill. We
glimpsed a Barn Owl sitting on a telephone wire as we drove back
to the Centre. When we added this to our list of 115 species seen that
day, 30 of them new for the trip, our running total came to 157
species.

**Nariva Swamp**

We had been scheduled originally to take a field trip to the
Aripo Savanna and the Heights of Aripo the next day and one to the
Nariva Swamp the following day, but Jogie pointed out that the
Nariva Swamp area would be fairly busy then with weekend sunbathers
at nearby Manzanilla Beach, so we switched trips. We took a van and
a car, which was driven by Singh, another of the Centre's drivers.

The trip to Nariva was a lengthy one that required a full
two hours, but when we began birding in the area we were rewarded
with good views of numerous species. Near the mouth of the
Nariva River we had a distant look at a Gray Hawk, and a recording
of a singing Silvered Antbird made by one of the participants on
the spot and replayed, brought the songster into perfect view below
us and only a few feet away. A White-winged Becard made a flash
appearance, and Southern Lapwings and Least Sandpipers were observed
in the fields and around muddy puddles.

The beach near Nariva is on the Atlantic Ocean, about fifty miles
north of the mouth of Venezuela's Orinoco River, so the water can be
muddy at times. On this day the water was fairly clear and the wind
was strong and out of the east, which made for pleasant birding.
We stopped for lunch on the beach under some of the one million
coconut palms that line Manzanilla Beach. Jogie skillfully opened
several ripe coconuts for their meat and a few green ones for their
thirst-quenching water.

As I collected tiger beetles on the beach and aquatic beetles in the
swamp pools, other participants sunbathed or beachedcombed for
sand dollars. The walnut-sized inflated purple balloons I found on the
beach turned out to be small specimens of Portuguese Man-of-War,
whose tentacles contain a neurotoxin that can paralyze bathers in
the surf.

The water levels in Nariva Swamp were low and so were the
numbers of birds present. The wind was also a problem, lowering
the range of hearing so that Jogie and I, both 90% "ear" birders, had
to depend solely upon our eyes. Stilted shacks overlooked the
hayacinth/sawgrass prairie, where a few pairs of Black-bellied Whistling
Ducks and Purple Gallinules paddled about in the wetter areas.

I found it interesting to observe the swamp-inhabiting people
and try to discern their sources of livelihood, which turned out to be
the trapping of terrestrial crabs. The day was hot, and in the lowlands
the heat builds as the day goes on, so soon we were all trying to
stay out of the direct sunlight. A land crab was an exciting find
along one of the swamp trails. Another highlight was a gorgeous
adult Plumbeous Kite, light gray with chestnut wingtips and ruby
red eyes, which we spotted as it perched in full view high atop a
dead tree on the roadside. As a Crested Oropendola flew onto the
branch below the Plumbeous Kite, I photographed them both with
the full moon in the background.

As we left the Nariva area for the Centre, some thirty miles dis
tant, the universal joint in our van broke, making a horrendous grind
sound and forcing Jogie shortly thereafter to ask us to push the van
off the road while he steered. We discovered that if we pushed it back
into place while the clutch was slowly released, the pressure would
hold it in place. This procedure worked long enough for us to drive
seven miles to the nearest town, Manzanilla, where Jogie and I dis
cussed various options and decided to let the oldest members of the
group ride back to the Centre with him and Singh, where Jogie would
enlist the aid of a friend and return for us.

For most of us who stayed, this was precisely the kind of expe
rience for which we had been wishing—an unchaperoned evening out
with the local people in a decidedly non-touristy spot. For us, the
"Chrysalt Restaurant and Dispensary of Spirituous Liquors" became
home for about three hours, and here we made the acquaintance
of several town residents. We were told that we were actually in the
town of Manzanilla No. 3, the first
two Manznilias being somewhat to the west. Out came bottles of rum, to be mixed with whatever was handy — other than green coconut milk, which had been tried and abandoned in disgust earlier in the day.

One patron, a young man from Grenada, was articulate about his great hope that the United States would someday rule his country. We discussed politics and personal freedom with the patrons and the proprietor, a young man with a business degree from NYU who had returned to make his fortune back home in Trinidad. While waiting Rogie's return, we downed quite a number of pints of stout, the potency of which was soon apparent from our increasingly informal demeanor and vacuous, benevolent smiles. As the sun dropped lower toward the horizon, music rose from a nearby house, and young men gathered to practise dance steps in the narrow roadway.

When Rogie finally returned with a pickup truck and a strong rope with which he intended to tow the van back to the Centre, those of us lucky enough to have been stranded came away feeling as though we knew more about Trinidad than we ever would have known otherwise. We enduring the two-hour ride in the back of the pickup truck by frequently passing a bottle of rum around and watching as the driver of the towed van tried to keep from crashing into us without applying the brakes hard enough to snap the rope.

Of all my evenings in Trinidad, this was my favourite. Talli rally was postponed; we later added the day's nine new birds to the list and came up with a total of 166.

**Aripo Savanna and Heights of Aripo**

The Aripo Savanna lies like a delta at the mouth of the Aripo Valley and was probably laid down as ancient sediment washed from the valley floor. Here the government of Trinidad has established an Agricultural Experiment Station in the foothills of the Northern Range. The area is similar to that found in our northern states, with grassy hills and rushing brooks.

Since we had yet to sight the Trinidad Euphoria, on this morning Rogie made a stop at Simla, where he showed us a nesting pair of pugnacious, kestrel-sized Bat Falcons, and while there we saw our first White-shouldered Tanagers and an apparently breeding pair of Double-toothed Kites in a tree near our van. The Trinidad Euphoria was located as well.

On the drive out of Simla, we had the enormous good fortune to encounter none other than Richard Frenich. For me, one of the high points of the entire trip was meeting this famous birder and author and having him autograph my copy of his field guide to the birds of Trinidad and Tobago.

Another stop Rogie had promised me in particular, was at an Indian fastfood restaurant along the road through Arima. It was here, Rogie vowed, that one could obtain the very best "hot roti,"

![Orange-winged Parrot](image)

![Blue-headed parrot](image)

which is an Indian version of the burrito. Wrapped in a steaming hot, soft, thin dough, are the contents, which consists of spicy beef, shrimp or chicken, potatoes, and gravy. I order mine hot (spicy), and Mary Lou ordered hers "slight hot," as the manager put it. With a hot roti before me, any day is great.

Within minutes after arriving at the Agricultural Experiment Station we were photographing Pied Marsh-tyrants, Giant Cowbirds, Red-breasted Blackbirds, Southern Lapwings, Ruddy-breasted Seedeaters, and a flock of approximately 100 Wattled Jacanas. Savannah Hawks are common here, and flocks of Barn Swallows flitted low over the grassy hillsides. We spent several hours in the area, combing the fields with our binoculars, and one wet strip of meadow yielded several Least Sandpipers.

A trip into the lowland woods produced two species of Trogons among the many species seen, and we had a picnic lunch in the shade of a pristine savanna forest. Later, as we swung up the narrow road leading to the heights, we stopped to survey a grassy field and located a large White-collared Swift, a species we saw again briefly on the trip back from the heights.

Rogie made a number of stops at which he was able to call up Trogons, Tanagers, and many other species. Near the head of the valley we parked the van and walked into a private estate where the flowering bushes attracted many Hummingbirds and other nectar-loving species. We birded for a while at a small concrete bridge over a deep, fast-flowing stream, then closer to the summit of Sierra del Aripo. Here Rogie had previously located a pair of Tropical Screech Owls, and we watched them for a time as they slept deep in the dim centre of a hundred-foot-tall clump of bamboo.

Later in the afternoon the sunlight was superb for photography, illuminating everything with a rich yellow cast. Blue-headed and Orange-winged Parrots provided us with outstanding views. Another White-collared Swift was located in a large mixed flock high over the valley wall, and a male Bearded Bellbird put on a show for us while exposed on a bare tree, a really sumptuous view for the group. Common Black Hawks soared over the ridges and Black Vultures dotted the sky.

The afternoon light seemed to make even the common species very special, and since we knew that this was our last hour of birding in Trinidad it was difficult to tear ourselves away from the area to return to tea at the Centre, where we added a Red-rumped Woodpecker to our list, viewed from the verandah.

At tally rally that night we added seven new species to our list for a very respectable Trinidad total of 173 species. A pair of Semi-collared Nighthawks squabbling in the twilight sky outside the verandah brought the total for our stay on Trinidad to 174.

*To be continued*