

Indispensable field guide to avifauna of Trinidad and Tobago

A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago

By Richard ffrench. Plates and drawings by John P. O'Neill. Portraits by Don R. Eckelberry. Second edition, 1991. 426 pp. Hardcover, \$72.50; softcover, \$34.50.

By **William L. Murphy**

This unique and indispensable work completely updates the first edition which was published in 1976 and last revised in the early 1980s. Although that edition is still usable, I would recommend that visitors to these islands purchase the new edition because of its many improvements.

Illustrations are the heart of a field guide. The original paintings were very good, but I feel that an opportunity to eliminate confusion due to crowding has been lost here. All of the color plates have been reprinted intact at the same size as in the first edition, even though the new edition features a larger page size. A better use of the larger page size would have been to reposition male-female pairs and to provide more space among species, especially on the plates of the hummingbirds, manakins, and tanagers. Many plates now depict rather small images of birds tightly clumped on pages with wide, unused margins.

John O'Neill painted one new color plate for this edition, illustrating such gorgeous but unrelated species as Channel-billed Toucan and Scarlet Ibis. The exceptional whiteness of the paper on which the plates are printed adds to the brilliance of the colors.

All of the portraits from the first edition have been consolidated at the center of the book following the plates, which makes finding them much easier than before. The portraits would have been even more accessible had they been inserted in phylogenetic order among the plates rather than being lumped after them. The present arrangement, however, still is better than that in the first edition. As in the first edition, 24 species are illustrated as line drawings. A dozen of these drawings have been recast in far better detail than in the first edition.

As expected in a new edition, the information presented here has been

updated and expanded. The original introduction was so thorough that little could be added except for a few timely updates, such as the recovery of certain species in Tobago. Several tables have been revised to reflect new information on the occurrence of migratory species in Trinidad and Tobago.

The heart of the book consists of detailed accounts of more than 400 species of birds. Suffice it to say that ffrench has done another masterful job of pulling together the old and the new and has added descriptions of several species new to Trinidad and Tobago. Birders familiar with the first edition will appreciate the large amount of new information that ffrench has added to the existing descriptions, drawing upon first-hand reports from competent birders as well as the literature base. When one considers the length of time required to produce a book of this nature, it is amazing to find that it includes records as current as February 1991, only six months before publication.

Among the other improvements, ffrench has incorporated the latest A.O.U. names, substituting Whistling Duck for Tree Duck, Common Piping-Guan for Trinidad Piping-Guan, Olivaceous Cormorant for Neotropic Cormorant, etc. Such consistency should ease the synonym problem for users comparing species descriptions among field guides. The titles of some of the plates have been changed more accurately to reflect their content, for example, "Large Raptors" instead of "Hawks and Vultures," "Medium-sized and Small Raptors" instead of "Kites and Falcons," and "Hermits and Larger Hummingbirds" and "Smaller Hummingbirds" instead of just "Hummingbirds."

Welcome evidence of editorial generosity pervades the text. The editor has been especially generous with eye-relieving white space such as blank lines between table of contents items and between topics

in the species accounts. Such breaks are especially helpful in allowing the eye to locate section headings quickly. In the same vein, almost all of the figures, maps, and photographs have been printed larger than in the first edition. Moreover, the resolution of the photographs has been enhanced. Finally, the type is set more tightly than in the first edition, which makes for easier reading.

Besides being technically accurate, the author has performed a valuable service by pointing out, in the species accounts, species that have been decimated by human disturbance and hunting. He calls for additional protection for species that, as everywhere, are being threatened by unrestricted clearing of land and unenforced restrictions or bans on hunting.

All books described as "field guides" should be portable. This edition meets the criterion, being midway in size between the National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to Birds of North America* and Stiles' and Skutch's *A Guide to the Birds of Costa Rica*. It fits comfortably into a belt-strap book pouch. Those who balk at the weight of the hardcover version will welcome the availability of a rugged softcover version.

William L. Murphy is the author of *A Birder's Guide to Trinidad and Tobago* and led a 1991 ANS foray there.