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Tobago hummingbirds: Status of the White-tailed Sabrewing (*Campylopterus ensipennis*) and first record of Brown Violet-Ear (*Colibri delphinae*)

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The White-tailed Sabrewing (*Campylopterus ensipennis*) is found only on the island of Tobago and in the Venezuelan mountains west of Trinidad (Sucre, northeastern Anzoátegui, and Monagas) (de Schauensee and Phelps 1978). On Tobago, it is now an extremely rare resident, but historically the species was more numerous. For example, on 24 June 1934, Belcher saw about 6 "Blue-throated Sabrewings" (an old name for the White-tailed Sabrewing) at various points of the forest track on the main ridge between Parlatuvier and Roxburgh [now Roxborough] (Belcher and Smooker 1936). The species became very rare in Tobago after Hurricane Flora in September 1963 (ffrench 1980, Murphy 1987). Regarding the widespread devastation of the rainforest by the hurricane, ffrench (1981) wondered whether the species had been able to withstand the effects of the desiccating blast of the wind, which would have removed for a time all the blossoms and other sources of nectar in the area. He noted that not until 1974 were sabrewings seen again, in very small numbers, at one locality on the Main Ridge.

Seven years later, ffrench (1988) noted, "After the 1963 hurricane it was feared that this beautiful hummingbird had been extirpated on Tobago, and certainly no records came in for more than a decade. But in the last 14 years small groups have been increasingly located in isolated pockets on the Main Ridge [ffrench 1981], where however the species remains extremely rare."

Junge and Mees (1958) declared that White-tailed Sabrewings on Tobago bred in February. Thus, in February 1988, Benton Basham, Olga Clarke, Adolphus James, and I searched for the species in the area mentioned by Belcher and Smooker (1936). The "forest track on the main ridge between Parlatuvier and Roxburgh" has been widened and paved and is now called the Roxborough-Bloody Bay Road. No suitable habitat for the hummingbird remains anywhere near the road. Nevertheless, access to the proper habitat can be gained via a muddy trail called Gilpin Trace (trace: an unpaved 4th-class road, such as a horse trail). This trail forks off the Roxborough-Bloody Bay Road almost at the crest of the Main Ridge and follows a fast flowing stream for several kilometers through a virgin montane rainforest. It traverses a deep, steep-sided ravine cut through a relatively high elevation section of the Main Ridge. Apparently the depth and narrowness of the ravine sheltered the closed-canopy rainforest from the full force of Hurricane Flora. Large mature trees remain, whereas other nearby and more exposed areas support only second-growth forest. We confined our search to the area through which Gilpin Trace runs.

On our visit we located two White-tailed Sabrewings at one spot along Gilpin Trace, which indicated that the habitat in the immediate area remains attractive to the species. We observed the first bird about 2 km from the Roxborough-side trailhead. The hummingbird approached us closely, hovered at eye level about 2 m from us, then landed nearby on a bamboo twig and studied us with apparent agitation. We noted all of its characteristic field marks, especially its iridescent blue throat and conspicuous white-edged tail, which it frequently fanned. It flew farther away to a low perch and preened until another sabrewing flew into the area. The first bird pursued the second bird, following a short distance behind while continuously fanning its white tail. It then perched while the other bird, in a series of brief vertical climbs, rose to a nest about 5 m above us in a bamboo overhanging the trail. The hummingbird briefly perched on the rim of the nest and manipulated the contents with its bill, then settled in and remained there until we left about 10 min later. The next afternoon, one of the White-tailed Sabrewings remained on the nest as we observed it for about 10 min.

Although White-tailed Sabrewings on the island must have reproduced since 1963, this is the first confirmed nesting of the species there in at least 30 years (ffrench 1980). We later learned from David Rooks, a Tobago naturalist, that the sabrewings had begun building the nest in late January. Only one complete nest had been recorded hitherto from Tobago (Junge and Mees 1958).

By examining the nest through a Questar telescope at 65x, we were able to determine that it was composed of bits of green moss with hair-sized rootlets and bamboo leaves woven into the rim and matrix. The nest was woven across a fork near the end of a bamboo twig, far enough out on the branch to make it inaccessible to most predators. The nest was oblong in shape and large in relation to the size of the hummingbird, with a diameter of ca. 8 cm and a depth of ca. 10 cm. Despite being constructed of green moss, the nest was conspicuous among the bamboo twigs because of its large size and its location near the end of a branch. We were able to locate it easily on subsequent visits.

Since 1988, Adolphus James and David Rooks have taken many nature groups along Gilpin Trace to view the White-tailed Sabrewings. The species often perches quietly for extended periods of time, prefers to feed and perch low, and is often silent. It thus is inconspicuous unless the nest is approached during the breeding season, at which time the adults become aggressive, flaring white-tipped tails and closely approaching the intruder.

Away from Gilpin Trace the species is still exceedingly rare, being recorded at long intervals from other locations, all in the heights of the Main Ridge, especially where the canopy is closed. My personal high count for the species is 6 seen in one day (early March 1990), and local guides report having seen as many as 10, all along the same 2-km stretch of Gilpin Trace. Although no attempt has been made to census the population elsewhere on Tobago, I would speculate that no more than 30 individuals remain.

On the same day that we found the White-tailed Sabrewing, we observed a flurry of bird activity in the crown of a fruiting *Ficus* tree. Several hummingbirds were among the avian crowd, mostly Copper-rumped Hummingbirds (*Amazilia tobaci*). Examination of the tree through the telescope yielded views of an adult Brown Violet-ear (*Colibri delphinae*) with a fledgling. We watched for several minutes as the adult hummingbird fed at nearby flowers and attended the young violet-ear. The fledgling retained protruding tufts of down, especially on the head and neck. Efforts by other observers to relocate the birds on subsequent days were unsuccessful, and I know of no further sightings of this species from Tobago.

This discovery marks the first sighting, as well as the first probable nesting, of the Brown Violet-ear on Tobago. Elsewhere the species ranges from Guatemala to western Ecuador, northern and eastern Bolivia, northeastern and eastern Brazil, the Guianas, and Trinidad (rarely) in tropical and subtropical zones (de Schauensee and Phelps 1978, Stiles and Skutch 1989).

Any additional information on sightings of either of these hummingbird species on Tobago would be appreciated. Especially welcome would be a photograph of a White-tailed Sabrewing, of which none seems to exist.

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