

Trinidad—A Birder's Paradise

by William L. Murphy



No other island in the West Indies can match its fabulous diversity. Located at the southern tip of the great arc of West Indies islands, Trinidad boasts over 450 species of birds (of which 250 species breed there), breathtaking scenery, a perfect climate, inexpensive lodging, savory food and drink that can be enjoyed without concern for intestinal distress, reliable transportation, a stable government, and English as the national language. Birds figure prominently in many aspects of Trinidadian culture. The island's native name, *Iere*, means "land of the hummingbird," and its dollar bill depicts three species of birds. The landscape, as varied as the fauna, includes 108 species of mammals, 55 species of reptiles, 25 species of amphibians, and 617 species of butterflies. Trinidad is a birder's paradise.

Looking for fresh challenges, with a profusion of new birds to identify and few look-alikes, many birders select Trinidad as their first foreign destination. They want the maximum birding adventure at the lowest cost. They seek comfort, safety, and English-speaking companions and guides. They want to see new species, ranging from weird Oilbirds and Potoos to spectacular Scarlet Ibises, parrots, macaws, trogons, and toucans. Trinidad best fits these specialized needs.

The size of West Virginia, Trinidad has lofty, moist emerald mountains in the north, drier forested mountains in the center, and rolling hills in the south, with mostly flat terrain elsewhere. The human population is concentrated in the northwest, around the capital city of Port-of-Spain and in an urban belt that extends east for about 20 miles. Most of the northern mountains are covered with lush rain forests and verdant coffee, cocoa, and citrus plantations; two peaks top 3000 feet. The northeast is essentially uninhabited, with pristine jungle and cool, rushing streams. Bisecting Trinidad is the picturesque Central Range, covered with large tracts of lowland forest and occasional small farms. The south is dominated by swamps, rolling hills, and private oil fields. Far to the southeast are the Trinity Hills, from which Columbus conceived the island's Spanish name. Encircling Trinidad are dazzling beaches, dark mangrove swamps, and millions of coconut palms.

Habitat diversity underpins Trinidad's wealth of bird species. In a single day you can visit elfin forests, mountain and lowland rain forests, grasslands, freshwater and saltwater swamps and marshes, freshwater reservoirs, beaches, and the ocean itself, as well as extensive plantations of teak, sugar cane, and rice. A profusion of feeding and nesting sites

accommodates even species that fill highly specialized ecological niches. Palms, laurels, and other seed-bearing plants furnish abundant, perennially available forage for resident species and migrants.

How many species can you see in Trinidad? Some birders list 40 to 60 species in a morning while relaxing on their veranda. Most North American birders (on a first neotropical tour) add 120+ lifers during a typical Saturday-to-Saturday trip. Accomplished birders can anticipate listing 155 to 190 species any month of the year, and avid birders will top 200. Augmenting the resident species are North American migrants from October to March and South American migrants from May to September. Organized birding tours visit Trinidad year round.

What bird books should you carry? Many species known from Trinidad are admirably described and depicted in Richard French's *A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*. My own *Birder's Guide to Trinidad and Tobago* supplements French's by providing bar graphs of seasonal distribution, details on good birding sites, and tips on finding and identifying tough species. Together, these books provide a thorough knowledge base. For identifying vagrants, ardent birders also carry *The Birds of Britain and Europe* by Heinzel, Fitter, and Parslow, the National Geographic Society's *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*, and *A Field Guide to the Birds of Venezuela* by de Schauensee and Phelps.

What about a rainy season? In previous decades, rain fell almost daily from May through August and from October through December; September was a dry month. Since the early 1980s, however, rainfall has diminished, and,

coincident with global warming trends, the rainy season seems destined for legend. During sporadic wet periods, rain falls intermittently, mostly at night. Birding still can be terrific, as many species forage energetically between showers, becoming even more conspicuous than at other times.

If you know how to bird in North America, you know how to bird in Trinidad. Just remember that as a birder you intrude into areas the birds know well. The more you blend with your surroundings and the less you move and speak, the closer the birds will allow you to approach and the more birds you will see. Just as in North America, clothe yourself unobtrusively, preferably in greens or browns.

"Pishing" works poorly in Trinidad. Some birds respond, but far more flock to the call of the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl. Purse your lips and whistle "hoo" about twice a second; pitch matters less than tempo. The imitated whistle often will lure in the owl itself. Species that respond to this call include wrens, thrushes, peppershrikes, vireos, greenlets, honeycreepers, bananaquits, tanagers, and euphonias.

What kinds of birds will you see? Regardless of where you stay, you will doubtless view plenty of Bananaquits, Blue-gray and Palm Tanagers, Ruddy Ground-Doves, Carib Grackles, Cattle Egrets, Orange-winged Amazons, Blue-headed Parrots, Smooth-billed Anis, Great Kiskadees, Tropical Kingbirds, Bare-eyed Thrushes, Tropical Mockingbirds, Blue-black Grassquits, and Yellow Orioles. You may even spot a species never before recorded on Trinidad; this is happening more and more frequently. The opportunity for such a discovery helps to make Trinidad birding unique. Visit it and see for yourself why it is called a birder's paradise.

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