

Trinidad and Tobago: Incredible Birds & Wildlife

Apr. 4–13, 2024 | Trip Report | by Michael Good



With guides Mukesh, Randell and Elisabeth, and participants Steven, Michael, Lise, Bill, Kit, Hildy, Lisa, David, Janice, Charlotte, Peter and Amy.



TRINIDAD

Asa Wright Nature Center April 4-6

It rained all day and into the evening of April 3, the day before our Naturalist Journeys trip was set to start. Despite the downpour, Michael, David, Janice and I had the chance to bird together and get to know one another. The four of us acclimated to the rainforest, spending quite a bit of time on the veranda talking with Mukesh, Randell and Elisabeth, the Asa Wright guides, and getting our “ears on” as we listened to many species of birds we would see during our stay in Trinidad and Tobago.

This morning the Palm Tanagers were very active outside of our rooms. Bananaquits, Streaked Flycatchers, Barred Antshrikes, Spectacled Thrushes and six species of hummingbirds were busy at the veranda feeders with

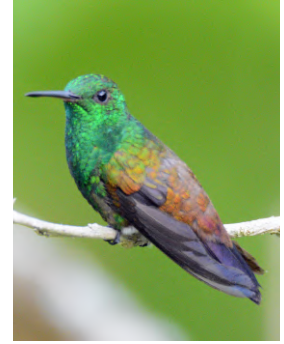


the backdrop of strange new songs and calls emanating from the forest. The Bearded Bellbird “Bock-ed” explosively and loudly in the distance, Cocoa and White-necked Thrushes were singing their dawn songs, the latter with faster song phrases, robin-like, whereas the Cocoa’s song is a bit slower, more melancholy. Occasionally, the descending call of Cocoa Woodcreeper could be heard in the distance. Through the scope, we could see a Channel-billed Toucan sitting in the morning sun.

In the evening, Mukesh led us on a short, night walk around the lodge just as the rest of our group arrived in time for dinner. We learned that Lisa wouldn’t be joining us until the following day, so we rearranged our itinerary a bit so she wouldn’t miss out too much.

We spent the next day exploring the grounds around the Asa Wright Center, learning about the many birds, plants, animals, reptiles and butterflies while familiarizing ourselves with the Trinidadian Rainforest. The veranda was our classroom initially, with the nectar feeders attracting all of the local hummingbird species plus many tanagers, the delightful Bananaquit and the occasional Barred Antshrike. After breakfast, we met David Ramal, our local birding guide for our time in Trinidad, who reviewed our itinerary and answered questions ahead of our first full day on the road. We spent the rest of the morning walking with Mukesh, our Asa Wright guide. After lunch, we hiked to the Dunstan Cave to see the Oilbirds, the only nocturnal, flying, fruit-eating birds in the world, that roost there. We learned about the how the people of Trinidad have protected the birds and this cave where they nest. Taking care not to disturb them, we took turns entering the cave where we were able to see and photograph them, noting their haunting screams, snarls and clucks. One bird briefly flew around the cave, giving Peter and Charlotte the opportunity to hear its in-flight echo-location clicks. We ended the day on a night walk with Elisabeth, finding a few snakes and many insects before a restful night in preparation for our road trip with David Ramal.

This day would be focused on the diversity of birds found in the Northern Range. Our drive along the Blanchisseuse Road through the mountains to Brasso Seco was memorable. We saw Green-backed, Collard and Guianan Trogons and learned many new things about the Trinidadian rainforest from David. A highlight was



seeing Red-crowned Ant Tanager, a difficult-to-find species that attends army ant swarms, feeding on the fleeing insects.

Brasso Seco, a small farming community in the valley with the motto: “Experience the Valley of Life,” was our destination for lunch. Afterwards, we learned about local chocolate production, from picking the ripe pods to the extraction of the purple cocoa beans and the seven-nine days of the fermentation process. Next, they cook the beans to loosen the seed covers before blowing them off with a hair dryer. The beans are ground to powder and then mixed with coffee or brown sugar. Of course there were plenty of samples to taste!

Birding at the Brasso Seco Visitor Center was delightful. We found our first Carib Grackle and Ruddy Ground-Dove, then finished up the afternoon with Rufous-tailed Jacamar. We all enjoyed the ride from Morne La Croix back to Asa Wright through the mountains of the Northern Range. These mountains span from the Chaguaramas Peninsula on the west coast to Toco in the east, making up about 25 percent of the land in Trinidad. Later in the trip we drove through Toco on our way to Grande Riviere. This was our last night at Asa Wright and its amazing hummingbird veranda!

Hacienda Jacana April 7-8

After our final breakfast and birding on the Asa Wright veranda, we departed for the Nariva Swamp, driving through “coconut alley” along the eastern beaches. This was our first “big day” on Trinidad! We met our driver Paul and David Ramal and started down the Blanchisseuse Road back toward Arima. We didn’t get far, in fact, we stopped and birded at the gate of Asa Wright. Here we found White-winged Becard along with Bay-headed and Turquoise Tanagers. Several stops were made along the Blanchisseuse Road where we found Great and Barred Antshrikes, Long-billed Gnatwren, Northern Tropical Pewee, White-flanked Antwren and a distant Common Black Hawk. We made a quick stop at David’s community, Temple Village, where five generations of the Ramal family have lived. Looking for raptors, we made a quick stop at the Aripo Livestock Research Station on our way to the Mexico Road where we picked up Black-crested Antshrike, a female with a beautiful brown crest. A small farm pond held Pied Water-Tyrant, Wattled Jacana and Striated Heron.

Today our destination was Nariva Swamp. On the way we found a Short-tailed Hawk (*Buteo brachyurus*) in a kettle with many Black Vultures. Not too far from this location, we saw our first Yellow-rumped Cacique and



heard a very close-by Ferruginous Owl. On the outskirts of Nariva Swamp, we picked up our only Snail Kite for the trip and found a Long-winged Harrier and a Yellow-headed Caracara that allowed for excellent in-flight photos.

The Nariva River proved to be one of our best stops of the morning with Sanderlings, Black-bellied Plovers and our best looks at a Southern Lapwing. A Little Cuckoo was eventually located in the Red Mangroves, and David pointed out a Silvered Antbird. One of my favorites, American Pygmy Kingfisher, was spotted by eagle-eyed Lise Hicks. A Common Black Hawk flew right over us, giving a few high-pitched “spinking” calls to warn us of its approach. Most everyone saw the broad black and white banding on its tail.

Our last stop before dinner was along the Kernaham Trail, a.k.a. the Melon Patch, where we watched Yellow-headed Caracara, Savanna and Gray-lined Hawks, Long-winged Harrier and a ton of Black Vultures. Blue-and-yellow Macaws were briefly seen flying over Nariva Swamp. Other birds on this road included Blue-black Grassquit, the theatrical Yellow-chinned Spinetail, close-ups of Pied Water-Tyrant and Yellow-bellied Elaenia with its wild hairdo.

Our dinner, catered by Gale Nana, was served on the Waller Airfield. What a wonderful experience dining under the open skies, then searching for nocturnal birds like White-tailed Nightjar, Common Pauraque and Tropical Screech-Owl. Our day ended at Hacienda Jacana where Michael, Peter, Charlotte and Amy were serenaded by a Common Pauraque at the House on the Hill. What an amazing day!

That Common Pauraque was our alarm clock, waking us at 4:45 a.m. Charlotte and Peter were already awake, listening and chronicling the birds at House on the Hill. Below us, near the pond, Janice, Lise and Steve were listening to the loud, cackling calls of Gray-necked Wood-Rails. Charlotte found a pair of Black-tailed Tityras, and we all saw a Red-bellied Macaw fly over in the morning light. Then we enjoyed a great breakfast on the veranda at Hacienda Jacana. Michael photographed a Sooty Grassquit and David pointed out a Gray-headed Kite. We had brief looks at Plumbeous Kite, Gray-lined Hawk, 250 Black Vultures and a lone Turkey Vulture, 41 species in all!



After breakfast, we departed for Caroni Swamp and our first Scarlett Ibis adventure. We traveled along the Caroni South Bank Road to the Southern Main Road where we stopped to see a beautiful Red-breasted Meadowlark foraging on insects in the littered field along with a Crested Caracara and a Southern Lapwing. At the end of the Southern Main Road, we encountered the Temple by the Sea, known as the Sewdass Sadhu Shiva Mandir in Waterloo, Carapichaima. The Temple is a testament to the love of Hinduism by Sewdass Sadhu, an indentured laborer from India who built the island, one bucket at a time, in the Gulf of Paria because he was forbidden to build it on the land. Surly this was a labor of love.

We found our first seabirds here including Laughing Gull, Black Skimmer, Large-billed Tern and Neotropic Cormorant. There were many shorebirds including Black-bellied Plover, Whimbrel, Semipalmated Plover and our only Willet of the trip. Our next stop was at the Hanuman Mandir Temple. We added Saffron Finch to our list and were mesmerized by the giant monkey god statue. This 85-foot statue of the Hindu God, Lord Hanuman, is in the village of Carapichaima and is the largest Hanuman murti outside of India.

Our next stop was the Yerette Hummingbird Retreat where we had the pleasure of listening to Theo Ferguson, Professor emeritus at the University of West Indies and one of David Ramal's professors. Professor Ferguson informed us that that of the 360 species of hummingbirds in the world, 19 can be found in Trinidad and just one, White-tailed Hummingbird, in Tobago. The Yerette Gardens has 15 species, making this a wonderful spot. We learned that hummingbirds have a resting heartrate of 500 beats per minute that increases to 1,200-1,500 beats per minute when they are active! Amazing! Hummingbirds burn about 150,000 calories per day, feeding primarily on nectar, but also insects, and consume twice their body weight each day!

We identified nine species of hummingbirds plus a Gray-headed Kite, then had a delicious lunch prepared by Theo's wife. After lunch we said our goodbyes and then were off to Caroni National Park where we would enjoy dinner in the Caroni Swamp with Scarlet Ibis. This remarkable event was voted as everyone's favorite of the trip. We boarded the broad boats and took our seats at a dinner table in the center. It was sunny and dry with very little wind, perfect conditions for birding the canals of the Caroni Swamp. We leisurely made our way through



the *Rhizophora* mangle of red mangroves and learned about the viviparous seeds, called propagules. These fully mature plants drop into the water and disperse, eventually embedding in shallow mud where they take root. Lester Nana explained that there are 40-square miles of red mangrove habitat that also serves as an excellent means of capturing and storing carbon.

We saw tree-climbing crabs, numerous in the Caroni, along with 185 species of birds, 100 mammals including 70 species of bats, 70 species of snakes and over 700 species of butterflies. We were fortunate to see Brazilian long-nosed bats on a tree along the canal.

Lester's grandfather was the first game warden in the swamp, protecting Scarlett Ibises from the millinery trade. He was beaten by poachers and later died from his injuries. Lester's father carried on his father's work, and now Lester is the third generation continuing the legacy. On April 22, 2015, the anniversary of Lester's grandfathers' death, 200 American Flamingos arrived on the island and have been present ever since.

It's estimated that the Caroni Swamp is home to 20,000 to 30,000 Scarlet Ibises, with 5,000 to 7,000 in this roost alone. As we dined aboard our boats, we observed 2,200 roosting in the mangroves, an event we won't soon forget!

Mt. Plaisir Estate Hotel, April 9

Today we will visit Grande Riviere to witness Leatherback Turtles laying eggs on the beach. We had a leisurely morning that we spent birding around the Hacienda Jacana property. We started with the nest of a Rufous-tailed Jacamar that was shown to us by the staff. As we wandered up the western hill, we found two Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls that allowed us to take photographs while a Tropical Mockingbird harassed them.

We departed at 9:30, stopping for lunch at Manor Del Suzanne where we saw Swallow-tailed Kites along the Valencia Road. We found a Bat Falcon on the Paria Maine Road before arriving at the Mt. Plaisir Estate Hotel. Since our hotel rooms were not quite ready, we ventured up the hill to the Monte Video where we found Trinidad Piping-Guans, one of our target species at this location!



The endemic Trinidad Piping-Guan is a turkey-sized member of the Cracidae family, that inhabits the dense forests and thick shrubs of this rainforest. These birds feed on seeds and fruits found in trees and on the ground. We were very fortunate to find two birds in an enormous kapok tree at the entrance to the Matura National Park. The 9,000-hectare park protects an important watershed that supplies fresh water for the people of Trinidad. Other sightings here included Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, White-bellied Antbird and Little Tinamou that, as is often the case, we heard but never got eyes on. We had to pull ourselves away for dinner and our night walk to look for leatherback turtles.

The evening walk surpassed everyone's expectations. We came upon a lumbering, 700-pound female and watched her lay eggs in the sand. In a hypnotic state, she methodically covered and packed the sand into place, as leatherbacks have done for millions of years. They are the only remaining member of a family of turtles that traces its roots back 100 million years. Amazing!

I woke early the next morning to watch as some of the last turtles returned to the sea at sunrise. Later that morning, one turtle remained on the beach on the other side of a deep channel. Lisa made the wet crossing and had the opportunity to witness this evolutionary wonder. Walking back to my room, a man handed me a hatchling he had saved from the freshwater lagoon. I found Peter, Charlotte, Amy and Janice and together we placed the hatchling near the water and watched as its tiny flippers conveyed it into the ocean. We can only hope that it beats the odds, roughly 1,000 to 1, and returns to this beach in 25-50 years. Live long and prosper little hatchling!

After breakfast at Mt. Plaisir Estate, we drove back to the Piarco International Airport. With a little time to spend birding, we went around the Trincity Millennium Park picking up White-headed Marsh Tyrant, Semipalmated and Stilt Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs and our first Black-necked Stilt. We also had great looks at several Fork-tailed Swifts flitting about. It was time for our flight to Tobago, so we said goodbye to Paul, our excellent driver, and to David Ramal. We ended our Trinidad birding with 162 species, amazing memories and an enduring desire to return in the future.



TOBAGO

Cuffie River Nature Retreat April 11-12

The first bird we saw on Tobago Island was a Brown Pelican as we came in over the water. No birding trip is complete without a stop at a Sewage Treatment Plant! And so began our Tobago birding adventure, with Jason Radix, our Tobago guide and host for the next three days. We loaded our gear onto the bus and took off for the Bon Accord Sewage Treatment Ponds, located just minutes from the airport.

We were immediately into the birds. Rufous-vented Chachalacas were sitting in some dead trees on the west end of the treatment ponds. Walking along the road to the ponds, we got some of our best looks at Ochre-lored Flatbill and Scrub Greenlet. Red-crowned Woodpeckers perched in an apple tree for all to see. A Shiny Cowbird was foraging with a small flock of Carib Grackles, and we had our first sighting of Eared Doves, very similar to Mourning Doves. Shorebirds included a few Whimbrels, Spotted Sandpiper and both Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs. Our first ducks of the trip included Black-bellied Whistling-Duck, Blue-winged Teal and White-cheeked Pintail. Our next stop was the Center Street Ponds, just a few minutes away, where we added Ring-necked Duck, an uncommon species in Tobago. There were many White-cheeked Pintails and Least Grebes along with 20+ Black-crowned Night-Herons. After another long day, we found ourselves in the comfort of the Cuffie River Nature Retreat where two White-tailed Nightjars were sitting on the road as we turned into the driveway.

The next morning started with an absolute CACOPHONY of raspy, bellowing “chachalaca, chachalaca, CHACHALACA, CHACHALACA! I counted at least 125 Rufous-vented Chachalacas, their mourning calls reverberating throughout the forest alongside the Cuffie Retreat. It was quite comical and abruptly woke everyone! This was followed by a morning chorus led by Streaked Flycatchers, Tropical and Gray Kingbirds and our friendly Tropical Mockingbirds. What a memorable way to wake up!

We enjoyed fresh coffee on the veranda overlooking the nectar feeders as we waited for breakfast to be served. We had good looks at the Trinidad, a.k.a. Tobago, Motmot along with Copper-rumped Hummingbird and Rufous-



breasted Hermit. We compared Streaked and Piratic Flycatchers, hearing and seeing both near the Retreat. Overall, it was a great start to our first morning on Tobago.

Desmond Wright led some of the group on a two-hour tour of the Cuffie River Road. It was hot and dry, but we added Blue-backed Manakin, Northern White-fringed Antwren, Chivi Vireo, Pale-vented Pigeon and White-tipped Dove. We saw a few Trinidad Motmot nests and found out just how much sap runs from a rubber tree. Jason met us after lunch at Cuffie and took us to the Adventure Farm on the Arnos Vale Road in Plymouth. With the ring of a bell, we were treated to a menagerie of birds coming to the nectar and fruit feeders. This was our closest encounter with Trinidad Motmot, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Shiny Cowbird, Blue-gray and Palm Tanagers and a quartet of hummingbirds: Ruby-topaz, Copper-rumped, Black-throated Mango and Rufous-breasted Hermit. Our walk gave us good looks at Northern White-fringed Antbird, Scrub Greenlet and some excellent moments with Trinidad Motmot.

To finish out the afternoon, we ventured off to the western coast where we visited Fort James on Shelbourne Street in Plymouth. We had great comparisons of Sandwich and “Cayenne” Terns, the latter subspecies distinguished by its bright yellow bill, as we saw clearly in the scope. We tallied 85 Black Skimmers, 385 Laughing Gulls and many Royal Terns on the long pier.

The Courland Monument documents the history of the point of land in Tobago, site of the oldest fort and town in Tobago. The Dutch town of Nieuw Vlissingen and Nieuw Walcheren (1628-1630) were twice destroyed by the Spanish and Caribs. It was restored to the Couronians by the English and remained a point of attraction to the French, Dutch, British and Caribs, invaders for the next 160 years.

This location has a long history of occupation by the Spanish, Dutch, French, Carib and English as documented at the Courland Monument not far from Fort James. Under the benevolent rule (with interruptions, from 1390-1693) of the dukes of Courland in Latvia, the Germans, Latvians, Scandinavians, Dutch, British, French, Caribs, and Gambians from Africa, formed an international settlement of Free Men at the great Courland Bay engaged in trade with North America, Brazil, Europe and Africa. Other Couronian settlements were located at Black Roack



(Fort Bennet), Mount Irvine (Little Courland Bay, Fort Monick, Fort Schmoll and Fort Casimir), King Peter Bay (Kalpi Bay) and Castara Bay (Corese Bay, Kursu Lics).

We drove back to Cuffie in time for dinner and prepared for another early wakeup call!

As we'd imagined, the next morning started again with Gray Kingbirds and Tropical Mockingbirds giving us their perspectives at 5:45 am. Peter, Charlotte and I birded a little way up the Cuffie Road and then behind the Annex. After breakfast we headed out with Jason to Tobago's Main Ridge Preserve, making a couple of stops to look out over the northern coastline and bays. Upon reaching the Main Ridge Preserve, we got out of the bus and immediately found our main target: White-tailed Sabrewing. The sabrewing is found only on Tobago and two highly localized populations in Venezuela. During Hurricane Flora in 1963, it was thought that this species had been extirpated. However, the population has begun to slowly recover since the 2000s and today it is reliably found around the Main Ridge Forest Reserve.

On the Gilpin Trace, we found White-tailed Sabrewing, a Rufous-breasted Hermit on a nest and Steve's nemesis bird, Red-legged Honeycreeper. We had good looks and photos of Cocoa Woodcreeper and excellent moments with Venezuelan Flycatcher, another member of the Myiarchus genus.

Our wanderings brought us to the Tobago House of Assembly and the Forestry Section of the Main Ridge Reserve, the site of the Bloody Bay Recreation. The staff and members of the community were celebrating the 248th year of the Main Ridge Reserve. Jason showed us the topographic map and talked about the Tobago landscape. Then it was time to go to the Gilpin Trace and bird the Forestry Section of the Reserve.

Departure from Tobago to Trinidad and Home April 13

We enjoyed one last morning breakfast at Cuffie River Nature Retreat, expertly prepared by Regina and her staff and surrounded by Trinidad Motmots, Palm Tanagers, Steaked and Piratic Flycatchers, Ruby-topaz and Copper-rumped Hummingbirds and the ever present White-necked Jacobin. Peter, Amy, Charlotte, Lise and Steven were the first to reluctantly venture off to Trinidad to catch the 3:18 p.m. flight to Miami. That left Michael, Bill and Kit to follow them for a 11:30 flight, and Lisa and Hildy to catch a 5:00 trip and relax all day long before flying back home. Janice and David, our British contingent, made a solid decision and stayed on at Cuffie for a few more days

to relax and take in one more birding experience with Z, our Little Tobago guide. I heard later from Janice that this was an excellent experience, and they were happy with their days in Cuffie River Retreat paradise and the land of Rufous-tailed Chachalaca. It was an amazing and memorable birding experience on Trinidad and Tobago!

Photos by Michael Good: Group (Michael Good - MG), Channel-billed Toucan (MG), Baby Leatherback Turtle (MG), Green Honeycreeper (MG), Boa Casabel (MG), Monarch Butterfly, Bearded Bellbird, Group Birding, Copper-rumped Hummingbird, Golden-headed Manakin, Oilbird, Long-billed Starthroat, Green-backed Trogon, Guianan Trogon, Lineated Woodpecker, Bay-headed Tanager, Yellow-headed Caracara, Collared Trogon, Pied Water-Tyrant, Relaxing, Bicolored Conebill, American Pygmy Kingfisher, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Red-bellied Macaw, Red-breasted Meadowlark, Gray-headed Kite, Leatherback Turtles, Blue-gray Tanager, Red Masked Cardinal, Tropical Screech-Owl, American Flamingo, Scarlet Ibis, Southern Lapwing, Feruginous Pygmy-Owl, Swallow-tailed Kite, Trinidad Piping Guan, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, White-tailed Saberwing, Red-billed Tropicbird, Trinidad Motmot

Photos by Janice Fiske: Tufted Coquette, Bananaquit, Roseate Skimmer, Ochre-ored Flatbill, Immature White-necked Jacobin, Barred Antshrike