



## Trinidad and Tobago Trip Report ~ March 11-21, 2002

by Adrian Binns

### Day 1/March 11 – Port of Spain Airport to Asa Wright Nature Center. Afternoon at Asa Wright – verandah.

Shortly after making our way out of the airport, we saw 4 Southern Lapwings resting in the shade of a large tree. I was assured there would be plenty more and that we didn't need to stop along the busy highway but the excitement became too much as I noticed a small raptor on the wires on the opposite side of the highway ahead. My first thought was a kestrel, but its tail was so short. Suddenly it dropped and shot across the road, as our driver exclaimed "Pearl Kite". We pulled over and all got out of the 2 vans to look for this diminutive size raptor. Kiskadees, Ruddy Ground-Doves, Black Vultures seemed to be everywhere, but alas the Pearl Kite was long gone. No doubt partly due to 2 Peregrines that put on a wonderful show for us as they patrolled this large expanse of area with ease. What a start!

As we climbed the southern slope of the Northern Range on our way to Asa Wright Nature Center we stopped once again, this time for a Short-tailed Hawk, one of only 3 we would see all trip, all light morphs. Carib Grackles, Tropical Mockingbirds and the ubiquitous Blue-Gray Tanagers flittered about in the neighborhood gardens. As we continued towards Asa a White-shouldered Tanager and Yellow-rumped Cacique crossed the road and 2 Chestnut-collared Swifts were seen in the valley, as was the first of many Crested Oropendolas.

Asa Wright is tucked away on 200 acres amidst a lush rain forest in northern Trinidad. This could easily be described as Paradise, and this might even be before one set eyes on the feeders at the base of the verandah. We were shown to our rooms, spread out close to the main house, and rendezvoused on the verandah. Several of us were side tracked as a male Tufted Coquette was nectaring on *verbena*, and then proceeded to alight atop a stem. This surely has to be one of the most stunning of hummingbirds, with his chestnut crest and beige side tufts with black spots protruding from the cheek.

The activity that occurs in front of this verandah is simply superb. Shiny Cowbirds, Silver-beaked Tanagers, White-lined Tanagers, White-bellied Emeralds, White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-breasted Hermit, Grayish Saltator, Cocoa Thrush, Bare-eyed Thrush, Gray-fronted Dove, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, female White-headed Manakin, Forest Eleania, Green and Purple Honeycreepers, Palm and Blue-gray Tanagers and of course Crested Oropendolas, Yellow Orioles and Orange-winged Parrots flying back and forth. How many lifers? For those coming to the tropics for the first time, probably every single one of them. The activity was mind boggling, if someone happened to walk by the feeders the birds would fly into the shrubbery and come back to the fruit and bread offerings immediately. There was further excitement as a Golden-olive Woodpecker flew over the feeders only to disappear into the trees. A Tegu, a large 2 foot striped 'Tiger' lizard, and a Red-rumped Agouti, a large rodent, were quite happy feeding on the scraps that fell from the feeder tables as were Ruddy Ground-Doves. The 'bonk' sound of a Bearded Bellbird could be heard in the distance. But the most amazing species to be seen venturing to this smorgasbord was the Blue-crowned Motmot. Having worked so hard in Mexico to see this species in the dense undergrowth, here it was in its full glory out in the open for all to see. It's hard to imagine a more colorful or bustling feeding station anywhere else in the world, and we were going to be here for another 4 days!

Tea was served at 4pm (very civilized), and then we reluctantly pulled ourselves away from this spot to take a short stroll down the beginning of the Discovery Trail. Behind the feeders we found Southern House Wren and a male Black-throated Mango working the flowers, while in the herb garden 2 very confiding Plain-brown Woodcreepers paused several feet above the ground on the trunk of a tree as a Great Antshrike was happy to pick off a trail of ants that crawled up the tree. A bumblebee sized Little Hermit zipped along the trail, and our only Lesser Swallow-tailed Swift was seen over the valley. A Rufous-browed Peppershrike was heard

calling and then we tracked it down in the canopy. It was back to the verandah for rum punch at 6pm as darkness fell on an outstanding first day of birding. 65 species in 4 hours, between the airport and the verandah at the Nature Center isn't a bad way to start a trip.

After dinner Kevin and I went on a short walk along the driveway stopping at the lampposts in search of Short-tailed Nighthawk. There were a few moths about, and a couple of bats and it was not long before we were rewarded with several brief glimpses as this nighthawk with almost no tail turned the corner and flew past us.

## **Day 2/March 12 – Asa Wright – verandah, Discovery Trail and Manakin Trail.**

Despite the fact that we probably all needed far more sleep than we got, especially after being shortchanged several hours the previous night in New York, everyone seemed to be up at 6am and eagerly awaiting dawn on the verandah. Or was it the tea and coffee that they were here for? What a way to start a morning!

We were greeted by a Rufous-breasted Wren singing continuously, as was a Motmot and the usual cast of characters, (we're getting complacent now) were to be found at the feeder. Did they ever leave? First light finds small numbers of noisy Orange-winged Parrots making various stops along the canopy and we watched the distant treetops for what was a daily ritual, the brief appearance of a Channel-billed Toucan. His bright chest evident even at a great distance and through the scope brilliant looks at the blue around his eye patch and on the base of the bill. New for the trip was a Tropical Pewee that flew sorties from a bare branch some 50 yards out from the verandah.

After breakfast we walked down the Discovery Trail to the Bearded Bellbird 'lek'. Though their calls were all around us the birds blended in very well and after much searching we were able to get great looks at 3 or 4 spectacular male white birds with brown heads, dark wings and of course with maybe a hundred string like wattles hanging from their throats, that would shake every time they called. In the distance a Tropical Parula was calling and if this wasn't enough, the scope that had been set up on an Ornate Hawk-Eagle's nest suddenly yielded some movement as an adult that was out of view stood up in full view for all to see. What a majestic bird with its erect crest, rufous facial coloration and barring from the belly down. She moved off the nest and out onto the branch for all to see before returning to incubate her eggs. We continued down the Manakin Trail where we found 3 White-bearded Manakins on their communal display ground. The size of the lek seemed to be only about 50 square feet and each would produce a loud 'pop' with a wing-snap as they flew from a low perch a foot or two off the ground, to the ground and back again, all in the hope of attracting a female. It was obviously more impressive to us than it was to any female, as we didn't see any! Barbara and I stayed behind to try and locate a signing White-necked Thrush which eventually showed itself and as we followed it we came across a male Plain Antvireo. We rounded out the morning with White-flanked Antwren, the rather plain Golden-crowned Greenlet, Violaceous Trogon, both male and female Tufted Coquette, Rufous-breasted Wren and Kevin managed to tape in a Long-billed Gnatwren. Butterflies seen along the trail included a Doris, Red Anartia and the Coolie. A Common Ground Lizard was also seen in the herb garden.

After lunch we spent the afternoon along the Manakin and Bellbird Trail and returned via the 2<sup>nd</sup> Trail. Looks at two gorgeous tanagers, the Bay-headed and the Turquoise began the successful walk. No sooner were we in the forest than a male Collared Trogon, with its bright red belly was spotted – it moved about, but everyone got on it. A Buff-throated Woodcreeper was cooperative and soon we were all familiar with its loud series of single notes that rise before fading away at the end. Those in the front of the group kicked up a Ruddy Quail-Dove, which some got to see before it vanished into the forest. Not as lucky for the group was the Black-faced Antthrush that Kevin almost stepped on. We came upon a small ant swarm, which was providing a meal for 2 Plain-brown Woodcreepers and a Blue-crowned Motmot. Across the path a Plain Antvireo and several female Golden-crowned Manakins were fluttering about, while Scaled Pigeons were cooing high in the canopy. As we exited the forest we came across a Tropical Pewee, Smooth-billed Ani, Boat-billed Flycatcher, female Lineated Woodpecker and a Golden-olive Woodpecker happily working a snag a short distance from four of us.

We missed tea, but while waiting for the rum punch to be served we observed a female Green Hermit at the verandah feeders as well as a female Barred Antshrike that spend most of its time hiding in the shrubs.

After dinner we all visited the Short-tailed Nighthawk spot and were rewarded with brief glimpses of two of them. A Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl was also heard calling.

**Day 3/March 14 – Asa Wright – verandah. Drove up and over the Northern Range to Blanchisseuse on the Caribbean coast and back again.**

Back on the verandah at 6am! Even though one would not expect to see many new species, this is such a wonderful place just to relax; enjoy morning coffee or tea and just watch the hustle and bustle of the morning's avian activities. Actually there was a new species, 3 Scaled Pigeons were perched where we later saw the Channel-billed Toucan. The beautifully rustic-colored Rufous-breasted Wren put in an appearance and along with the usual suspects made up the mornings soundtrack.

Today we spent the day driving north over the Northern Range to the sleepy coastal village of Blanchisseuse, stopping numerous times along the way. Our first stop produced 2 male Golden-headed Manakins, and an inkling of what one can expect in the way of raptor watching on the Northern Range. I had already seen a Zone-tailed Hawk on the way up, and here we saw White Hawk and an adult Common Black-Hawk as well as a juvenile. The second stop was at the top of the range, with a view of the Caribbean that unfortunately was covered in mist for the most part. Orange-headed parrots seemed to be everywhere, and this was supposed to be the spot for the rare Swallow Tanager, but some only got a brief glimpse as the blowing wind conditions made today a poor day for viewing passerines. A Yellow-bellied Eleana put in an appearance, but the show belonged to the raptors. Firstly Common Black-Hawks, followed by an Ornate Hawk-Eagle that flew by and then 2 Plumbeous Kites flew over our heads. Our third stop was at the bend in the Brasso-Seca to Arima Road, where we had more Golden-crowned Greenlets, a Black-throated Mango, 4 calling Common Black-Hawks and 2 Striped-breasted Spinetails which Jogie taped in, but really were not as cooperative as we would have wished. Our final stop before we made it to Blanchisseuse, was thanks to a close sighting of a White Hawk, but by the time we all got out the vans it was all but gone. Not to be discouraged we had great looks at a female Collared Trogon, 2 Turquoise Tanagers and a Tropical Pewee.

While having our picnic lunch and shark sandwiches besides the water, a small group of Brown Pelicans stood on some rocky outcroppings off the shore and they were soon joined by Turkey Vultures. As it turned out they were not the same kind that we are used to seeing. They had a lemony colored nape; a yellow tip on their bill; were browner in overall color; showed light yellow primary shafts in flight, and had bright red legs. No doubt a South American subspecies. 4 Short-tailed Swifts, with their beige colored rump and tail, were acting like shorebirds, flying back and forth low over the water between the beach and outcroppings. A short walk along the beach to the lagoon, where several locals were catching crabs for their lunch, produced a White-winged Swallow, 2 Spotted Sandpipers, a pair of Southern Rough-winged Swallows and the first of what would be many Tropical Kingbirds on this trip.

The return journey over the Northern Range was eventful, as the first stop produced a much hotly debated female White-tailed Trogon that soon disappeared only to be replaced by half a dozen Violaceous Trogons! We couldn't turn any of them into a White-tail but while trying had 2 Streaked Flycatchers streak through the canopy. Our second stop gave us great looks at a Rufous-browed Peppershrike that Kevin taped in and our first female Black-throated Mango. We next stopped where Rufous-tailed Jacamar nest in the sandy banks along the road, and not only saw their kingfisher-like tunnels but also a pair of these beautiful iridescent birds, with their long tails and bills, as they perched in the open waiting for passing insects. Running late for our appointed time to see Blue-headed Parrots going to roost, we thought we had missed them as all we saw and heard were Orange-winged Parrots. While waiting patiently as we were losing daylight in the valley, we found a small group of Yellow-rumped Caciques flying between the overgrown vines, and then to our amazement 2 birds flew into a close tree and they were our birds! Though well camouflaged amongst the leaves, once located it was easy enough to see their brilliant blue heads and red under-tail coverts. Then another one showed up in full view for all to clearly see.

After dinner one of the lodges naturalists ran an evening walk along the road. His "staked" Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl performed beautifully as it posed for all to see only yards from the road. We walked past the Short-tailed Nighthawk lamp and when a vehicle approached we all moved off to one side, only to hear a scream from a lady who said something had bitten her foot. Torch in hand we located the culprit, a Wild Pine Scorpion, inches from her heel. It was the first time anyone had been bitten by a scorpion at Asa. All turned out well as she made it to the doctor in Arima. Well needless to say, that since most of us were wearing sandals, it put an end to the walk.

**Day 4/March 14 – Asa Wright – verandah. Drove south to Aripo Livestock Farm, then east to Manzanilla Beach on the Atlantic coast and south to Nariva Swamp.**

I was up early enough this morning and was lucky enough to catch an Oilbird fly across the valley towards the cave as it returned from an evenings foraging. We had on-off drizzle for the better part of the morning. Dare I say it, but it was just another 'boring morning' at the verandah! Where else can one see three motmots coming to the feeders before breakfast?

Today was going to be a long event filled day as we were heading for the lowlands and eventually a date with Red-bellied Macaws coming to roost at Nariva. By 9:30am we had seen our first Savannah Hawk as we neared the Aripo Livestock Farm, and then were greeted by 2 more once we arrived. They soon copulated and we were left with only one. I wonder which one it was? The livestock farm is an area of considerable acreage, comprising primarily of grazed grass with low wetter spots, and as with any new habitat it produced a wide variety of new species. A Yellow-headed Caracara (actually a falcon) alighted on a distant perch while Gray-rumped Swifts and Fork-tailed Palm Swifts filled the air. In the grassy areas we had Blue-black Grassquits, Gray Kingbird, several Yellow-hooded Blackbirds which were not too cooperative and the stunning Red-breasted Blackbird, a South American species that first colonized Trinidad only 25 years ago, and is now relatively common. Pied Water-Tyrant and White-headed Marsh- Tyrant were obliging and we got our first look at a Wattled Jacana. A brief downpour temporarily had us running for cover, but not for long. Striated Herons were numerous, though none were particularly close. They are similar to our Green Heron but with a gray neck and chest. A sulking White-necked or Cocoi Heron, which is similar to our Great-Blue Heron, showed why it has that name. A Common Black-Hawk put in an appearance. It was maybe the small Green-rumped Parrotlet that landed on the fence that stole the show. Several more were seen but none that well. We drove further east to the next left turn to look for Striped Cuckoo. One was calling, but it would not show itself. A White-Hawk was seen gliding away from us and a female Merlin was perched in a distance tree.

From here we headed to the Atlantic coast and Manzanilla Beach, stopping on the way in Sangre Grande for Denis to put in a call to his better half, and for some to pick up a chicken roti! This also seemed to be the land of the Gray-breasted Martins. Pulling in to the beach Kevin told me he had a Caribbean Martin in with the Gray-breasted. After lunch I scanned a distance group on the wires and found what looked to be two Caribbean Martins! They are only supposed to be on Tobago, though it seems rather absurd that they wouldn't be recorded on Trinidad, just a short hop away. We drove to the spot, only to find they were gone! Waiting patiently for them to return we were rewarded with a Pearl Kite on top of a dead snag. Then the martins began to return, one after the other, they were Gray-breasted, until one was darker and clean cut. Finally, a Caribbean Martin and then a second one. As it turned out, we later found out that someone had reported seeing Caribbean Martins on Trinidad already this year. Anyway back to the Pearl Kite. After preening itself it flew to a closer and lower branch. From here it searched for prey before descending upon an unsuspecting lizard, some 30 yards from us. It captured its prey and returned to the branch to eat it before taking off. Great action!

Onto Nariva Swamp, where we stopped at a bridge over a small stream that signaled the edge of Nariva. Here a Blue Dacnis showed itself and a juvenile Grey Hawk was spotted deep in the woods, before slipping away. Waiting patiently for something to happen certainly paid off as a Swallow-tailed Kite was seen cruising the distance tree tops, then a Yellow-headed Caracara flew by, followed by a Savannah Hawk which perched in a lone tree in an agricultural field. Then we caught a glimpse of a dozen juvenile Scarlet Ibis circling over the treetops, before no doubt finding water out of our view. As we were following the ibis a Plumbeous Kite perched on a bare branch over the road for all to get wonderful scope views of the rufous in the primaries and the long primary projection beyond the tail. It's hard to top the quality of what we had just witnessed but we did with point blank looks at two Southern Lapwings that had been watching our excitement.

Following the road south along the palm tree lined coastal road, we found a Lineated Woodpecker, Common Black-Hawk, another Yellow-headed Caracara and a Striated Heron. Arriving at the Kernaham Trail, which is the road that leads one through the heart of Nariva Swamp, we quickly found Wattled Jacanas, Yellow-bellied Elaenias, White-headed Marsh-Tyrants, Blue-black Grassquits, White-tipped Dove, very close looks at Pied Water-Tyrant and several Yellow-chinned Spinetails, whose rattle-like call sounds a bit like a kingfisher. A day-old baby jacana produced ooh's and aah's, but it was the Pinneated Bittern that flew across the road and into a marshy area that got everyone excited. Even though it wasn't that far away it was hiding in a depression, and we had to wait for it to move into the open. It certainly did, and we all got stunning looks at this often-elusive species. A Yellow-crowned Parrot flew over, and a Pearl Kite was spotted in a distant tree.

As the late afternoon sky darkened with what seemed to be an approaching storm, we made our way back to the main road, and pulled over amongst the coconut palms. Here, with a warm windy breeze coming off the Atlantic and rum punch in hand, we watched dozens of Red-bellied Macaws with their beautiful bright

yellow face patch coming in to roost, some in groups as large as ten. Though the light conditions (or was it the rum punch?) were not the best, we were just about able to see the maroon belly markings. We also found a Grey Hawk and had another large group of juvenile Scarlet Ibis, this time flying over the ocean, before calling it a day and making the long journey back to the nature center.

**Day 5/March 15 – Asa Wright – verandah, Guacharo Trail to Dunstan Cave and the Motmot Trail.  
Late afternoon drove south to Waller Field Airstrip for night birding.**

After morning beverages and a look at the toucan, some of us went for a walk along the road, where we got a brief glimpse at a Piratic Flycatcher and watched oropendolas displaying at their hanging nests.

James, one of the senior naturalists at the nature center guided us along the Guacharo Trail to Dunstan (the Oilbird) Cave. Guacharo is the Amerindian name for the oilbird and means “the one that wails and mourns”. A Black-faced Antthrush was spotted in the dark undergrowth and once we all got into viewing position along the trail, it obliged by walking across the path and further up the slope for all to see. Striped-breasted Spinetails, were not as cooperative, as they played hide and seek, but a Long-billed Gnatwren was far more helpful. Once we reached the oilbird cave, which is actually a deep cut through the rock forming a narrow dark gorge, we had to carefully negotiate the slippery boulders and slow moving stream, in order to view the birds that nest on the ledges. To begin with, bats were flying about and it was hard to see, but as our eyes got accustomed to the darkness and with the help of some soft light courtesy of James’ very dim torch, we were able to see these large fruit-eating birds with long rictal bristles close up and even managed to see the heads of some young. In all we were probably able to count about 20 birds. While waiting our turn to enter we noticed a small kingfisher, more than likely a Green, silhouetted at the other end of the cave.

On the return journey two Bay-headed Tanagers entertained us, as they took turns getting a drink from a hollow knot on a fern covered branch. Golden-fronted Greenlets flittered about the canopy, while Buff-throated Woodcreepers, Channel-billed Toucans and Violaceous Trogons called. Some in the group got a brief look at a female Red-crowned Ant-Tanager and James pointed out a Blue-chinned Sapphire but it took off before anyone else got to see it. Once we reached the main trail, we went to the area where Barbara and Edie had a Golden-crowned Warbler during their pre-breakfast walk. It wasn’t long before we had luck as one was working its way around numerous branches for all of us to get good looks at.

After lunch some of us took a short walk along the road and up the Motmot Trail. Being the early afternoon, things were quiet, but we were able to locate the source of a single note call – it turned out to be a female Blue Dacnis. A Rufous-browed Peppershrike wasn’t so obliging! After Rochana found a Hissing Cockroach, we ran into the head groundskeeper with plants in hand, who told us of his efforts to attract Ruby-topaz Hummingbirds with certain nectaring plants. Denis had told us about the watering hole, so I paid a visit to see if it was as spectacular as he said. It certainly was as I found him under the waterfall in this wonderful setting. He was joined shortly thereafter by Barbara and Kathi.

Back at the flowering plants near our rooms - while we were watching the Tufted Coquette and White-chested Emeralds alternate at the flowers, a Streaked Xenops flew into the hedge. I was able to summon Willie and we watched this small bird that resembles a woodpecker with a slightly upturned lower mandible work the underside of branches, as woodpeckers do!

This afternoon’s field trip was to the abandoned US airbase known as Waller Field, east of Arima. We left at 4:30pm and arrived within 45 minutes, picking up Savannah Hawk, White-necked Heron along with the ubiquitous Carib Grackles, Smooth-billed Ani’s, Tropical Kingbirds and Cattle Egrets along the way. We went directly to the *moriche palm* site passing through what seemed like hundreds of Black Vultures gathering on the tarmac before going to roost. Here we quickly found 3 Moriche Orioles and 3 Sulphury Flycatchers. Conveniently there was a Tropical Kingbird present to compare the Sulphury with. Before leaving Kevin had a Brown Violet-ear, and Jogie had a White-tailed Goldenthrout streak pass them. We piled into the vans and had not gone very far before a Striped Cuckoo was heard calling. We searched for a while before locating it very low in a shrub. Not everyone got to see it, as it flew further away, but 2 Pale-vented Pigeons flew in and posed nicely in the late afternoon light. We ate dinner on the airstrip, and were serenaded by purring White-tailed Nightjars as soon as the last of the stunning red sunset melted away. Checking the abandoned buildings, we found a Tropical Screech-Owl dosing on a beam with a cicada in its beak. From here we drove the runways, flushing numerous White-tailed Nightjars, but due to the heavy cloud cover, none of them would sit long enough in the torch beam for us to get good looks – we had to be satisfied with seeing the birds in flight, some of which were close enough to see the white patch in the wing of the males. Pauraques were heard calling, and one was seen well enough in flight to notice the longer tail and wing appearance as well as the smoother

flight, compared to the bat-like flutter of the White-tailed Nightjar. Then came the highlight. Jogie caught the red eye-shine of a Common Potoo with his spotlight. It was perched upright, as one would expect, on the tip of a thin broken trunk in full view thirty feet from the edge of the runway. Needless to say thanks to Kenny there were plenty of “holy cow(s)”, and rightly so.

**Day 6/March 16 – Took the early morning flight to Tobago. Bon Accord Sewer Pond and environments. Then onto Grafton Estate and finally to Speyside and the Blue Waters Inn in the north eastern corner of the island.**

An early morning breakfast, bags packed and ready to leave by 5:40am! The flight to Tobago was like all flights should be - 20 minutes! We met Adolphus James (a bit of a birding legend on Tobago) and his colorful bus driver, Black Pirate (yes, that is his real name), and were off to Bon Accord Sewage Ponds. The scheduled stop at Bucco Marsh was changed due to the decline of conditions there, but Adolphus assured us that all species possible were just as likely here at Bon Accord. Eared Doves and Caribbean Martins were all over the place, as were Silver-spotted Flambeau's, a butterfly that resembled a fritillary. Half a dozen Green-rumped Parotlets landed in the marsh and Anhingas came and went from the edge of the ponds. The ponds held small numbers of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks and White-cheeked Pintails; Great Egret; many Green Herons, including a Tobago Green Heron (looking like a cross between a Green and a Striated) and an adult and juvenile Least Grebe. Several Spotted Sandpipers; our first gulls of the trip, two Laughing Gulls; Gray Kingbird and a juvenile Black-crowned Night-Heron were about, as were a dozen Southern Lapwings, but the surprise here was a kettle of 50 or so Broad-wing Hawks, obviously anxious to get back to the northern states. Walking around the outside of the compound, we found an adult and juvenile Yellow-crowned Night-Heron; Scrub Greenlets aptly named the 'nothing bird' due to its non-descript appearance and Yellow Warbler. Venturing into the woods we had Brown-crested Flycatchers, Buff-throated Woodcreeper and White-fringed Antwren.

Our next stop was Grafton Estate. While having our picnic lunch under the porch with Rufous-vented Chachalacas walking about, 2 Red-crowned Woodpeckers joined the Bare-eyed Thrushes at the feeders. Kathi alerted us to a different bird, which turned out to be an immature male Black-faced Grassquit, the only one of the trip. Yellow-breasted Flycatchers were singing around us and eventually one came down from the canopy for excellent views. We then proceed to walk down the trail picking up Chivi Vireo, more White-fringed Antwrens, a female Barred Antshrike, a pair of Rufous-tailed Jacamars, several Copper-rumped Hummingbirds, White-necked Jacobins and the stunning male Blue-backed Manakin, with its sky blue mantle and v-shaped red crown patch.

From here our journey took us along the southern seaboard to Speyside in the remote eastern corner of Tobago and the secluded Blue Waters Inn. The setting here looking out over Bateaux Bay to Goat Island and Little Tobago is simply paradise. From the beach one could see Red-billed Tropicbirds between the islands. The feeders were full of chachalacas and at night, fruit bats. With the remainder of the afternoon to relax some of us went swimming while Kevin took others birding the upper grounds, where they found a juvenile Great Black-Hawk, Merlin and Brown Boobies out at sea, while I picked up a Hook-billed Kite flying along the ridge.

**Day 7/March 17 – Blue Waters Inn grounds. Drove to the Main Ridge Forest Reserve, stopping along Roxborough-Bloody Bay Road and at the Bloody Bay Overlook before heading into the Gilpin Trace Rain Forest.**

I went to sleep listening to the soothing sounds of the waves breaking, but my sleep was shattered when a mockingbird began calling right outside the bedroom window well before daybreak. Well at least it got me up early to enjoy tea on the waterfront and a lone Brown Booby patrolling the cove close to shore.

After breakfast we took the bus west through some beautiful patches of orange colored flowering trees called *immortelle* trees, that are used to shade the coffee plants, to the Roxborough-Bloody Bay Road, which cuts right through the heart of the Tobago Rain Forest, known at the Main Ridge Forest Reserve. Our first stop yielded the 'nothing' bird, a brief glimpse at a Grey-headed Kite, three Common Black-Hawks and numerous Orange-winged Parrots. The second stop was far more interesting. Here we had superb views of a perched White-tailed Sabrewing, a dozen plus Red-legged Honeycreepers, Giant Cowbirds trying to enter Crested Oropendola nests and 3 Venezuelan Flycatchers, which spent most of the time out of the spotlight. Like all

good bathroom stops, the one at Bloody Bay Overlook produced the best looks imaginable of the often heard but elusive Yellow-legged Thrush. Actually there were two pairs feeding on berries over the restrooms. A Blue-backed Manakin and a Rufous-tailed Jacamar put in an appearance, before the thrushes gave an alarm call and all disappeared.

Half the group rented wellies from a local tout, though some turned out not to be waterproof, for our journey into the rain forest. Though the path was muddy in spots, the weather cooperated and it was very pleasant. The birding was typical of a rain forest. Continuous bird song, a great deal of looking up (at nothing but canopy) and the occasional highlight, such as a White-tailed Sabrewing on a nest; close views of a Fuscous Flycatcher; a single egg in a White-necked Jacobin nest; a Rufous-breasted Hermit; Stripe-breasted Spinetails; Rufous-breasted Wrens on the path; a female Blue-backed Manakin and good numbers of motmots. Once we reached a small waterfall, where several Gray-rumped Swifts circled the canopy opening, we turned around and made our way back, having spent an enjoyable 2-½ hour walk.

After a late lunch at Blue Waters, everyone went their own way for the remainder of the afternoon. Some took Frank's Glass Bottom Boat out to Angel Reef off Goat Island to snorkel, while Kevin and Edie kayaked to join them; Barb went for a massage; Todd and Pam caught a cat-nap, and Ed, Rochana, Lorraine and I lazed about in the water.

### **Day 8/ March 18 – Blue Waters Inn grounds. Took Frank's Glass Bottom Boat to Little Tobago. Afternoon return flight to Trinidad and onto the PAX Guest House.**

Though overcast, we had an enjoyable hour birding the grounds searching for 2 Brown-crested Flycatchers that were seen at first light. There was an immature White-fringed Antwren, Gray Kingbird, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Blue-black Grassquits, Southern House Wren, White-tipped Dove and of course Chachalacas. We checked on Denis' Blue-Yellow Macaw, as he really wanted it to be countable, but I somehow think that it has never moved off that tree!

At 9am we joined Frank for the short journey to Little Tobago aboard his glass bottom boat. He took us over Angel Reef, and proceeded to name every coral and fish that came within view without taking a breathe for 15 minutes solid! His accent and the non-stop narrative certainly bought a smile to all our faces. If only Kevin had taped it! I do recall an awful lot of 'soopermales' amongst the 4-eyed Butterflies, School Masters, Creole Wrasse and Stoplights that swam over Venus Sea Fans, Giant Clam Sponge and Dead-mans Fingers. The underwater sea life is certainly fascinating. By the time we made it to Little Tobago the skies looked as though the end of the world was coming. This was supposed to be the dry season, but every few years they get some rain, and this was the year. Actually the second wettest March ever!

The slow steady climb in the rain was not what we had hoped for. We paused for shelter in an abandoned building, as Frank told us it would be over in 5 minutes. While drying ourselves off, we had a continuous parade of Bare-eyed Thrushes, several Blue-gray Tanagers, a Brown-crested Flycatcher and finally great looks at 2 Chivi Vireos. 5 minutes came and went. The rains did not - so we continued on our climb. Once we had reached the top we could see Red-billed Tropicbirds soaring below us, and decided to continue down a slippery path to the nest sites, rather than watch the few birds from this spot. We came across a well camouflaged Audubon's Shearwater nest, with one sitting at the entrance to the burrow, then a couple of Red-billed Tropicbird nests, one with a well grown juvenile in it, and the other with mother and junior. From this vantage point we scoped Red-footed and Brown Boobies at their respective nests, before making our way back up the now very muddy slope. The rains never let up. Of all the days to have this happen. Since we were here and now wet, we continued to the upper level platform passing another Audubon's nest at the base of a *gumbo limbo*. As least we were somewhat sheltered here, but we could only imagine what a sight the tropicbirds flying all around us would be like on a sunny day. Today the weather had grounded most of them.

We returned to Blue Waters by 12:30pm and after lunch departed for Crown Point Airport and our late afternoon flight to Trinidad. We reached the PAX Guest House where our gracious hosts, Sheldon, Oda and Gerald, greeted us. It was now well after sunset but just in time for rum punch!

**Day 9/March 19 – PAX Guest House verandah. Drove south to the Caroni Rice Fields and then onto Point-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust, before returning north along the Gulf of Paria to the Waterloo mudflats and ending the day at Caroni Swamp Bird Sanctuary.**

Another morning, a different verandah, and almost the same birds. A 4-foot Green Iguana was in the scope lying along a branch catching the morning's first rays. A Rufous-browed Peppershrike came in showing itself well as did two Grayish Saltators. The two hummingbird feeders in front of us, each seemed to belong to very territorial hummers, one being the Copper-rumps and the other to the White-chested Emeralds. When the emeralds feeder was removed to be refilled they took over the Copper-rumps feeder, until theirs was returned. When the other feeder was taken away the emeralds chased the Copper-rumps away. We now know who the bullies are. Before departing for the all day field trip, a 3-foot Boa Constrictor was spotted waiting patiently on a small tree near a hummingbird feeder, besides the tearoom. We did not stay long enough to find out whether she had breakfast!

This morning we headed south into the lowlands, driving through the Caroni Rice Fields, where numerous Yellow-headed Blackbirds, Smooth-billed Anis and a few shorebirds such as Wattled Jacana and Greater Yellowlegs could be found. A Zone-tailed Hawk was seen well flying besides the van, and other raptors included a Savannah Hawk and Osprey. The species we were hoping to see, Long-winged Harrier, was not to be found. Maybe it had to do with the aerial agricultural spraying that was going on! Not good for any of us, so we moved on. By mid morning we had arrived at Point-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust, a 70-acre freshwater natural wetland within a petrochemical complex, which takes credit for a successful captive breeding program for endangered birds, in particular the Scarlet Ibis. The feeders immediately produced an array of colorful species - Yellow Oriole, Blue-gray Tanager, Yellow-hooded Blackbird and Kiskadee but it was two of Trinidad's rarest birds that caught our attention. Firstly a pair of Red-capped Cardinals and then the simply stunning male Ruby-topaz Hummingbird, whose iridescent red crown and golden throat lit up in the sunlight. Kenny our guide, found a family of Saffron Finches, also known as the Trinidad Canaries. We proceeded to walk around the two lakes, where we came across a male Barred Antshrike; numerous Black-bellied Whistling Ducks; Neotropic Cormorant; Black-crowned Night-Heron; a male Ringed Kingfisher and a Green Kingfisher. On the tree duck box in the lake, there were about two-dozen White-lined Sac-winged Bats in a vertical line, roosting on the north-facing side of the post. We had a sandwich lunch in the gardens and watched as Yellow Warblers flittered about in the orange grove.

The next stop was the coastal mudflats at Waterloo. Here the tide was well out and the flats were alive with a plethora of shorebirds. Black Skimmers; Short-billed Dowitchers; Red Knots; Greater Yellowlegs; Spotted and a single Solitary Sandpiper; egrets and herons, including a Great-blue Heron; Southern Lapwings; Willets, all of which were westerns; Whimbrel; Black-bellied Plover; Semipalmated Plover; Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers; Ruddy Turnstones and Large-billed Terns, with their sabine gull-like back pattern.

Our final stop of the day was at the Caroni Swamp Bird Sanctuary, where we took a boat ride through the mangroves, passing Pied Water-Tyrants; stopping for a 6-foot Cooks Tree Boa curled up and asleep, much to Kenny's delight; seeing more Little Blue Herons than any of us had seen before; spotting our only Greater Ani of the trip as it worked it's way out into the open along a low hanging mangrove branch; and who could forget the boatman skillfully maneuvering the boat away from his 'staked' Common Potoo, so that his competition wouldn't notice his find. At 5:15 we turned a corner only to see 4 boats packed with people, lined up at the edge of the mangroves. This was the spot for the evening's spectacle. After dropping anchor (tying a rope to a pole!), we watched as Scarlet Ibis, the national bird of Trinidad, came in to roost. Some would first stop at the edge of the water for a final feed or drink, but most would come in over the mangroves behind us, twisting and turning as they dropped down low over the water and into the lone island some 500 feet in front of us. "Golly gee, Willie did you see that?" the jolly Texan exclaimed over and over as groups of varying numbers poured in. The island was lit up like a Christmas tree with 500 scarlet light bulbs, far fewer than the estimated 3000 birds we saw enter - the majority of the ibis vanished deep into the mangrove island. Without a doubt this was the highlight of the trip. On the return boat journey a lone Rufous-necked Wood-Rail, a rare resident of the mangroves, flew in front of the boat only to disappear into the mangroves.

**Day 10/ March 20 – PAX verandah and grounds, including the road to Mt. St. Benedict.**

I awoke early this morning to the sound of Red Junglefowl (chickens), pauraques, a Pygmy-Owl, Buff-throated Woodcreeper and Orange-winged Parrots. Welcome to the early morning sounds of the rain forest! It was over by 6:15am. The gorgeous female Purple Honeycreeper made an appearance at the feeders, as did a

female Black-throated Mango. A Piratic Flycatcher sang outside the breakfast room window, actually in the same tree that Diane showed us the Yellow-headed Caracara during the previous mornings breakfast.

After breakfast Gerald gave us a tour of the grounds leading to the Mt. St. Benedict Monastery, which was interrupted by various species of birds. The first being a Lineated Woodpecker then a small group of Green-rumped Parrotlets (recent sightings to PAX), followed by a Streaked Xenops, Summer Tanager, Trinidad Euphonia and White Hawk and numerous Common Yellow and Large Yellow-Orange butterflies as well as a single Monarch.

During the afternoon we tried our hand at raptor watching, since the positioning of the Guest House overlooking the valley seemed ideal, but the timing may have been wrong, as we only had the vultures! Moving on, we took a leisurely stroll up the road as far as the Retreat House and the beginning of the Alben Trail, and had far more success. A pair of Blue Dacnis foraged in a tree besides the road, then we got our best looks at a Grey-headed Kite, when she flew through the valley below us. It took a little time to see them, but eventually we did get good looks at Trinidad Euphonias. We also found a Boat-billed Flycatcher in a pine tree, and soon noticed a nest and another bird entering it. A pair we thought, but on further investigation it turned out the other bird was a Kiskadee. We surmised that they were a mixed couple, as they seemed to be getting along and the Boat-billed looked as though he was guarding the nest. Sheldon later told us that as they were of different genera, it was unlikely that they were a pair, and possibly one of the two species was raiding the nest for material, though we never saw this. The following day, we did not see a Boat-billed there, but instead saw only Kiskadees! At the entrance to the Alben Trail we had Brown-crested and Yellow-bellied Flycatchers and a female Trinidad Euphonia. When we returned to the Pax Guest House the Piratic Flycatcher was happily signing on his branch.

Being our last night in Trinidad, the skies cooperated and we enjoyed a wonderful dinner on the verandah under the stars. Conditions were also good for stargazing and finally everyone got to see Saturn, Jupiter and its moons and the Orion Nebula.

### **Day 11/March 21 – PAX verandah, the Old Donkey Trail and the Alben (Tower) Trail.**

Our final verandah watch produced all the usual ‘backyard’ species! Don’t we all wish we had this for a backyard? 2 White Hawks showed themselves very well as we were preparing to go in for breakfast. Those traveling via Miami left us in the morning and the rest of us made one last excursion, this time onto the Old Donkey Trail. Since it takes several hours to reach the fire tower from this trail, Ed, Denis, Lorraine and Kathi chose to take the Alben Trail to the tower and had great looks at a pair of Black-tailed Tityras, a species that had eluded most of the group this trip. Our 3-hour walk along the Old Donkey Trail produced some of the best forest birding of the trip, with wonderful looks at White-fringed Antwren, Golden-crowned Warbler and Edie finding a Gray-throated Leaf-tosser that unfortunately vanished before everyone got good views of it. At the stream crossing Silver-beaked Tanagers and Ochre-bellied Flycatcher were coming to drink in the shadows of the overhanging branches. Two hermits were seen along the trail -Rufous-breasted and a Green, which came face to face with Barbara. The iridescent blue butterflies that fluttered along the stream were Forest Mort Bleu’s or Caligo’s. Four Rufous-breasted Wrens were continuously calling around us and while we were watching them a Streaked Xenops came in to within 10 feet at head height.

It did not end there, as we were enthralled with Golden-headed Manakins at a lek. Here they would perch and call, and then moved rapidly from one favorite branch to another and back again, about 15 to 20 feet above ground, all in the hopes of attracting a female. Of the dozen or so we saw we got a glimpse of only one female on one occasion. Continuing a short distance beyond the lek we found a Long-billed Gnatwren, 5 Turquoise and 1 Bay-headed Tanager, and on the way back a Trinidad Skink was seen working its way through up a dead tree trunk before disappearing into a heavy tangle. Though the birds were outstanding, the most amazing sound along this trail belonged to an insect. It began sounding just like the warning beeps of a truck reversing, and then broke into a siren, sounding similar to that of an ambulance. Rightly or not we called it the Ambulance Beetle! What an ending to an outstanding trip.

PS: I’m sure you are all saying, “Didn’t he notice the Bananaquits?” That will cost you a bottle of champagne (make that a Negro Mondelo) next time we meet.

### **Favorite Species as voted upon by the group**

Scarlet Ibis were left out on purpose, as the whole experience of seeing this species coming in to roost at Caroni Swamp Bird Sanctuary, was undoubtedly the highlight of the trip for everyone.

- 1. Tufted Coquette**
- 2. Ruby-topaz Hummingbird**
- 3. Blue-backed Manakin**
- 4. Common Potoo**  
**Ornate Hawk-Eagle**
- 6. female Purple Honeycreeper**
- 7. Red-capped Cardinal**  
**Chestnut Woodpecker**  
**Bearded Bellbird**  
**White-tailed Sabrewing on the nest**  
**Oilbirds**