Trinidad’s Biodiversity & Animal Behavior With Naturalist Journeys & Caligo Ventures

June 20 – 28, 2020
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June is a fabulous time to witness the richness of life and all its complexities on this Trinidad eco-tour that offers a fast-track study of tropical biology and ecology. In addition to Trinidad’s famed rainbow of birds, June’s cooling rains bring out a kaleidoscope of life, from land crabs to katydids to Tegu lizards and more. Ph.D. biologists, Carol Simon and Howard Topoff, lead this tour and are known for making learning fun. Imagine this as a tropical ecology course with no exams!

The continental origin and proximity of Trinidad to South America, along with its varied habitats, has resulted in an extremely diverse biota. Dominated by the Northern Range, which rises to about 3,000 feet and was historically covered by tropical rainforest, the island is just 50 miles long and about 37 miles wide, yet boasts 97 native mammals, 400 birds, 55 reptiles, 25 amphibians, and 617 butterflies, as well as over 2,200 species of flowering plants. No other area in the West Indies, and few areas of comparable size in tropical America, can match this spectacular species diversity.

We begin at Grand Riviere, the stronghold for rare Trinidad Piping-Guans and Leatherback Turtle nesting. Then dive into your tropical forest experience at the renowned Asa Wright Nature Centre (AWNCC) in the Northern Range. Although world famous for its bird watching opportunities, AWNC offers so much more for the wildlife-interested traveler. Carol and Howard give presentations on topics that include primates, bats, social insect systems, reptiles, plants, and more. Gain new skills as you are introduced to many smaller-winged creatures, and even a few that crawl. This tour is the perfect opportunity to immerse yourself in tropical biodiversity as you watch the rainforest come to life on day and night excursions.

Carol and Howard tour the world, sharing their knowledge on cruises and land excursions. We are thrilled they can be with us this week!
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Tour Highlights
- Look for the highly endangered Trinidad Piping-Guan while at Grande Riviere
- See the largest sea turtle, the Leatherback, nesting on the beach and possibly see emerging hatchlings
- Relish morning coffee and incredible birding on the Asa Wright Nature Centre’s famed verandah
- Explore the Centre’s trails to witness manakin and bellbird leks, army ants, tarantulas, native mammals, and more
- Gain exclusive access to enigmatic Oilbirds in the grotto of Dunston Cave
- Witness skies turned crimson with thousands of Scarlet Ibis coming in to roost in Caroni National Park

Tour Summary
9-Day / 8-Night Tropical Nature Tour with Carol Simon & Howard Topoff
$2490 Double Occupancy, $2750 Single Occupancy; from Port of Spain. Airport is Piarco International (POS)

Itinerary

Sat., June 20  Solstice! | Arrivals
You arrive today at Piarco International Airport in Port-of-Spain (POS). A driver from the lodge greets you and takes you to our first hotel. Those that arrive late may wish to book an extra day to rest up from travel, but you may arrive at any time you choose today.

We stay just out of the city tonight at the pretty Pax Guest House, just a half-hour drive from the airport. Take in a scenic vista and a lovely setting as you settle in for your first night. Enjoy a welcome dinner and the chance to get to know your guides and travel companions.

Accommodations at Pax Guest House
Sun., June 21
Grand Riviere | Trinidad Piping-Guan & Lush Coastal Forests
This morning enjoy a lovely breakfast at the Pax Guest House, where you can greet the day watching birds at the feeders.

After breakfast, Carol and Howard present their foundation talk for the week, “An Introduction to Rainforest Ecology.” Afterwards, we leave mid-morning for our drive over to the northeast corner of the island for a two-night stay in Grand Riviere. We do some sightseeing en route, stopping at the Toco Lighthouse for a picnic lunch. Below you witness the mixing of Atlantic and Caribbean waters — it’s quite a dramatic sight.

Accommodations in Grand Riviere are at a delightful beachside hotel, known for serving delicious cuisine. The entire area is very lush and the community is small, only 300 people.

We settle in, and in the late-afternoon venture a short way to look for rare and endemic Trinidad Piping-Guans as they return to roosts in the area. They are highly endangered, and Grand Riviere is their stronghold.

Tonight we have a real treat: joining local guides to see Leatherback Turtles! This beach has been used by documentary film crews to film the amazing life-cycle of this species, largest of the sea turtles. It is an important nesting beach, perhaps holding one of the highest densities in the Caribbean, and at this time of year we should see dozens of hatchlings emerge. We visit during a dark phase of the moon and, if it is a clear night, the stars should be just incredible.
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Carol and Howard rate this sea turtle experience as one of the highlights of their careers. For many, this is a highlight of the tour.

Accommodations at Mt. Plaisir (B,L,D)

Mon., June 22  Piping-Guans at Dawn | Insects & Birds by the Sea

Early risers have a wonderful chance to see Leatherback Turtles finishing up their laying and returning to the sea in natural light. If for any reason we missed the guans yesterday, we can make another run up the hill.

After breakfast, learn more about local turtle conservation at the adjacent hatching facility, and put all that you’ve seen to work, understanding information presented by Carol and Howard who discuss “Sea Turtles of the World.”

After lunch, we head back towards Port of Spain and on up to the fabulous Asa Wright Nature Centre, a drive of about three hours.

The Asa Wright Nature Centre, located at 1,200 feet in the mountains of Trinidad’s Northern Range, is seven miles north of the town of Arima. Learning takes place in the field here, and the itinerary is carefully designed to visit varied habitats to find the greatest array of species. Night spotlighting is always popular, often described as the thrill of a treasure hunt.

The habitat type here is known as Evergreen Seasonal Forest. Formerly the Springhill Estate, the grounds have returned to a wild state from once extensive coffee, cocoa, and citrus plantations. Some of these plants are still maintained alongside the wild second-growth forest vegetation at the Centre. Natural second-growth has taken over and festooned the abandoned plantation vegetation with vines and a host of epiphytes. The whole effect is one of being deep in a tropical rainforest.
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After we arrive and settle in, we can walk the forest trails and/or spend time on the famed verandah where Ruby-topaz, Tufted Coquette, Red-rumped Agouti, Golden Tegu Lizard, Squirrel Cuckoo, and both Purple and Green Honeycreepers are among the species that can be readily seen. Carol and Howard, as well as the Centre’s guides, can help you understand their interactions. We enjoy our first rum punch while tallying up a host of species from the verandah.

*Accommodations at Asa Wright Centre (B,L,D)*

**Tues., June 23**

**Centre Trails in Search of Bearded Bellbird, Army Ants, Tarantulas & More**

Morning begins with the raucous noise of the Crested Oropendola, just one of several exotic sounds. A cup of fresh-roasted Trinidad coffee is waiting for you on the property’s famous bird-viewing verandah. A first-time visitor might see 30 – 40 life birds before breakfast!

Our day starts with a guided tour of the several trails that traverse this rich and diverse wildlife sanctuary. Along the trail Carol and Howard interpret the behavior of White-bearded Manakins that should be dancing at their ground-level lek, and Bearded Bellbirds doing the same from the trees. Learn more about the work of David Snow, a pioneer researcher who worked at the Asa Wright Nature Centre on these social breeding species.

Centre naturalists join us, ready to help us find a number of species. In leaf litter along the trails we may find tarantulas, grasshoppers, and other species, including reptiles like large Tegu Lizards. Red-rumped Agouti spend time where forest fruits drop beside the trail. A colony of Crested Oropendolas ensures a
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steady stream of this species passing overhead; along with them keep watch for Orange-winged and Blue-headed Parrots, as well as raptors including Ornate Hawk-Eagle, Black Hawk Eagle, and White Hawk. Returning to the Verandah, Howard, who did research on tropical Army Ants, presents a talk highlighting their behavior, as well as that of Leaf-Cutter Ants and termites, in the Mango Room followed by lunch.

In the afternoon, we take another trail or work the long driveway area leading in to the Centre, from which many of the more elusive species can be found. Perhaps we find a colony of Army Ants or the work of another social insect: termites. Those who wish can just remain on the Verandah and let the birds and bugs come to you! Tea is served daily in the late afternoon, followed by rum punch, a lovely custom to watch sunset with the birds from the Verandah.

After dinner, enjoy a leisurely night walk to look for the eye-shine of spiders and possibly Tropical Screech Owl.

Accommodations at Asa Wright Centre (B,L,D)

Wed., June 24  Blanchisseuse Road | Trinidad’s Northern Range

Today we embark on a scenic, all-day excursion following a lush and winding mountain road that passes over the Northern Range towards the seaside fishing village of Blanchisseuse. Trinidad’s Northern Range is an eastern extension of the Coastal Cordillera of Venezuela, a connecting range to the Andes.

We leave just after breakfast to drive north on the Blanchisseuse Road into the upper elevations of the Northern Range forest. This is the only road on the island which bisects the Northern range before finally descending to the Caribbean coastline. En route we reach the highest point possible by motor vehicle, some 2,200 ft. in elevation. Our day is spent looking at tropical biodiversity along both quiet country roads and wide forest tracks seeking species more easily found at this higher altitude.

Enjoy a local lunch in the village of Brasso Seco where clean washroom facilities are available. Learn more about how
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they make artisanal chocolates from local cacao. This is not a day where we spend a long time driving. We make numerous roadside nature and birding stops, never walk far from the vehicles, and there are always coolers with both water and fruit juice on board.

Along with rich birdlife, we also have an opportunity to examine the fascinating world of leaf-cutter ants, and to photograph orchids, elephant ear philodendron, ferns, mosses, and other tropical flora. By changing elevation, we change vegetation and associated insect species. We also find some wet areas that attract damselflies and dragonflies.

Occasionally an Ornate Hawk-Eagle can be seen soaring over and we may see insect hatches also on the wing.

Towards mid-afternoon we stop our northward journey at the village of Morne le Croix. Here we take afternoon tea and cake before a late afternoon drive back south to the Centre in time for a shower before rum punch and dinner.

With happy hour, Carol and Howard offer an in-depth presentation highlighting rainforest botany.

Accommodations at Asa Wright Centre (B,L,D)

Thurs., June 25
A Day at Asa Wright Nature Centre | Bat Behavior & Ecology

Today, after breakfast, we start off with a talk by Howard and Carol on butterflies. We then walk one of the Centre’s several trails, with an eye on insects in general. All around you are vibrant colors, from bird wings to seed pods, examine the signals shared by these.

Just before lunch, Carol and Howard prepare you for tomorrow with a talk about tropical primates. In the afternoon you may want to take a swim in the Centre’s natural swimming pool, or just enjoy some photography or the view. Spend some verandah time watching hummingbird behavior, and join the Centre’s landscape person to learn more about the gardens and coffee production. After a busy schedule, this afternoon gives us some free time to relax and catch up with journals, photography, or other personal interests.
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We hope that tonight we can share time with a local expert from TrinBats, a non-profit organization that conducts surveys on the island, including netting done at the Asa Wright Nature Centre. Over happy hour they share a presentation on findings to date, and after dark help you with behavioral observations.

Fri., June 26  Nariva Swamp | Bush Bush Research Area | Howler Monkeys | East Coast of Trinidad

The east side of Trinidad hosts an ecosystem very different than of the west side. Where the Nariva River reaches the sea here, freshwater environments are comprised of herbaceous swamp and swamp forest, dotted with a few patches of mangroves such as the area around Bush Bush Creek.

Nariva is the largest freshwater herbaceous swamp on the island. Along its edges are “palm islands,” where the tall Moriche Palm is common. Here too we see a unique mangrove community, made up primarily of the stilt-rooted rhizophora mangrove, which often reaches a height of 80 feet. Part of our drive follows the ocean shore down scenic “Coconut Alley.” All these locales invite the opportunity for us to record new insect species.

As part of the day, we walk into the Bush Bush Forest, an area that provides good birding, and a good chance to see Red Howler and White-faced Capuchin Monkeys and possibly other mammals such as Prehensile-tailed Porcupines. This is a raised area of sandy soils, surrounded by wetlands, and site of much of the work described so well in C. Brooke Worth’s book, A Naturalist in Trinidad. For many years research on Yellow Fever was conducted here, as Trinidad hosted an internationally-acclaimed virus research lab. Many of the country’s insects were surveyed and identified in studies associated with Bush Bush. In 1999, a reintroduction effort to restore Blue-and-Yellow Macaws was begun here. The walk is in an area where permits are required by the Forestry
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Department, in the sanctuary where hunting is not allowed, and thus it’s a good place to look for mammals.

On our route today, the open countryside and farmland allow us the opportunity to seek out a number of new bird species including Cocoi Heron, Savannah Hawk, Gray-headed Kite, Yellow-headed Caracara, Wattled Jacana, Southern Lapwing, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Fork-tailed Palm-Swift, and White-winged Swallows. Red-breasted Blackbirds add a splash of color.

This is a very full field day, so no presentations are scheduled.

Accommodations at the Asa Wright Nature Centre (B,L,D)

Sat., June 27    Dunston Oilbird Cave | Caroni Marsh

This morning we visit Dunston Cave, a beautiful riparian grotto located on the Centre’s property, home to a breeding colony of the fascinating nocturnal Oilbird. A walk along Guacharo trail gets you there in around 45 minutes. The trail can be steep in places, but there are hand-rails along the way and at the destination, an Oilbird viewing area.

The cave has a stream running through it; the water level is dependent upon recent rainfall. However you should not get more than your ankles wet. Please note the Centre regulates no flash photography at the cave.

Trinidad is perhaps the easiest place to see the world’s only fruit eating, nocturnal bird that navigates within the cave by echolocation. It is much, much bigger than anyone expects (almost the size of a small harrier, with a wingspan of up to 42 inches). The floor of the cave is littered with germinating palm seedlings. The Oilbirds swallow the palm fruit entirely, and after the pericarp is digested they regurgitate the seeds. Oilbirds are very important to the seed dispersal of a number of tropical trees. Centre staff have collected these seeds and planted them around the estate to enrich the habitat.

En route, this trail provides the best opportunity to find Gray-throated Leafftosser and Red-crowned Ant-Tanager and perhaps your only chance of viewing, at a safe distance, a sleeping Fer-de-Lance, which Carol is delighted to tell you about. On the return you can retrace your steps, or connect to another of the Centre’s several trails to make a longer loop. These are less traveled and a real prize sighting might be that of the elusive Little Tinamou.

Ahead of lunch, Carol gives a presentation on rainforest amphibians and reptiles, venomous and non-venomous, and their fascinating biology and behavior.
In the afternoon we drive to Caroni Swamp, which comprises 6000 hectares of protected area, including National Park lands. The habitat here is mainly mangrove forest and includes a very specialized mangrove forest that contains several genera and species of mangroves, showing classic examples of plant adaptation in a unique brackish water community.

From the Centre, we drive in the direction of Port of Spain, close to the airport. This wild land area is south of the growing sprawl of the city, but worlds away from the city’s congestion. Before our boat departs, we have the opportunity to seek out mangrove species from the roadside. Black-crested Antshrike, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Straight-billed Woodcreeper, and Masked Cardinal are some of the possibilities. There is also the opportunity to visit clean washrooms facilities at the National Park Information Facility.

After boarding our small tour boats, we explore to the west down the Blue River (or as Trinis call it, No. 9 drain). This is a public waterway used both by fishermen and leisure boaters before we turn south into the permit controlled forestry reserve. Our boat leaves around 4:00 PM, under the leadership of an experienced tour guide who visits the swamp each day. Your AWNC guide is also on board.
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We spend an hour or so slowly navigating some of the mangrove channels seeking out specialties of the area, including Green-throated Mango, Greater Ani, and Bicolored Conebill. Carol and Howard share insight into how mangrove ecosystems are formed and how they sustain themselves.

Often there are roosting Tropical Screech-Owls and a Common Potoo close to the water and we have a distinct chance of spotting a kingfisher or two with Green, Ringed, and American Pygmy all living in the swamp. There is also an outside chance of a Boat-billed Heron, the least confiding of our salt-water herons. On the way, the boatman keeps a special eye out for Ruschenberger’s Tree Boa roosting in the branches close to the river. These snakes feed almost exclusively on small birds and can grow to about 7 – 8 feet long. We also have a chance of a roosting Silky Anteater or even a Spectacled Caiman.

We then moor up, sip our rum punch and wait for parties of Scarlet Ibis, plus smaller numbers of Tricolored and Little Blue Herons and Snowy Egrets flying in to roost in the mangroves. Butterflies and other insects are also attracted to mangroves. The star attraction is, of course, the spectacular flight of Scarlet Ibis, which occur often by the hundreds, returning to their mangrove roosts at dusk. This is truly one of the world’s most dramatic natural moments. We leave as light begins to wane, retracing our steps back, arriving at the dock at dusk. En route we search the mangrove-lined channels for the mysterious-sounding Common Potoo and with luck, nocturnal Boat-billed Heron. We then return to the Centre for a slightly later than usual dinner.

**Accommodations at Asa Wright Centre (B,L,D)**

**Sun., June 28  Departures**
You may leave at a time convenient for you this morning, if you can tear yourself away! If you have a very late flight (close to midnight), you can enjoy lunch and dinner at the Centre (nominal additional cost) and use the public areas before going back to the airport. You can also take that late flight the night before, if getting home on Sunday is key.

*Itinerary subject to change due to weather, road condition, access, and other factors. The order of the trips may also change. Should a location or region become unviable, we make every effort to visit an equivalent location or region.*
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Cost of the Journey

Plan Ahead!
Protect yourself with Allianz Travel Insurance. Their website will show a grid of tour cost and your age category for you to make selections. As of January 2017, Naturalist Journeys pays 100% of your flight carbon offset.

Cost of the Journey
Cost of the tour is $2490 DBL / $2750 SGL from Piarco International Airport (POS), Trinidad. This cost includes all accommodations, meals as specified in the itinerary, professional guide services, other park and program entrance fees and miscellaneous program expenses.

Tour cost does not include: round-trip transportation from your home city to Port of Spain, Trinidad (Piarco International Airport), optional activities, lodge and guide gratuities, or items of a personal nature such as laundry, telephone charges, maid gratuities or beverages from the bar.

Travel Information
Plan to arrive on June 20 at a time convenient for you. You may depart on June 28 on flights leaving after 1:00PM.

Photo Credits
White-bearded Manakin, Karen Chiasson; Harlequin Beetle, Ray Mendez (RM); Porcupine, RM; Leatherback Turtle, Dave Ramlal (DR); Channel-billed Toucan, Steve Wolfe; Scarlet Ibis, Peg Abbott (PA); Tayra, Mukesh Ramdass (MR); AWNC Verandah, PA; Copper-rumped Hummingbird, Buck Snelson (BS); Tegu Lizard, Howard Topoff (HT); Grasshopper, Wyatt Mendez (WM); Birders, PA; Pax Guest House x2, PA; Birding Grand Riviere for Trinidad Piping-Guan, Dodie Logue (DL); Leatherback Turtle, HT; Trinidad Piping-Guan, PA; AWNC, Hugh Simmons Photography; Agouti, Kim Wright; Tufted Coquette, MR; Verandah View, Caligo Ventures Stock (CVS); Lek Area, DL; Tarantula, WM; Ornate Hawk-Eagle, Bill Fraser; Rhinoceros Beetles, HT; Green Honeycreeper, PA; Flora near Brasso Seco, CVS; Rufous-tailed Jacamar, PA; Collared Trogon, CVS; Bromeliads, Lynn Tenenefoss; Red Howler Monkeys, HT; Coconut Alley, PA; Blue-and-yellow Macaw, Sandy Sorkin; Capuchins, PA; Southern Lapwings, PA; Oilbird, Janice Petko (JP); Tree Boa, MR; Antillean Skimmer, BS; Scarlet Ibis, CVS; Julia Butterfly, PA; Boat-billed Herons, Tom Dove; Black-throated Mango, JP; Common Potoo, Mike Boyce.