

# Christmas Week at the AWNC | Trip Report

## Dec. 21-30, 2023 | by Pat Lueders



**With guide Pat Lueders, local guides Lester Nanan, Dave Ramlal, and Jason Radix, and participants: Joan, Geary, Chris, Glenna, Judy, Deb, Nancy, Fiona, Declan & Malakai**



### **Thurs., Dec 21**

### **Welcome to Trinidad**

Most of the group arrived at various times yesterday, and we spent the night at the Hacienda Jacana. The marvelous song of tropical birds awoke us early, especially the very vocal Southern House Wren and the Common Pauraque. We ate quickly so we could begin walking the Hacienda Jacana property, listening to the calls of the Gray-cowled Wood-Rail at the pond below the cabins. Smooth-billed Ani, Blue-black Grassquit and Ruddy Ground Doves were along the trail. A Black-tailed Tityra was perched above our cabin and a Green-backed Trogon paused for pictures. What a great beginning to our upcoming week! After lunch, we drove to Asa Wright Nature Centre and were greeted by the welcoming staff offering us rum punch to toast our arrival. We settled into our newly renovated rooms, and we quickly met for our first group gathering on the veranda. Watching the hummingbirds at the feeders and the colorful birds on the fruit trays was immediately overwhelming! The lodge naturalists helped identify the different species, and the photographers found their favorite spot to start shooting. A delicious traditional dinner was the perfect ending to the first day in Trinidad! Many of us did a night



walk with the centre guide, Caleb. We spotted numerous spiders, a scorpion and a tarantula, crabs, ants and frogs.

### **Fri., Dec 22            Blanchisseuse Road | Brasso Seco**

Our local guide, Dave Ramlal, met us after we enjoyed breakfast with the “birds”. Today, we will be traveling into the Northern Range on the Blanchisseuse Road to find many species typical for that area. Dave listens, and he hears two Gray-headed Kites vocalizing above us in the car park. We stop at various spots to see Collared Trogon, Cocoa Woodcreeper, Golden-headed Manakin, Euler’s Flycatcher, and Golden-Crowned Warbler. Dave used Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl calls and one responded, coming in close to the road. A Summer Tanager was spotted, and a Northern Waterthrush was seen along the road. At the next stop, we had Guianan and Green-backed Trogons vocalizing and good looks at a Streaked Xenops and a Long-billed Gnatwren hiding in the brush. Wow! Many new birds were seen before lunch.

We enjoyed a typical Trini lunch prepared by the ladies of Brasso Seco, and a demonstration involving the cacao they farm and market. Delicious! We spotted the elusive Rufous-browed Peppershrike flying around their pavilion. A stop in town produced a White-bearded Manakin, White-winged Becard, Sooty Grassquit, and Violaceous Euphonia. Near their cavities in the road bank, we came upon a family of Rufous-tailed Jacamar for great photo opportunities. In the village of Morne la Croix, we had scope views of a distant Scaled Pigeon, close views of a cute Pale-breasted Spinetail, a tree of Yellow-rumped Cacique building their nests, and an Olive-gray Saltator. On our return to the centre, we relaxed in the living room and tallied the long list of birds we had seen today.

### **Sat., Dec 23            Bearded Bellbirds | Oilbirds**

Today we met with the head of the lodge’s guides, Mukesh, and he explained the history of Asa Wright and the centre. We walked the Discovery trail hearing the distinctive “bongs” of the Bearded Bellbirds as we approached their area. From the trail, we could see at least four of the species vocalizing around us. After lunch, most of the group walked the renovated trail to the Oilbird cave, a unique species that is a nocturnal, fruit-eating bird. The colony has been monitored for years and is one of the easier places to view this species in the world. The challenging venture into the cave provided views of a few of the birds near the entrance. We spent the afternoon on the veranda and enjoyed a special dinner prepared by the chef, a perfect ending to this exciting day.



## **Sun., Dec. 24      Christmas Eve at Caroni Marsh | Scarlet Ibis**

Caleb led us this morning on a walk down the entrance road finding soaring Short-tailed Hawks with a Zone-tailed, White-flanked and White-bellied Antbirds, a Southern Beardless-Tyrannulet, Forest Elaenia, and Golden-fronted Greenlet. Dave picked us up after lunch and we visited the Millennium Golf Course on our way to Caroni Marsh, seeing Anhinga, White-headed Marsh Tyrant and Pied Water-Tyrant. We arrived at the boats and immediately saw a Masked Cardinal and a pair of sleeping Tropical Screech-Owls. What a start! We chose a gift from Naturalist Journeys before we boarded our “dinner cruise”. Our guide, Lester Nanan, was talented in spotting birds and mammals, and he pointed out a Mangrove Boa, a Northeastern Silky Anteater, another pair of Screech-Owls, a Common Potoo, a Mangrove Cuckoo, Straited Herons, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, and Black-crested Antshrike.

When we emerged into the bay, a line of over 200 American Flamingos could be seen at the base of the island, and Scarlet Ibis were beginning to collect above them in the trees. As we ate our delicious dinner in comfort, we enjoyed this amazing and memorable natural phenomena.

## **Mon., Dec 25      Christmas Day at Asa Wright**

We enjoyed another beautiful morning on Christmas day and met on the veranda to stake out the male Tufted Coquette that had been eluding many of the photographers. After breakfast, we took a walk down the main road with Caleb and were lucky to find the first Black-faced Antthrush of the season skulking in the undergrowth. We walked to the entrance gate watching for our first looks at Red-crowned Ant-tanager and found a pair in that area. We enjoyed good looks at Turquoise, Bay-headed and Blue-gray Tanagers, a Streaked Flycatcher, and Rufous-breasted Wren. After lunch, a group of us went down the Discovery Trail to watch the White-bearded Manakin lek that doesn't get active until around 2 pm. We were rewarded with at least five males executing their mating “dance” only a few feet above the ground. What a delightful Christmas present from nature! Before dinner, we had a Christmas party with complimentary drinks from Naturalist Journeys and a gift exchange. Each of us told a story about a memorable birding moment, and we enjoyed a delicious dinner prepared by the Asa Wright staff.



## **Tues., Dec. 26**

### **Nariva Swamp**

Our final full day in Trinidad was spent with Dave at the Nariva Swamp area, the largest freshwater herbaceous swamp on the island. We drove through the island to the East Coast which hosts an ecosystem different than the west side. We stopped on Mexico Road finding a perched Savanna Hawk and the lovely Red-breasted Meadowlark out in the field. Green-rumped Parrotlets were calling and then landed above us for good looks. We had lunch at Manzanilla Beach on the Atlantic Ocean which is lined with Moriche Palms, and we spotted Magnificent Frigatebirds and an Osprey soaring over the water. The Nariva River mouth was our next stop and provided nice looks at Black-bellied Plovers, a Willet, and a pair of American Pygmy Kingfishers. In the brush we found a Silvered Antbird, Bicolored Conebills, and a Northern Scrub-Flycatcher. In the newly planted watermelon fields, we saw many Yellow-headed Caracaras of various ages on the ground. New birds were found as we entered the swamp area with activity everywhere we looked; Striped Cuckoo, Yellow Oriole, Gray Kingbirds, Yellow-hooded Blackbirds and Yellow-chinned Spinetail to list a few. What an amazing area! As we were leaving, Dave spotted a Limpkin and a battle between Crested and Yellow-headed Caracaras. A great last day to an amazing trip!

## **Wed., Dec. 27**

### **Departures | Extension to Tobago**

Sadly, four of the group departed for home, and the remaining six flew the short 18 minute flight to Tobago, being greeted by Jason Radix, our new guide. We began birding immediately visiting the Bon Accord Sewage Treatment Ponds. Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks were sitting on the levee with Anhingas and Black-crowned Night Herons, shorebirds including Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary, and Spotted Sandpipers were at the water's edge. We drove along the coast and spotted Sandwich and Royal Terns over the beach. We arrived at our new home for three days, Cuffie River Nature Retreat, and Regina, the owner, welcomed us and escorted us to our rooms. We watched the feeders around the lodge spotting our new target, the beautiful Ruby-topaz Hummingbird. A Rufous-breasted Hermit could be found at the same feeder. Wow! After our delicious dinner, we found White-tailed Nightjars feeding in the lights, and we rested well anticipating tomorrow's adventure!

## **Thurs., Dec. 28**

### **Birding Tobago Island**

We spent our first morning walking the area with Cuffie's longtime birding guide, Desmond Wright. Knowing the location of many of the special species of Tobago, we were very successfully getting good looks at Rufous-vented Chachalacas, White-tailed Sabrewing, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Red-crowned Woodpecker, Blue-black Manakin, and Ochre-ored Flatbill. After lunch, Jason took us to the Centre Street Ponds for additional water birds, and we had good views of White-cheeked Pintails, Least Grebe, Purple Gallinule, Green Herons, and a Glossy Ibis. We



then visited the Adventure Farm and had great photo opportunities for the Trinidad Motmot, a nesting White-tipped Dove, Black-throated Mango, and Spectacled Thrush. On our return to Cuffie, we spotted more White-tail Nightjars on the road. What a successful day!

### **Fri., Dec. 29            Gilpin Trace | Little Tobago Island**

Our final full day in Tobago would be a busy one. We drove to the historic Main Ridge Forest Reserve, the world's oldest legally protected forest since 1776. We walked a trail finding Golden-olive Woodpecker, Venezuelan Flycatchers, Chivi Vireo, and finally Red-legged Honeycreepers. After a stop at the visitor's center, we walked the famous Gilpin Trace trail. Trinidad Motmots were plentiful, we spotted an Olivaceous Woodcreeper and our first Yellow-legged Thrushes. What a beautiful tropical jungle trail! We arrived at Speyside in time for lunch at the Birders' Restaurant and then met our boat captain, Zolani, at Blue Water's Inn to journey in his glass bottom boat to Little Tobago Island. The uphill climb on the island was rewarding, providing an expansive view of the ocean cliffs where hundreds of Red-billed Tropicbirds, Magnificent Frigatebirds, Red-footed and Brown Boobies were nesting. On the descent, we found Brown-crested Flycatchers, Scaly-naped Pigeons, and a Peregrine Falcon. Ruddy Turnstones greeted us on our return to the dock. What a successful last day in Tobago!

### **Sat., Dec. 30            Departures**

Sadly, the Christmas in Trinidad & Tobago tour was completed, and we departed for Trinidad's airport and flights back to the U.S. On the lawn at the airport, Nancy let us know that she had seen a Saffron Finch, the final species of the trip. We all agreed that visiting Trinidad was a wonderful way to celebrate the Christmas holidays!

*Photos: Group (Pat Lueders - PL), Purple Honeycreeper (Nancy Siepman - NS), American Flamingos (NS), Green Honeycreeper (NS), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (NS), Butterfly (NS), Turquoise Tanager (Deb Ervine - DE), Barred Antshrike (NS), Scarlet Ibis roosting & American Flamingos (NC), Bearded Bellbird (NS), White-necked Jacobin (NS), Green-backed Trogon (NS), Squirrel Cuckoo (NS), White-bearded Manakin (PL), Channel-billed Toucan (NS), Scenic (PL), Pelicans (PL), Trinidad Motmot (DE)*