Thanksgiving in Trinidad & Tobago
Nov. 22 – Dec. 1, 2025 | Trip Report | by Stephen Grace

Naturalist Journeys Tour Leader Stephen Grace with Jennifer, Chris, Libby, Steve H., Anne, Jim, Linda and Russ

Sat., Nov. 22 Hacienda Jacana

We gathered at Hacienda Jacana, a tucked-away ecolodge that feels like Trinidad the way Trinidad should feel—quiet, lush, birdy, and rooted in family and place. Jesse's parents first began the transformation of the old plantation, reshaping it over the years into a haven for wildlife and people. Jesse and Helen now run the lodge, carrying the vision forward with warmth and intention, while Jesse's brother Paul works culinary magic in the kitchen, turning local ingredients into meals that taste like home and forest combined. Heliconias leaned over

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still ponds, breadfruit cast cool shade, and the calls of Great Kiskadees carried through second growth. It was here, among purple vervain and dragonfly-dimpled water, that our journey began.

We had the good fortune to spend our first afternoon with naturalist, photographer, and author Faraaz Abdool, whose presence shaped the tone of the trip. Faraaz calls his style casual birding—not for lack of passion, but because it slows the pace to where birds reveal themselves, one by one. He reminded us that no species is too common to celebrate, that beauty lives in a grassquit as surely as in a bellbird. He and his partner Joanne, who manages the lodge with gracious ease, welcomed us like friends returning rather than guests arriving. This activity wasn't on the schedule—just an afternoon freely offered—and it set the tone of generosity and curiosity that carried through the week.

As we settled into the pace of the place, our attention shifted from the exotic to the familiar. The first birds that greet you in Trinidad are often the common ones—the species you stop noticing unless someone invites you to look again. And that became a theme of our very first afternoon: beauty doesn't always announce itself with rarity.

Take the Bananaquit. Often brushed aside as ordinary because it seems to be everywhere, yet it's anything but. Its curved bill and brushlike tongue are exquisitely adapted for nectar feeding. Sometimes it pierces blossoms to rob nectar without pollinating, but when it feeds naturally it becomes a pollen courier, helping flowers reproduce. Across its range there are more than forty recognized subspecies; the Trinidad and Tobago form is distinguished by its crisp white eyebrow. In Faraaz's company, a Bananaquit became a moment of wonder—a reminder that nature doesn't reserve its magic for rarity. It sits in plain sight, if we take the time to notice.

A hedge of purple vervain—always a magnet for hummingbirds—produced excellent looks at Little Hermit. The elusive Tufted Coquette remained a rumor for the moment, though anticipation was already building. A Northern Waterthrush bobbed along the ground—an old familiar friend for many in the group—while Orange-winged Amazons passed overhead in noisy pairs, reversing direction morning and evening as they commuted between feeding and roosting sites. These local rhythms, simple but deeply rooted, delighted a group hungry not just for sightings but for understanding.

The forest edge rang with the bubbling voices of Crested Oropendolas. Yellow tails flashed against the canopy, and we tried—at Faraaz's suggestion—to catch the glint of their pale blue eyes. Some birds that landed close proved to be Yellow-rumped Caciques, oropendola cousins with the same astonishing eyes.

We had an unexpected lesson in look-alike flycatchers. The Boat-billed Flycatcher announced itself—and Faraaz walked us through the field marks that distinguish it from the more familiar Great Kiskadee. Later, when a Great Kiskadee burst onto the scene with its unmistakable onomatopoeic call, *kis-ka-DEE!*, the comparison fell into place. The kiskadee showed brighter rufous wings and a bolder attitude overall, while the Boat-billed proved heavier-billed and more subdued. It's usually the Great Kiskadee that greets travelers on their first Neotropical experience, yet here the script flipped, a detail the group savored.

A male Black-throated Mango posed in perfect light, shimmering green with a velvet-black throat stripe. As we watched, Faraaz shared a remarkable recent observation: what looked like a male mango sitting on a nest. In hummingbirds, males never incubate eggs or feed young—parental care is the sole domain of the female—so sightings like this are extraordinarily unusual.

How to explain it? One possibility is a hormonally altered female, expressing male-like plumage. Another, still speculative but compelling, is that female hummingbirds may sometimes adopt male-like coloration to reduce harassment or gain better access to resources such as feeders. Even common birds still hold mysteries, and hummingbirds seem particularly good at reminding us how much we have left to learn.

Linda, delayed by a travel snag, joined us, our group now whole as conversation flowed like birdsong across the dining area. Dinner showcased the hospitality at the heart of Hacienda Jacana. For lunches and dinners during our three-night stay Paul prepared dishes like roasted chicken, grilled fish, and Trinidadian lasagna layered with sweet plantains. Breadfruit—harvested steps away—anchored some meals, and homemade sorrel drink, a hibiscus infusion central to Trinidadian culture, especially around Christmas, paired beautifully with the meals. Coconut ice cream finished the night, a runaway favorite.

It was hard to imagine a finer beginning: a family-run lodge in the green heart of Trinidad, a gentle introduction to birding through the wise eyes of Faraaz, and a first taste—both culinary and avian—of the richness to come. Our story had only just begun.

Sun., Nov. 23 Hacienda Jacana | Caroni National Park

Our first full day together began with optional bonus birding before our local guide arrived, though "optional" didn't really apply—everyone joined in, pulled outside by the magnet of the purple vervain hedge. The quest for the Tufted Coquette had become a kind of shared electricity in the group. Coquettes don't visit feeders; their

tiny size and traplining lifestyle mean you must find them in the wild, where they shuttle from flower to flower on predictable loops. The tension was real: the flowers were blooming, the light was perfect, and we were all hoping for a glimpse of one of Trinidad's most extraordinary birds.

The hedge was alive with hummers. White-necked Jacobin, Copper-rumped Hummingbird, White-chested Emerald, Blue-chinned Sapphire—the full morning show of wings and glitter.

We watched a Little Hermit visit vervain repeatedly, its slim, decurved bill dipping into flowers it wasn't "supposed" to favor, as Faraaz pointed out. Hermits are famous specialists—bill and bloom co-evolved like key and lock, their curved bills matching the long, hanging corollas of Heliconia and other deep tubular flowers. Yet here it was, happily working short vervain blossoms alongside the generalists. Field guides describe patterns—not rules. Birds break them all the time. Nature, ever the better teacher, leaves room for surprise.

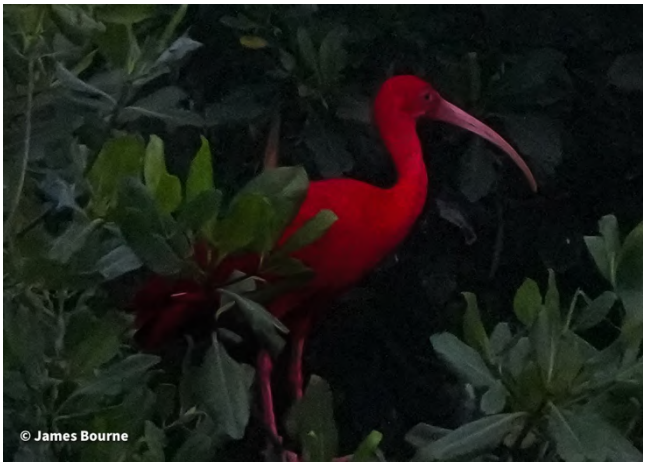
Then came our next surprise. An immature Ruby-topaz Hummingbird appeared—remarkably early, at least a month ahead of the usual return of birds migrating north from South America to breed in Trinidad and Tobago. And then, as if the season wished to make its point, a full adult male blazed into view, ruby-red crown and topaz-gold throat flashing like flame when the light struck at the perfect angle. Cameras clicked. Voices fell to whispers. It was still early morning and already unforgettable. Steve H. smiled and said the bird looked "like a scholar in robes in an academic procession"—a wonderfully vivid simile. He had arrived calling himself a non-birder, just there to support his spouse—but before long he was spotting birds, sharing laughter, and clearly hooked. The best birder is the one having the most fun.

And just when we thought the morning couldn't get any better, a female Tufted Coquette zipped into view—tiny, quick, flashing the pale rump band that makes the species unmistakable. Hearts jumped. Moments later, as if on cue, the male arrived.

Nothing in photos prepares you for a male Tufted Coquette. At just a few grams—about the weight of a penny—he is bumblebee-small yet impossibly ornate. His crest blazed orange, a spray of plumes like a tiny flame. From his face, elongated cheek feathers—also fiery orange—flared outward when he turned his head, creating miniature explosions. His back gleamed like green fire.

He perched often between feeding bouts—a gift for anyone with binoculars or a camera. We stayed a long time, each visit and landing offering a new angle on the crest and cheek plumes, another flash of this living ember. Proof that the smallest birds sometimes burn the brightest in memory.

Breakfast after this spectacle tasted especially delicious. As we drank coffee and ate fresh fruit, a Purple Gallinule climbed into a banana tree and began feasting, its absurdly long yellow toes splayed across the fruit.



Those toes—evolved for walking on floating vegetation—spread weight across a wide surface, letting the bird tiptoe across lily pads without sinking. Here they served just as well in the banana tree, helping this jewel-toned marsh bird balance as it tore into fruit with surprising enthusiasm.

Shortly after, our Trinidad guide Dave Ramlal arrived—steady, sharp-eyed, keen-eared, and deeply experienced. With Dave we birded the grounds, beginning with a Blue-black Grassquit giving its “Johnny Jump-up” display from a stick, popping into the air in quick vertical leaps to impress females. A Black-crested Antshrike followed, crest flared, staring down from a tree limb with fierce intensity.

Wattled Jacanas worked the pond margins and sparked discussion on their reversed sex roles—larger, more dominant females defend territories and mate with multiple males, while males incubate eggs and raise the young. Southern Lapwings strode across the lawn like they owned the place, wing spurs flashing when they stretched—sharp little weapons used in territorial defense and in dive-bombing intruders. A Streak-headed Woodcreeper hitched its way up a trunk, bracing with stiff tail feathers as it probed bark crevices—a perfect introduction to the foraging style of Neotropical woodcreepers.

Next came the punctuation mark of the morning: a Rufous-tailed Jacamar, long-billed and iridescent, reminiscent of a bee-eater in —though unrelated, a beautiful case of convergent evolution. Not long after, a male Guianan Violaceous Trogon glowed from the understory like a yellow lantern hung in green shade. Then two Black-tailed Tityras were spotted, crisp black caps and red facial skin glowing against pale bodies.

Leaving the lodge gate, we walked the road where butterfly activity was breathtaking—Scarlet Peacocks flared red and black, White Peacocks drifted like pale petals, Malachites gleamed like living glass, and Postman butterflies crossed back and forth with steady purpose. Like a mail carrier on a daily route, the Postman flies the same circuit each day, visiting familiar flowers in sequence. This route-based foraging—known as traplining—echoes the behavior of hermit hummingbirds, which follow regular nectar circuits through the forest like a hunter checking traps.

As a member of the Heliconius longwing butterflies, the Postman belongs to one of the few butterfly groups that feed on pollen as well as nectar. The amino acids gained from pollen fuel their long lives—weeks or even months instead of days—and help them maintain cyanide-based chemical defenses, making them distasteful to predators and inspiring other species to mimic their bold patterns.

The birdlife was no less dazzling. A Streaked Xenops crept and spiraled along branches, foraging beneath leaves and hanging upside down like a tropical chickadee. The genus name—from Greek xenos (strange) + ops (appearance)—is wonderfully apt for a bird with such odd, acrobatic foraging habits and a chisel bill built for prying insects from curled leaves. Euler's Flycatcher appeared next—small, jittery, tail-flicking—a bird Dave Ramlal said he often recognizes first by behavior rather than plumage, a skill honed through decades in the field. Overhead, Common Squirrel-Cuckoos bounded branch to branch, long rufous tails flowing like banners. Their presence sparked a conversation about cuckoos—how some species such as the Common Cuckoo of Old World and the Striped Cuckoo found in Trinidad are brood parasites that lay eggs in other birds' nests, yet this one builds its own nest and raises its own young.

By late morning we returned for another of Paul's excellent meals, spirits high—camera cards full, and memories fuller still. The day had begun with a bird the size of a bumblebee and crescendoed through antbirds, woodcreepers, jacamars, trogons, tityras, and cuckoos—each encounter stacking wonder upon wonder. A sense of promise hung in the heat; Trinidad had opened a door, revealing a glimpse of the Neotropics' treasure rooms, and we knew more waited beyond the threshold.

After lunch we loaded into the van with Dave and our driver Paul—not to be confused with Chef Paul back at the lodge—and set off toward Caroni, Trinidad's most storied wetland. But birding never begins at the destination; it begins the moment the wheels roll.

Our first pause came at Millennium Park, a riparian green wedge tucked among upscale homes. An Osprey circled overhead with a fish gripped tight in its talons. A male Ringed Kingfisher sat broad-shouldered above the river, crow-sized and vividly blue and rufous. Nearby, a white immature Little Blue Heron stood beside a Snowy Egret—an ideal side-by-side comparison. Black-necked Stilts, all impossibly pink legs and elegance, picked delicately through the shallows. An Anhinga, wings spread to the sun, reminded us that underwater it swims like a snake—its feathers lack waterproofing, giving it stealth rather than buoyancy, yet forcing it to dry before flight.

Even a bathroom stop became birding. Caribbean Grackles strutted across the roof of a shopping mall, and bright Saffron Finches flickered yellow in the lot. Always be birding.

Further along we found a flock of Smooth-billed Anis moving through the scrub—black cuckoos with laterally compressed hatchet-bills and a soundtrack of constant conversational chatter. Unlike most cuckoos, these birds breed cooperatively: several females may lay eggs in a single nest, and the entire group helps raise the chicks. Watching a dozen boisterous anis advance together felt like meeting a feathered committee, opinions offered all at once.

The road toward Caroni passed through open country patched with marsh. When we got out of the van and walked, a Yellow-chinned Spinetail appeared and sang, its busy chatter a soundtrack to Trinidad's marshlands. A Green-throated Mango perched near us, teal throat flaring, offering a satisfying view of a species much harder to find than the Black-throated Mango. In roadside mangrove scrub, we noted Common Waxbill and Tricolored Munia, naturalized exotics now woven into the island's avifauna. Then someone spotted two mud-brown birds with long downcurved bills—juvenile Scarlet Ibises, not yet transformed to the brilliant vermilion that would soon leave us breathless. Their presence felt like foreshadowing.

We reached Caroni Swamp in late afternoon, red mangroves rising from the tide on stilt-like roots, their trunks mirrored in dark water the color of strong tea. We stepped aboard a low, quiet boat piloted by Lester Nanan—descendant of the family whose advocacy and stewardship helped protect this wetland for generations. His calm confidence set the tone. We were not merely touring a swamp; we were entering a cathedral of mangroves.

We pushed into narrow waterways, ducking beneath low branches and vine-roots. Greater Anis appeared in twos and threes, blue-green gloss catching what light filtered in, pale eyes bright in the gloom. We searched for a Straight-billed Woodcreeper—heard it well—but only glimpsed movement in shadow. A Little Cuckoo called but stayed deep in cover. A Silky Anteater, tiny as a kitten and curled into a golden puff of fur, slept in a tangle of branches—a miniature nocturnal insect-hunter resting through the day. A Tree Boa lay coiled like twisted rope on a limb, waiting for night to hunt bats. At the shadowy swamp edges, Little Blue Herons moved like blue ghosts. A Peregrine Falcon sliced through the darkening sky.

Then the swamp opened into wide water, and the world seemed to exhale. American Flamingos stood pale rose in the shallows, long legs still as reeds. Scarlet Ibises passed overhead, lighting the gloom. The stage was set.

Lester anchored near the roost island while his wife Gale served dinner onboard—savory rice and roast potatoes with curried chicken, fish and veggie dishes—even rum punch and chocolate cake—laid out on a red cloth. A feast amid the mangroves. It felt surreal to eat a gourmet meal while ibis trickled in, one flock at a time. Then the sky shifted, and the spectacle began.

At first a trickle—six or seven birds. Then more. Then dozens. Then hundreds. Thousands. A river of red wings flowed across the twilight. The mangroves turned crimson as flaming birds settled among their branches. Shrimp-rich diets load ibis feathers with carotenoids—pigments that build color feather by feather—meaning the reddest birds are often the healthiest, strongest, most desirable mates. Beauty backed by biology.

As light fell, something remarkable happened. The brilliant red softened, toned down by our eyes losing color sensitivity to night. The same birds that blazed like embers moments ago became darker, ember to charcoal. Not gone—just transformed by dusk.

We rode back through the mangrove tunnels in awed silence. A Boat-billed Heron ghosted past the beam of the spotlight, a nocturnal hunter on the move. A Common Potoo glowed in the light—enormous eyes reflecting gold, as if the stump its camouflaged body perched on had suddenly sprouted a pair of watchful eyes. Pauraques lifted from the riverbanks, wingbars flashing white. A caiman's eyes burned like twin red embers on the water—ancient, unblinking, and still.

The boat nudged the dock beneath stars and mangrove shadows. Back at Hacienda Jacana, we drifted to sleep with ibis still burning behind our eyelids. Morning had given us a hummingbird no bigger than a bumblebee; evening closed with a sky alive with scarlet wings. Trinidad had opened itself to us—lush, generous, unforgettable.

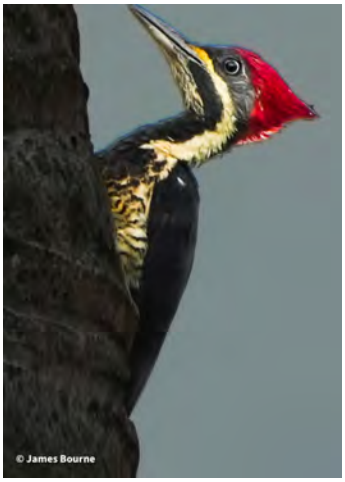
Mon., Nov. 24 Aripo Savanna | Trinidad's Atlantic Coast | Nariva Swamp

Just after breakfast, as we were preparing to leave, Dave heard a Green-backed Trogon and quickly found a beautiful male perched in a tree at the entrance to Hacienda Jacana. Jim captured a fantastic photo of the bird with a giant caterpillar clamped in its bill.

We left Hacienda Jacana and headed to Aripo Savanna. Ruddy Ground Doves were common but uncommonly beautiful, and we celebrated them—as Faraaz had encouraged us to do with all common birds. Blue-gray Tanagers ("Blue Jean" locally) and Palm Tanagers were constant companions, and we talked about why these familiar species should never be taken for granted—their beauty, their ecological roles, their delightful presence from yard to forest edge.

A Silver-beaked Tanager lit up the morning, the male's plumage wine-red and luminous. An Olive-gray Saltator followed, its pale supercilium on full display—a fancy term for eyebrow, and a rather supercilious one at that.

A pair of Barred Antshrikes perched together, male and female—the male in his barred "jailbird" plumage, the female wearing her rich cinnamon crest. Russ, encountering antbirds for the first time as a birder from the UK, asked what antbirds actually are, his curiosity sparking many natural history conversations throughout the tour. We talked about the diversity of the antbird family—how some species are true obligate ant-followers that shadow army-ant swarms through the forest, taking insects flushed in panic—while others, like the Barred



Antshrike, are more independent hunters, gleaning insects methodically from dense understory vegetation and only joining a swarm opportunistically. Two strategies, same lineage, each fascinating in its own way.

While searching for a Masked Yellowthroat that didn't appear, we admired blooming ginger plants and a perched Tropical Kingbird—TK—common, yes, but entertaining, especially as it performed classic flycatcher maneuvers: flying out from a perch to grab an insect, then snapping back to the exact same spot as though attached to a string. TKs, we agreed, should not be taken for granted. Nor should TVs.

A few TVs (Turkey Vultures) drifted past, and Black Vultures circled overhead in huge numbers. We talked about kettles—spiraling groups of vultures riding thermals. We didn't see any wakes (vultures on the ground), only kettles rising into the sky.

A Savanna Hawk gave great looks. A Gray-lined Hawk followed, a huge hit. Yellow Orioles appeared, and we noted how these orioles differ from Old World orioles familiar to Russ. These are icterids, members of the New World Blackbird family—relatives of the Crested Oropendolas and Yellow-rumped Caciques from the day before.

Dave led us to a reliable spot for Red-breasted Meadowlarks, and sure enough, we found them— handsome icterids scattered across the grassland. Immature males moved among adults, the brighter birds glowing with full scarlet chests, visible from a great distance. We were lucky enough to have a few land close, offering exceptional looks.

We headed east to the coast and enjoyed a picnic lunch of fresh-cooked food we'd picked up along the way: barbequed chicken, callaloo, and provision—true Trini fare. Callaloo is a rich, savory stew of leafy greens (often dasheen leaves) simmered with coconut milk, aromatics, and spices. "Provision" refers to hearty root vegetables like cassava, dasheen, plantain, or sweet potato—staple comfort food across the islands.

South down Coconut Alley, Dave found a Snail Kite, and everyone enjoyed fantastic views of its deeply hooked bill, perfectly shaped for extracting apple snails.

Leaving the coast, we drove inland through Nariva Swamp. Our first stop produced a Common Black Hawk perched for excellent scope views. A rain shower sent us scrambling into the van, but as so often in Trinidad's rainy season, the sun returned quickly. Here, downpours and sunshine often coexist—the landscape at once glowing and dripping, rainbows smearing color across a rain-streaked sky.

In mangroves we found Bicolored Conebill, a little tanager of estuaries. A White-lined Tanager appeared—the male entirely black, the thin white line often difficult to see unless the bird is in flight. A busy Northern Scrub-Flycatcher flicked its crest. A Golden-fronted Greenlet showed itself only with effort. Another Rufous-tailed Jacamar appeared, quickly becoming a tour favorite. Then came a true surprise—Rufous Crab-Hawks. Seeing one is lucky; seeing three is extraordinary. Many tours never encounter them at all.

We searched for White-tailed Goldenthroat, a hummingbird that doesn't use feeders and prefers wild open savanna with flowering reeds. We found its preferred flowers but not the bird.

While scanning, we made a stunning discovery: a Pinnated Bittern right beside the road. Dave rarely sees these, and he was thrilled for our group to not only see one, but to see it so well. We watched and photographed it from the van at close range before it slowly opened its wide wings and launched skyward.

On the way back to Hacienda Jacana we stopped several times for one Crested Caracara and several Yellow-headed Caracaras—members of the falcon family, though unlike the swift peregrine-type falcons, these are ground-loving opportunists that look like hawks, scavenge like vultures, and display a problem-solving intelligence that approaches parrots and corvids. I mentioned Jonathan Meiburg's *A Most Remarkable Creature*, its title drawn from Charles Darwin's astonished descriptions of caracaras. In *The Voyage of the Beagle*, he wrote of their Falklands caracara cousin, calling them "false eagles"—raptors shaped like nobles of the sky but behaving like bold, clever tricksters. To Darwin they were "the most forward and inquisitive birds" he met on his journey. That mix of mischief and raptorial form is what makes caracaras so unforgettable—and our group seemed to relish the story.

It was a day full of learning, discovery, and joy—capped by another stellar dinner from Chef Paul at Hacienda Jacana and more of his famous homemade coconut ice cream for dessert. We lingered over stories and laughter but eventually drifted off to our rooms knowing we'd be up and out early the next morning, trading sleep for the chance to witness something extraordinary.

Tues., Nov. 25 Grand Riviere | Asa Wright Nature Center

Steve and Libby had decided to stay back, sleep in, and enjoy the grounds of Hacienda Jacana; the rest of us headed out for a 4 a.m. start. Everyone was punctual and organized. Away we went, sprawled in the van for a little extra sleep as Paul expertly navigated the winding roads leading us northeast. This is Trinidad's Atlantic

coast, not Caribbean—the island faces the Atlantic on its exposed eastern flank, which gives it its rugged surf, sea cliffs, and wave-carved sea stacks.

At dawn, dramatic scenery revealed itself: rainforest tumbling down to the shoreline, mist clinging to ridges, waves thundering against black-rock headlands. We wound upward past the beach resort of Grand Riviere and stood atop a hill as the sky filled with bruised clouds. Just before a deluge broke open, we saw what we had left so early to find: Trinidad Piping-Guans—endemic, critically endangered, and one of the island's great conservation stories.

Three Trinidad Piping-Guans sat high in the canopy like awkward arboreal turkeys, their bare white faces and blue wattles luminous against the green. Once widespread on Trinidad, they were pushed to the edge by overhunting and habitat loss, reduced to a few hundred birds. Seeing them here—alive, perched, feeding—felt like witnessing a lineage that nearly slipped off the planet. Trinidad has since mounted an impressive recovery effort, and moments like this are part of that ongoing success story.

Dave stepped away briefly and returned holding nutmeg—both wild and cultivated forms—to illustrate the guans' preferred fruit. He explained how they swallow nutmeg whole, digest the fleshy aril, and later disperse the seeds through the forest, effectively planting future trees. The demonstration was simple, hands-on, perfect: fruit in his palm, guans in the canopy, and the connection between species and landscape suddenly tangible. The Trinidad Piping-Guan is more than a bird to check off a list—it is a gardener of the rainforest, its survival intertwined with the forest's own.

When the rain began, the birding hardly slowed. Hummingbirds swarmed the feeders beneath the sheltered eaves of our roofed viewpoint, activity buzzing as if the weather energized them. White-necked Jacobins—large, bold, unapologetic feeder bullies—seemed to revel in the downpour, bathing and flaring their tails. Blue-chinned Sapphires flashed blue-green fire, Black-throated Mangos swept in and out on quick arcs, White-chested Emeralds hovered with fine control, and now and then a Tufted Coquette materialized beyond the feeders to probe the purple vervain.

We drove down the hill to breakfast at the Mount Plaisir Estate Hotel on Grand Riviere Beach—a delicious spread that went far beyond bacon and eggs. Tomato choka, roasted and mashed with deep Indian roots, sat beside toast with marmalade and grilled tomatoes, a nod to Trinidad's British heritage. Fried bake, a Caribbean classic—like a tender, savory donut—anchored the plate, and fresh papaya provided a bright finish. A perfect Trinidadian morning: Indian, African, and European influences woven into one locally sourced meal.

After coffee, we birded outside the dining room. Brown Pelicans flew past in disciplined squadrons. Magnificent Frigatebirds soared overhead and perched on distant snags; one male sat with his red throat pouch partially inflated, allowing good scope views. A Rufous-browed Peppershrike sang above us—a beautiful, ventriloquial voice that echoes in the canopy—while giving us only brief, teasing glimpses, as this vireo species loves to do. Black Vultures patrolled the beach; one began playing with a soccer ball, prompting jokes about challenging the vultures to a match.

We continued to Bajnath's Estate Hummingbird Sanctuary inside Matura National Park, where Josh Bajnath and his mother met us. His mother was warm, welcoming, and prepared an exquisite homemade lunch of traditional Indian dishes, including buss-up-shut roti (the shredded roti whose name—"busted up shirt"—refers to its torn, soft texture). Josh showed us how to use our hands to wrap the curries in the roti. "You can use a spoon," he joked, "but you will be judged." They served chai and his mother's homemade spice cake—simple, fragrant, unforgettable.

And what a show with lunch. The hummingbird activity was almost too much to follow—so many birds, all so active. New species for the trip appeared one after another: Brown Violetear, with its purplish ear tufts; Rufous-breasted Hermit with long, decurved bill perfectly adapted to heliconias; and Long-billed Starthroat, flashing its turquoise crown and purple gorget.

Then came one of the unforgettable moments of the tour: two Tufted Coquettes perched side by side on a branch gently touched their bills. Josh explained that this was a mother and juvenile—an intimate exchange rarely witnessed. The combination of the Bajnath family's warmth, extraordinary hummingbird viewing, expert interpretation from Josh, and a meal none of us will ever forget left the group awestruck.

A bonus sighting greeted us as we stepped away from the dining patio—a tiny creature wriggling across the floor, not something any of us expected. At first it looked like a small worm, but a closer look revealed shiny scales and the tiniest flicking tongue. Not a worm at all, but a blind snake.

Blind snakes are among the smallest snakes in the world—thread-thin, glossy, and built for life underground. They spend most of their time burrowing in soil and leaf litter, feeding on ants and termites. Their eyes are greatly reduced and hidden beneath scales, sensitive only to light and shadow. Because they so rarely surface, finding one out in the open—especially on a patio—felt like discovering a secret. A perfect little ambassador from the rainforest's hidden world, revealed for just a moment.

With full bellies and full hearts, we continued, heading to one of the world's great ecolodges: Asa Wright.

Asa Wright Nature Centre is a legendary place—known globally for its verandah, where generations of naturalists have watched tanagers, toucans, hummingbirds, and manakins move through the forested slopes of the Arima Valley. One of the first nature reserves in the Caribbean, it helped shape the early movement of community-based conservation, long before the term was widely used. The centre is named for Asa Wright herself, an Icelandic-Trinidadian plantation owner and conservation-minded bird enthusiast who, along with friends, protected this former cocoa estate for wildlife and for those who would come to marvel at it. Today, it remains a sanctuary—for biodiversity, and for the people who arrive seeking connection with it.

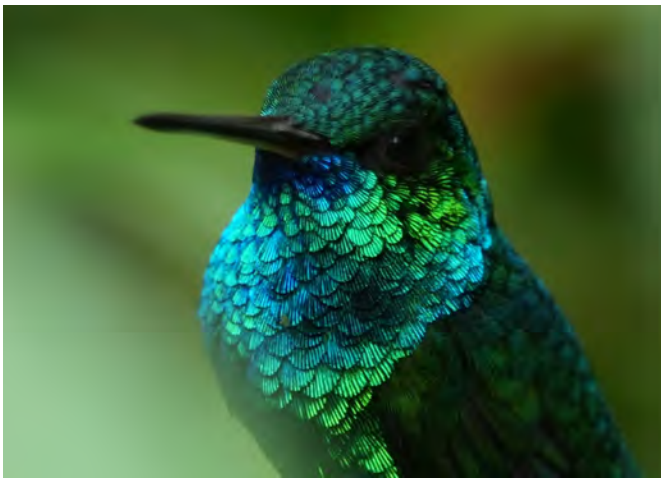
We checked in, dropped our bags, and drifted out to the verandah. Steve and Libby, fresh from a day at Hacienda Jacana, were already posted at the railing, wide-eyed at the spectacle of birds whirling around the feeders and fruit trays. With the group reunited, we turned our binoculars to the honeycreepers—Purple and Green—males and females so distinct in color and pattern that they seemed like four separate species, each more dazzling than the one before.

We completed our daily checklist on that storied verandah, savoring the dusk chorus. Tomorrow we would be up early once again—this time to seek some of Trinidad's most iconic avian treasures. What awaited us was extraordinary, and the anticipation alone was enough to quicken everyone's pulse.

Savoring the sounds of dusk as the birds quieted and the frogs began their chorus, we felt the forest shift into its nighttime rhythm. Dinner was our first of many gourmet meals here—buffet-style fish, chicken, and a local dish of peas cooked with Caribbean spices, simple but full of that unmistakable island magic. No one would go hungry on this trip, we all agreed, laughing as we pushed our plates away so bowls of ice cream could be put in front of us.

After dinner we set out on a night walk with an Asa Wright guide, Sabira—a young woman who had just begun guiding and brought wonderful enthusiasm to her introduction to the forest's nocturnal life. One of the highlights was a Ruschenberger's Tree Boa stretched out along a branch, perfectly still and beautifully patterned. Chris, our resident snake enthusiast, was especially thrilled.

We talked about the adaptations of tree boas—how arboreal species differ from their heavier-bodied ground-dwelling relatives. Tree boas must strike fast and accurately at bats and birds on the wing, sometimes while dangling from a single coil. They rarely go to the ground, relying instead on balance, cryptic coloration, and stealth as they hunt in three dimensions.



Sabira's UV light revealed the eerie glow of harvestmen—long-legged arachnids often mistaken for spiders, though they are a separate lineage entirely. Lacking venom and silk, they lead quieter lives than their spider cousins, wandering the forest as omnivores that feed on tiny insects, decaying matter, fungi, and whatever else the night offers. A tiny scorpion also fluoresced, its exoskeleton shining ghostly blue under the ultraviolet beam. Tree frogs hid among leaves at eye level, their calls echoing from the vegetation. And in a pond near the trail, we found two enormous Cane Toads—native here, perfectly at home in Trinidad's ecosystems, even though they have become a nightmare invasive species elsewhere. One sat half-submerged with only its head showing; another hopped slowly across the path, unconcerned by our nighttime wanderings.

In a bluff along the road, our night walk brought us eye to eye with Manicou Crabs—large, terrestrial crabs li ving in the mountain forests, burrowed into hillsides far from any tide. Several peered from their holes like sentries; others stood boldly at the entrances, claws raised in poses equal parts warning and comedy. Unlike most crabs, Manicous never return to the sea—or even to freshwater. Females brood their young inside the burrow and carry fully formed juveniles beneath them, tiny youngsters clinging like opossum joeys. In Trinidad, the word "manicou" refers to the local opossum, so a crab that carries its babies the same way naturally inherited the name. The encounter sparked conversation about the Black-backed Land Crab, Trinidad's coastal species, which must still migrate to the sea to spawn—releasing larvae to the surf before the young return inland. A classic marine life cycle Manicous have long since abandoned.

The stars came out between slow-moving clouds, the night warm and fragrant—a perfect close to a remarkable day. Tomorrow we would rise early, with Asa Wright's storied trails waiting just beyond the dark, and an undercurrent of calm excitement ran through the group. We knew the morning might bring some of the centre's most iconic birds, and the promise of discovery felt close, like dawn already gathering at the edge of night.

Wed., Nov. 26 Asa Wright Nature Centre

Before breakfast, everyone made their way to the verandah at their own pace. Some of us arrived just as dawn was lighting up the Arima Valley below—a soft wash of gold along the ridges, mist clinging to the folds of the rainforest, the valley slowly revealing itself under the first touch of sun. It was one of those Trinidad mornings where the air feels still and dense with life, a sense of calm and profound beauty settling over everything.

Jennifer was especially entranced by the Purple Honeycreepers, bright and electric, feasting on fruit just a few feet away, and her excitement was contagious. The usual whirl of tanagers and hummingbirds buzzed around the verandah, a living kaleidoscope, and then—as if the scene needed a centerpiece—a Channel-billed Toucan

appeared in a treetop. Such a beautiful bird: sleek black, lemon-yellow breast, that patch of deep blue facial skin, and a bill so improbably long it always seems like it shouldn't work. Yet a toucan's bill is strong and surprisingly light, built of hollow bone and keratin like a natural honeycomb. Perfect for reaching fruit on slender branches, raiding nests, and even shedding heat, functioning like a radiant cooling fin.

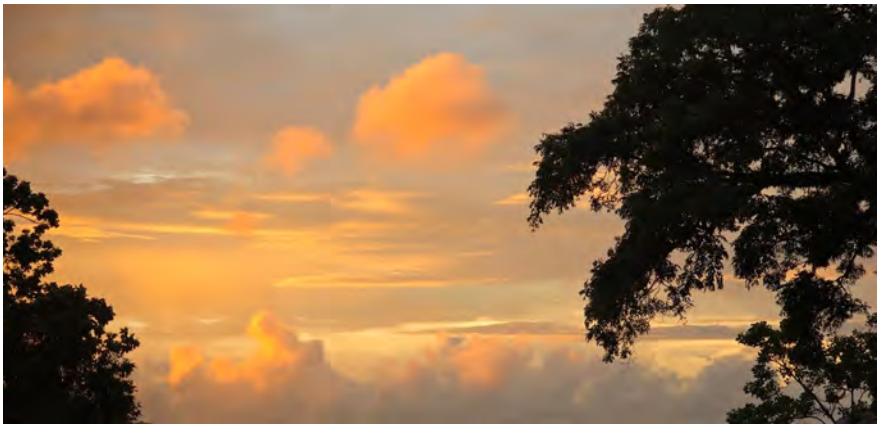
But in that moment, the science hardly mattered. It was enough to stand there and simply feel awe. For many people, the toucan is the quintessential Neotropical bird—an ambassador for the richest bird region on Earth. And there is truly no better place to step into that world than Asa Wright.

At breakfast I told a story everyone loved. A British novelist living in Jamaica needed a name for the protagonist of a spy novel he was writing. He was a birder, and while searching for a name with the right crispness and simplicity, he glanced at one of the books on his shelf: *Birds of the West Indies* by the American ornithologist James Bond. Fleming later said he wanted a name that sounded "as ordinary as possible"—and James Bond fit perfectly. And that's how the most famous spy in fiction got his name from a field guide.

We kept the theme going by recalling the Bond film in which the spy poses as an ornithologist. In *Die Another Day*, Pierce Brosnan's Bond appears in Havana holding a copy of *Birds of the West Indies*—a clever nod to the real James Bond and to the bird book that started it all.

After a great breakfast we were ready to begin. As we gathered on the verandah, we met our guide for the day: Caleb, a longtime Asa Wright naturalist known for his deep knowledge and patient, enthusiastic way of sharing the wonders of this remarkable place. Even before we set out, a Bearded Bellbird was vocalizing from somewhere down the valley. This species is almost impossible to believe until you experience it: a snow-white male with black throat wattles and a voice like a hammer striking an anvil. I found the calling bird with the scope and we all enjoyed views, though what we really hoped for was to get close enough to stand underneath one calling from a perch.

We headed out on the trails. Torch Ginger plants stopped us in our tracks—their surreal, sculptural blooms glowing pink in the filtered morning light. Around their blooms swarmed several Green Hermits, the long-billed, long-tailed hummingbirds that seem purpose-built for heliconias and ginger blossoms. Watching them arc in and out of the flowers was pure joy. Caleb heard a Golden-headed Manakin and soon found a male; everyone saw it, then a female, and a few of us were lucky enough to witness the male's "moonwalk"—sliding along a horizontal branch in a smooth, gravity-defying dance. Manakins are one of the signature families of the Neotropics, famous for their leks, acrobatic displays, and explosive snapping wing sounds. Seeing this one felt like a gift, especially since it's harder to find than the White-bearded Manakin, which was our next target.



A short walk brought us to the White-bearded Manakin lek right beside the trail. The males were active—little white-throated sparks hopping and snapping across the forest floor, performing their lightning-fast leaps between saplings. Their wings made sharp cracking sounds as they displayed, creating a rhythm that seemed to pulse through the understory. It was mesmerizing.

We heard a Collared Trogon and went searching, glimpsing a Channel-billed Toucan before it flew off. Onward we went, deeper into the rainforest, in search of the Bearded Bellbird. Its metallic calls grew louder as we approached. One bird seemed to be right above us, but the foliage was too dense. Caleb led us to an opening, and we waited—patiently, quietly, letting the rainforest settle. And then he appeared. A male bellbird, perched in full view, wattles hanging like black cords, throwing his head back with each explosive note. The sound hit us physically—as if someone had snapped a heavy wire nearby. We watched him for several minutes, transfixed, and even saw another male farther downslope.

Day-flying bats added unexpected intrigue—Greater Sac-winged Bats darting through the trees in agile bursts. Males of this species have small scent sacs near their wrists that hold glandular secretions—often blended with additional gathered odors—which they fan toward females during courtship, like tiny perfume diffusers in flight.

We walked beneath huge rainforest giants with buttress roots spreading like fins across the forest floor. Tropical rainforest soils are nutrient-poor, so buttresses help stabilize trees in rain-soaked ground while capturing nutrients from the thin organic layer at the surface. Nutrients cycle rapidly here, and the forest depends on intricate mutualisms: Cecropia trees hosting Azteca ants that defend them from herbivores; leafcutter ants ferrying bright green leaf fragments along well-worn trails to underground gardens. We watched a line of leafcutters at work and talked about how they don't eat the leaves—they use the foliage they collect to cultivate fungus, one of the great agricultural partnerships in the natural world.

Some of us had been reading (and rereading) *The New Neotropical Companion*—Libby had been an especially diligent student of this wonderfully rich text—and seeing its concepts unfold right in front of us—mutualisms, nutrient cycling, canopy stratification, lekking birds displaying like diagrams come alive—felt like stepping directly into the book. One chapter had been sitting at the back of our minds, pointing toward one of the strangest and most wondrous birds in the Neotropics. And so we began the trek to Dunston Cave.

Oilbirds defy categories. They are the world's only night-flying, fruit-eating birds that navigate using echolocation. In darkness they click, and the echoes bounce back, guiding them through narrow cave chambers much like bats. They roost and nest on rocky shelves deep inside, and the chicks—fed on lipid-rich palm fruits—grow so fat and oily that Indigenous people once rendered them for lamp fuel. Their name is a remnant of that history.

Recent rains had swollen the creek feeding the cave, so we waded in—feet wet, spirits high. Entering felt like crossing into another world: cool air flowed from the cave mouth like the breath of something ancient, and water roared into darkness ahead. Our headlamps threw narrow cones of light across the stone walls. Thrilling hardly covers it.

Deep inside, using a dim red beam that wouldn't disturb the birds, we stood in reverent quiet. Oilbirds perched on ledges—big, chestnut-brown bodies freckled with white spots, their enormous eyes built for darkness. Some flapped above us on broad, near-silent wings; others gave those unearthly cries that led early explorers to speak of "demon-haunted caves." The sound reverberated through the chamber, primal and electrifying. It felt like standing inside the living heart of prehistory—a moment both intimate and otherworldly. Truly one of the world's great wildlife encounters.

We were exceptionally fortunate—oilbirds had abandoned the cave a couple of months earlier and had only recently returned. Right place, right time, and a memory we knew we'd carry for life.

As we left the cave and stepped back into daylight, the rainforest offered a bonus: several Yellow-throated Trinidad Frogs along the stream edges—a species found nowhere else on Earth but the northern forests of Trinidad. Small, dark, and subtly patterned with a pale throat, this endemic herp lacks the neon brilliance of mainland poison dart frogs, though they belong to a related Neotropical lineage. Their beauty is quieter—a masterclass in camouflage—blending perfectly into leaf litter and mossy stones, seen only by those who slow down and look closely.

Then a land crab appeared in the middle of the trail, claws raised as if declaring, "You shall not pass!" We stepped respectfully around it—and just as we did, Blue Morpho butterflies drifted past us, flashing electric sky-blue. If a single butterfly could symbolize the rainforests of the Americas, it might be the morpho—an ambassador of tropical beauty in motion.

We hiked back uphill, but we were so elated from our cave encounter with the oilbirds that the ascent hardly registered.

Lunch followed, and then a relaxed "choose your own adventure" afternoon. Some guests headed out on the trails; others stayed to observe and photograph the steady parade of birds. Steve and Libby enjoyed tea with a Trinidadian friend they had met on the plane. Asa Wright offers many ways to experience nature, and everyone settled into their own rhythm. Birds such as Bay-headed Tanagers dazzled those watching from the verandah.

Nature encounters on the grounds included a Golden Tegu—a large, powerfully built lizard with a speckled golden-and-black pattern and a slow, deliberate gait. These tegus roam the forest floor in search of insects, eggs, and fruit, and though they look formidable, they are shy and deeply interesting animals to watch.

Some members of our group also saw Red-rumped Agoutis, those sleek, long-legged rodents that look like scaled-down versions of their famous Capybara cousins. They are far more than just charming mammals; agoutis are ecosystem architects and keystone species in Neotropical forests. They are the only animals capable of cracking open the rock-hard nuts of many rainforest trees—especially Brazil nuts—and they bury the seeds for later, much like squirrels. Many of those cached seeds are forgotten, sprouting into new trees. Without agoutis performing this seed dispersal and burial, the structure of the rainforest would begin to collapse—much like removing the keystone from the top of an arch. Their quiet foraging is one of the forces that keeps the forest standing.

We gathered again on the verandah for the daily checklist and then enjoyed another delicious dinner. We asked the chef to come out of the kitchen so we could thank her—and the rest of the warm, gracious staff—for the wonderful meals and hospitality. Another day of wondrous nature, delicious food, and kind people.

After dinner, we headed out for another night walk with Sabira. Tonight's discoveries included many stick insects—masters of camouflage whose bodies mimic twigs so precisely that even at close range your eyes try to slide past them. Their trademark swaying is not random; it is an evolved behavior. Stick insects rock back and forth to imitate a leaf or branch moving in the breeze, making predators assume they are part of the vegetation rather than something alive. Once you know to look for it, the illusion becomes even more impressive.

A little farther along, an enormous wolf spider appeared on a branch near the path. At first glance, several of us mistook it for a tarantula—the creature was that big, easily "bird-eater sized" in appearance if not in taxonomy. Its eyes gleamed like tiny mirrors in our headlamp beams.

Then we encountered the real thing: a Chevron Tarantula, large, calm, and beautifully marked. We could clearly see its pedipalps—the small leg-like appendages near the mouth used to manipulate prey—and with binoculars and cameras, we admired the sensory hairs covering its body, each tuned to the faintest vibrations in the forest night.

Nearby, a scorpion as big as a human hand glowed fluorescent green beneath Sabira's UV light, its entire exoskeleton shimmering as though painted with liquid neon.

We walked under the stars, listening to the forest breathing around us, the night alive with quiet wonders.

A perfect close to a day that had taken us from dawn toucans to underground oilbirds to glowing night creatures—a full immersion in the mysteries of Trinidad's rainforest. We had much to give thanks for—and tomorrow happened to be Thanksgiving Day.

Thurs., Nov. 27 Blanchisseuse Road | Brasso Seco Village

Another early-morning, optional verandah session drew everyone in before the official start of our day. Blue-headed Parrots appeared—much harder to find than the Orange-winged Amazons we had grown accustomed to. Smaller, quieter, and scarcer, they were utterly beautiful, their violet-blue heads and emerald shoulders glowing in the soft morning light. Several of us stepped off the verandah to a different viewpoint to see and photograph them in the best light.

While we were there, a male Barred Antshrike came boldly into the open and sang, and we could hear his partner answering from nearby. In the Neotropics, males and females often sing—and not just for mate attraction. Because many tropical birds defend territories year-round, both sexes use song to coordinate pair bonds and maintain their space. It's a very different system from most of North America, where typically only males sing and only during a brief breeding season. On this morning, the antshrikes gave us a perfect example of tropical duetting. We also had wonderful views of toucans along with the usual rainbow of tanagers and hummingbirds before breakfast.

After breakfast, Dave and Lester joined us, and we split into two vans because the Blanchisseuse Road is narrow and winding—too tight for a single big vehicle. We drove slowly, stopping often to get out and bird. Our first stop, just beyond the entrance to Asa Wright, was immediately productive. A Broad-winged Hawk perched openly in a tree. A female White-bearded Manakin sat on a limb—the day before we had watched the males at their lek but hadn't had good looks at a female. This one was easy to see, drab-bodied but with the bright orange legs that give away her identity.

Turquoise Tanagers flitted overhead—beautiful but slightly chaotic-looking birds, as though painted in a rush: turquoise spattered across their backs and yellow blotched underneath. "From chaos, beauty," Caleb had quipped the day before, and we all had another good look at these tropical abstractions.

At our next stop, we found a species we had been eagerly searching for and completed the trogon trifecta. After seeing Guianan Violaceous and Green-backed earlier in the trip, here was a Collared Trogon—perched, composed, and glowing in perfect light. Like other trogons, it relied on a sit-and-wait strategy, holding still for long stretches and then swiveling its head in a slow, almost mechanical arc as it searched for insects or small fruits. A bird that can disappear by stillness alone, yet on this morning it offered us an unobstructed, unforgettable view.

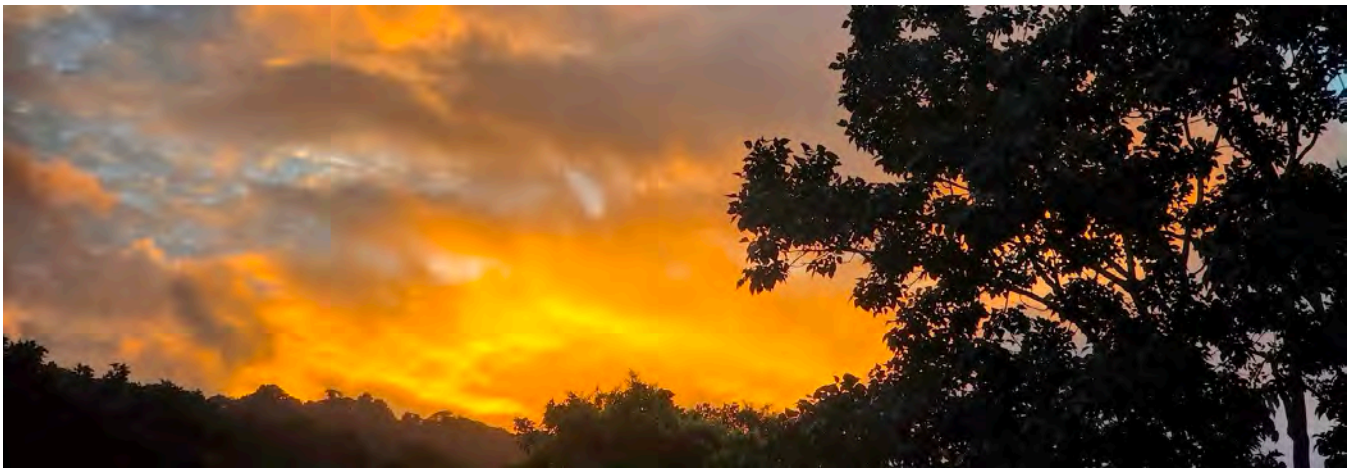
We worked hard to see a Black-faced Antthrush—a notoriously secretive forest bird that struts around the leaf litter with its tail cocked like a little rooster, keeping to the deepest shadows. A couple of us glimpsed it at this first location, but we knew we'd try for more satisfying views elsewhere.

Farther up the road, where the ridge opened to sweeping views of the ocean, Magnificent Frigatebirds soared effortlessly on fixed wings, and a Common Black Hawk glided past at eye level. Short-tailed Hawks circled overhead. We scanned hopefully for Ornate Hawk-Eagle—this dramatic raptor often haunts these mountains—but it didn't show. Instead, we stepped into the forest again and finally secured the great look at Black-faced Antthrush we'd been hoping for. A White-bellied Antbird required even more patience—another shadow-loving skulker of the rainforest floor—but everyone eventually saw it. Golden-olive Woodpeckers came in as well. Here, the primary rainforest felt ancient and alive: towering trunks buttressed like cathedral columns, a dark, layered understory, and a canopy stacked like the floors of a living city.

As we walked back toward the vans, Dave paused, tilted his head, and grinned—he'd heard something special. Swallow Tanagers—six or so—perched high in a canopy tree. They weren't supposed to be here; as austral migrants, they should have headed far south more than a month ago. The males glowed deep turquoise-blue with crisp white bellies and bold black face masks, brilliant against the green. We savored marvelous scope views—one of those wonderful surprises that Trinidad seems to gift at just the right moment.

After the excitement, we continued downhill on Blanchisseuse Road toward the village of Brasso Seco, stopping again when a White Hawk perched near the road. A broad white raptor with contrasting black primaries in flight, it is as elegant as it is powerful—a rainforest hunter known for taking snakes and lizards from quiet, concealed perches.

At Brasso Seco—a mountain village shaped by generations of cacao and coffee growers and surrounded by verdant hills cloaked in old-growth forest—we experienced one of many warm welcomes on the trip. A hands-on cacao demonstration let us taste the process from fruit to nib, and meal was so good it could have passed for Thanksgiving dinner itself (though it was lunch).



On the powerlines outside, Southern Rough-winged Swallows lined up in neat rows, their warm buff throats setting them apart from the Northern Rough-winged Swallows many of us know from back home. Tropical Mockingbirds delivered bright, varied songs—snatches of imitation stitched together like radio scanning through stations.

Butterflies filled the air: Scarlet Peacocks glowing red and black, Cattlehearts flashing crimson patches like live embers each time their wings opened, clouds of sulphurs, whites and yellows drifting along the roadside. And then the showstopper—Silver King Shoemaker—flashing iridescent sapphire like polished metal catching the sun. Even among the beautiful birds, this butterfly held its own.

After we digested the delicious meal and purchased locally produced chocolate and coffee, we continued back along Blanchisseuse Road. We stopped at a viewpoint toward the village of Morne La Croix and found Blue-headed Parrots roosting—the same species we'd begun the morning with—now seen beautifully for a second time. A Cocoa Woodcreeper flew in close; then darted down into the valley; then returned to the same tree in front of us, back and forth, as though wrestling with some mystery of its own. Birds show themselves plainly sometimes yet remain mysterious—enough to keep us forever curious.

Another stop along the road was wildly productive. We had great looks at two male Guianan Violaceous Trogons, and added new species: Northern Tropical Pewee and Variegated Flycatcher, the latter uncommon here. An American Redstart darted through the midstory—a familiar Neotropical migrant warbler to many in the group from our North American homes. Then a Tropical Parula appeared—one of the few New World warblers that stays in Trinidad and Tobago year-round rather than migrating to the northern latitudes to breed. A Zone-tailed Hawk flew low and slow overhead, giving us a perfect chance to see the field marks that separate it from the Turkey Vulture it mimics—stealthily joining vulture flocks to catch prey off guard.

Thanksgiving feast awaited us back at Asa Wright. We were the only guests there, and the waitstaff surprised us by playing steel pan music for ambiance—a quintessential Trini touch. The kitchen had prepared a full Thanksgiving spread—turkey cooked to perfection, stuffing, potatoes, even cranberry sauce. All flawless, especially impressive given these dishes are not traditional in Trinidad and Tobago. Dessert had its own local flair: cheesecake topped with a sorrel compote, the hibiscus-infused flavor of Christmas in Trinidad.

As I later wrote in a social media post:

"On our Naturalist Journeys tour we have so much to be thankful for. We're spending this holiday at the Asa Wright Nature Centre—a beacon of conservation history—and we've been welcomed by the warm people of this wonderful nation. Our group of nine has gotten along fabulously in these fraught times—it feels like

traveling with old friends. We're grateful for the delicious food that Trinidad and Tobago is famous for—a reflection of the rich cultural blend that shapes these islands. And of course—birds. From Scarlet Ibis flying in at dusk to roost at Caroni Swamp, to the critically endangered and endemic Trinidad Piping-Guan, to Oilbirds in the darkness of Dunston Cave—each encounter a gift. Yesterday, Channel-billed Toucans landed near the verandah at Asa Wright—the forest revealing its wonder just for us. So today—amid laughter, shared meals, and the chorus of the forest—we pause to give thanks for nature, for community, and for the privilege of being here together in this place where life still feels abundantly whole."

We took advantage of one last night-walk opportunity at Asa Wright. The previous two had been excellent, but this one—our Thanksgiving night with a thrilling surprise—was the most memorable of all.

My friend Mukesh Ramdass, head guide at Asa Wright, led us into the forest. Mukesh has spent forty-one years here—a living link to the natural history of the Arima Valley. His grandfather and father knew Asa Wright herself, and also William Beebe, the pioneering naturalist who helped shape tropical ecology. Few people know this forest more intimately than Mukesh. Walking with him feels like walking with the forest's memory—every sound another chapter in a story he has been reading his whole life.

A sweep of Mukesh's light revealed something rare and ancient—a velvet worm. Not a true worm, not an arthropod, but a member of its own lineage (phylum Onychophora), a deep-time survivor whose ancestors walked the Earth more than 500 million years ago. Soft-bodied, velvety, slow-moving, it hunts by shooting adhesive slime to snare small insects—a creature from prehistory, alive in our beam of light.

Farther along, Mukesh shared a story. Twenty-five years ago he collected fallen Manac Palm seeds from the floor of Dunston Cave, where Oilbirds roost by day. The seeds were there because Oilbirds swallow Manicaria fruits whole at night and later pass the seeds onto the cave floor—a natural method of forest regeneration. Now the palms tower above the stream, living proof of what care and time can do.

As he pointed them out, the magic arrived.

Oilbirds poured into the night—broad wings ghosting through moonlight, rapid clicks of echolocation guiding them between the trees. These birds are nocturnal frugivores that disperse seeds and help shape the very forests that shelter them. And on this night, they fed on the fruit of the palms grown from seeds they themselves had dropped decades earlier.

A perfect circle.
A relationship restored.

We stood in reverent silence—the stream whispering below, wings beating overhead, moonlight caught in the canopy, a friend's lifetime of stewardship bearing fruit in front of us. It felt as though the rainforest had opened a door just wide enough for us to slip inside, invited to witness something ancient and ongoing.

A Thanksgiving full of gratitude—for nature, for people, for the privilege of watching an ecological lineage continue. A night when birds, palms, memory, and moonlight all braided together into something rare and deeply meaningful.

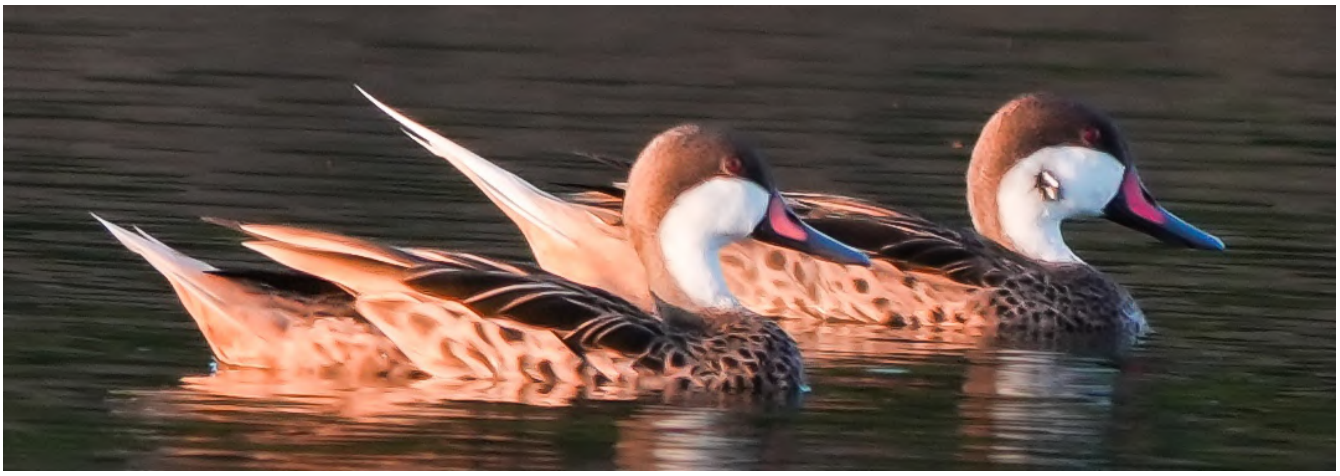
A Thanksgiving none of us will forget.

Fri., Nov. 28 Asa Wright | Flight to Tobago | Cuffie River Nature Retreat

Again many of us gathered at dawn on the famous verandah at Asa Wright for one last immersion in the hum and shimmer of Neotropical life. Channel-billed Toucans were among the first to appear, silhouettes against the brightening sky, later glowing like ornaments when the sun lifted over the Arima Valley. At the feeders and fruit tables the morning show resumed in full color. Brown Violetears flared their brilliant ear patches. A Long-billed Starthroat perched in the open, the early sun catching its turquoise crown and purple throat. White-lined Tanagers fluttered and flashed the wing stripes that give them their name. Silver-beaked Tanagers fed beside Purple and Green Honeycreepers—birds so dazzling it hardly mattered where you looked; beauty pulled the eye in every direction. A pair of Barred Antshrikes paused long enough for everyone to admire them—the male boldly striped, the female warm and rufous—offering what felt like a final farewell performance.

After one more delicious breakfast—complete with smoky, savory Caribbean tomato choka—we spent an hour with Mukesh, walking the grounds in the company of the person who knows them best. He pointed out plantings he had made decades earlier, along with the palms and the vervain he'd cultivated for Tufted Coquettes, and spoke about how the forest has grown, shifted, and endured through storms both literal and human. Every few steps seemed to unlock a memory.

Turkey Vultures circled overhead, drifting on thermals. Several perched low for excellent study, and we focused on the pale nape of the local tropical subspecies—unexpected for those familiar with the darker-headed



northern birds. An American Redstart flicked through the foliage like a small flame. A female Golden-headed Manakin appeared briefly—olive, quiet, easy to overlook without the male's blazing crown—one of those quick rainforest glimpses that rewards patience.

Then Mukesh invited us inside for a short film and a history talk. We sat together in the cool of the main house, listening as he told the story of the valley—how Asa Wright became a refuge for birds, how science and conservation intertwined, and how generations of people kept this place alive. His voice carried not just information but devotion. It felt less like a lecture and more like being entrusted with a legacy.

Eventually we had to say goodbye. With gratitude we left Asa Wright—and Trinidad—behind, stepping into the next chapter of our journey. On the drive to the airport, rain drummed on the windshield as Dave suddenly called out a remarkable sighting: a Pearl Kite, poised on a powerline. One last stop, one last shared look—a tiny raptor before the island changed beneath our feet.

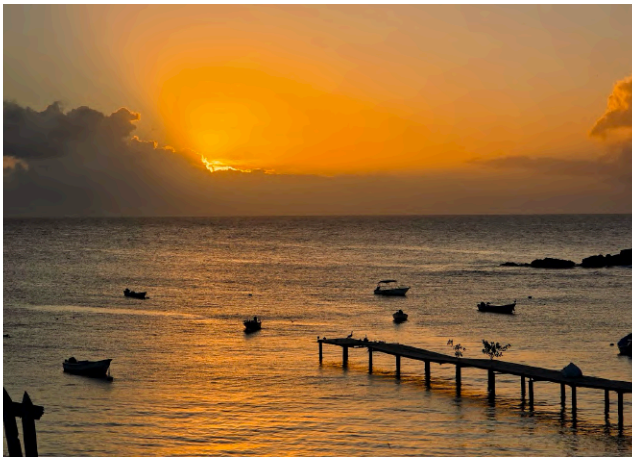
At the airport we thanked Dave and our driver Paul, exchanged hugs and handshakes, then boarded the short twenty-five-minute flight to Tobago. On landing, we were met by guide Jason Radix—broad smile, scope already slung over his shoulder. "If we move fast," he said, "we can get twenty new species before dark." It was an ambitious challenge.

But this group? Absolutely ready.

We drove straight to Bon Accord Sewage Ponds—proof that some of the best birding happens in the least glamorous places. Along the roadside ditches we quickly added Greater Yellowlegs, Eared Dove, Hudsonian Whimbrel, Willet, and Green Heron to our growing list. When a flock of White-cheeked Pintails swam into view, Jason pointed out that one of those ducks was not like the others. In the scope was a male American Wigeon, a rarity here, its pale forehead shining among the pintails, a misplaced traveler from far north.

At the ponds themselves, a Sora stood astonishingly in the open, lingering long enough for everyone to study—so rare for this shy rail species. Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks clustered along the pond margins, their upright posture and pink bills unmistakable. Least Grebes bobbed and disappeared like little submarines, and Barn Swallows swept in tight arcs across the fields. Tobago was delivering quickly.

Light was fading, but we had time for one more stop at Centre Street Ponds. A Spectacled Caiman lay sunning on a grassy bank while a Black-crowned Night-Heron hunted nearby, entirely unconcerned. Blue-winged Teal



drifted across the water. Overhead, a half-dozen Lesser Black-backed Gulls wheeled in the wind—so many that Jason remarked he had never seen such numbers here before. Then Jim made a great find: a tiny shorebird on the concrete, not the Spotted Sandpipers we had been seeing. Through the scope it revealed itself as a Semipalmated Sandpiper, its partially webbed toes visible in Anne's photo—a perfect example of their husband-and-wife dynamic of sharp spotting and adept photography. We added more than twenty new species to our list in just over an hour—Jason had delivered on his bold promise.

The sky dimmed to rose and lavender as the sun melted into the Caribbean. Evening settled gently, crickets rising in chorus as we drove inland to the Cuffie River Nature Retreat. Owner Regina Dumas welcomed us, and dinner—prepared by Dwayne and June and served family style—tasted especially good after a full day of travel and birds. We completed our list together, satisfied and a little stunned at how much we had already seen. Tomorrow we would begin exploring Tobago in earnest, the promise of new species and new landscapes waiting just beyond morning.

Sat., Nov. 29 Cuffie River | Adventure Farm

Some of us rose early and wandered out onto the grounds at Cuffie River, the air soft and cool, sunlight filtering through the leaves like brushed gold. Rufous-vented Chachalacas—called Cocrico by locals, an onomatopoeic name meant to echo their explosive *co-CREE-co!* calls—rang out raucously from the hillsides, hoarse clucking voices bouncing through the valley. They were a wild alarm clock of the forest edge, yet despite their volume we never quite laid eyes on them during our morning search, though we would keep trying. On Tobago they are beloved enough to share national-bird status with Trinidad's iconic Scarlet Ibis.

Palm Tanagers worked the gutters and eaves, occasionally outcompeting the more delicately behaved Blue-gray Tanagers, while Orange-winged Amazons screeched overhead, always dramatic in their arrival and rarely subtle in their departure.

We staked out the hummingbird feeders, and soon the morning rewarded us. Amid the familiar Copper-rumped Hummingbirds and the sashaying White-necked Jacobins appeared a bird unique to Tobago: the White-tailed Sabrewing. Males and females took turns at the feeders and perched nearby, showing the long, scimitar-shaped primary feathers that give them their name. They are found here on Tobago and in the coastal mountains of Venezuela, but not on Trinidad.

Then came an unexpected spectacle—two Red-crowned Woodpeckers, male and female, sipping sugar water at the same feeder, sharing space with hummingbirds like polite oversized cousins. Nectar feeding in a

woodpecker, however opportunistic, was delightful proof that birds rarely read the field guide before deciding what they are "supposed" to do. This species, like the Sabrewing, occurs on Tobago and on the mainland of South America, but not on Trinidad. A reminder that two islands separated by mere miles can diverge like worlds.

After breakfast—perfectly seasoned eggs, fruit bright as sunrise, toast still warm—we met our Cuffie River guide, William, a forester and ornithologist with a deep, easy command of the island's ecology. Almost immediately two Rufous-vented Chachalacas burst across the road, wings whirring. A few in the group caught the moment, but we wanted everyone to have a clean look at this iconic Tobago bird—so the quest continued, a background thread woven through our time on the island.

Birdsong was sparse at first, the forest holding its breath in the early warmth. But patience paid off with Scrub Greenlet working methodically through the canopy. This Tobago subspecies is thought by some to be distinct enough for potential future elevation to species status—perhaps another endemic jewel waiting just beyond the horizon of taxonomy.

On our walk back toward the lodge, a large dark shape tilted over the ridge. We looked up just in time to see broad wings catching the light. Without vultures on Tobago to muddy the identification, there was no doubt: Great Black Hawk. It circled once, then dropped lower, legs dangling like yellow hooks. Birds scattered in alarm, but whether the hawk struck successfully we never learned—it vanished into the green, leaving only the hush of stirred canopy behind.

The afternoon slowed into island tempo. Some of us swam in the pool, some wandered the gardens with binoculars, others napped. A pair of Great Black Hawks circled overhead again, and Orange-winged Amazons perched in a nearby tree, their faces sunlit emerald and gold.

At Adventure Farm, the hummingbird activity was dizzying: Copper-rumpeds, Blue-chinned Sapphires, White-necked Jacobins—a shimmering blur of wings and color. New birds were ticked on the trip list as well. A Fuscous Flycatcher, patient and plain, perched long enough for a lingering look, and Red-rumped Woodpeckers worked the trunks nearby.

Close looks at Trinidad Motmots—poised and luminous in the understory—were a highlight. Along with the Trinidad Piping-Guan, it is one of just two bird species endemic to Trinidad and Tobago. Curiously, it is often more readily encountered on Tobago than on Trinidad.

Jason's passion for plants surfaced here, each flower a story, every leaf a lesson. We moved slowly among mango, heliconia, and ginger, all stitched together with history and use.

Later in the day we drove to Fort James, perched overlooking blue Caribbean water. Brown Pelicans glided past in formation, plunging for fish with the confidence of creatures born to the sea. Royal Terns rested on pilings, and a single Black Skimmer swept low in the golden light. Black-faced Grassquits fed in the park grounds like wind-up toys. White-winged Swallows looped above a soccer field, tracing arcs in the sky.

We walked around the Courlander Monument next, where history buff Steve H and others wanted to stand in a place where history breathes. As we talked about the Courlanders—Latvian colonists who once laid claim to Tobago—two Rufous-tailed Jacamars flew in and perched for extraordinary views. The male gleamed with a white throat; the female showed buff instead. Behind them, the Caribbean slid toward sunset, colors deepening to peach and indigo.

Back at Cuffie River, dinner warmed the table and, conversation flowed easily. Afterward we stepped outside with a bat detector—an Echo Meter 2 that converts ultrasonic calls into audible signals and identifies species in real time. Velvety Free-tailed Bats appeared first in rapid bursts, followed by Sinaloan Mastiff Bats, each call pattern a hidden world revealed through a small device attached to a phone. We tried for the White-tailed Nightjar that had flushed on our arrival, but the night yielded only frog voices, rustling leaves, and the soft hush of the river.

Instead we stood beneath Orion and Cassiopeia, pointing out the Pleiades—those bright blue daughters of myth, a navigational touchstone across cultures, a test of sharp eyes, and the star cluster behind the Subaru emblem. The constellations wheeled above us, clear and bright, as if the sky were conjuring a magical morning for us. Tomorrow would take us from rainforest to dry island, from emerald hills to wind and seabirds—our final full day ahead, and we could feel something big gathering.

Sun., Nov. 30 Tobago's Main Ridge Preserve | Little Tobago Island

We set out early for one of the most scenic drives of the trip—north along Tobago's coast, where rainforest spills toward the sea and waves rise white against black rock. We stopped at overlooks to breathe it in, photograph the cliffs, and scan for our morning target, the Rufous-vented Chachalaca, but none appeared. The road curled upward into the Main Ridge, the oldest legally protected forest reserve in the Western Hemisphere, protected since 1776. Mist hung in the valleys like steam rising from green.

At the top of the ridge we stepped into the forest and followed a trail toward a manakin lek. Along the way, Collared Trogons appeared in the dim understory—males glowing emerald and red, females dressed in warm browns and slate, both impossibly elegant and still as ornaments hung in the trees. Underfoot we found the fallen fruit of the autograph tree, shaped like woody stars. Early travelers and locals often scratched their names into the leathery leaves, and the scars remained for years—signatures held by the forest.

At the lek we glimpsed a manakin before rain swept in, drumming on the leaves and erasing birdsong from the forest. Sheltering beneath a canopy, we talked about Blue-backed Manakins, a species shared only between Tobago and the South American mainland. Unlike most manakins, where a single male performs for females, Blue-backed males cooperate in pairs or trios—two or more birds working together in a choreographed display. They leap, snap their wings like tiny castanets, then rocket across the lek in bursts of blue. Only the dominant male gets to mate, but the backup dancer may one day inherit the stage. These cooperative courts are among the great spectacles of Neotropical birds.

When the rain eased, no dancers returned, and we backtracked along the trail—hoping the forest might open the curtain later.

Along the road we found Venezuelan Flycatcher and Olivaceous Woodcreeper, both Tobago specialties absent from Trinidad. Entering a trail called Gilpin Trace, the forest deepened—dim, wet, and alive. Collared Trogons called as soon as we stepped inside—soft, resonant whistles. A Plain Antvireo flitted through the undergrowth like a whisper. Then the Yellow-legged Thrush appeared—yellow bill, yellow orbital skin, and yellow legs glowing brilliantly in the shaded understory. Finally, we reached our goal: another Blue-backed Manakin lek. Several males appeared, shining black with red caps bright as cherries. They weren't displaying, but seeing them at all felt like a small miracle—flashes of blue and red among twisted lianas and dripping leaves.

Before leaving, we stopped beside a clear pool to watch Jumping Guabine. These small fish leap from the water and wriggle across wet stones to move upstream. Back at the vans we dropped down to Birdwatchers Restaurant for a feast of Caribbean comfort—provision, fried plantain, baked chicken, fish, macaroni pie, banana salad—plates full, laughter loud.

A short drive brought us to Blue Waters Inn, where we met our guide for the afternoon, Zolani "Zee" Frank. His parents run the restaurant where we'd just eaten and had established the glass-bottom boat business here. Zee has been guiding Little Tobago for years, and his love for this island spills out in every word. Before boarding the boat, we finally spotted a chachalaca in a tree—a good omen for later.

The crossing was short but lively—wind on the bow, spray on the rails—and Little Tobago rose ahead of us like a dry island dreaming of rain. From the water we could already see cactus studding the brown slopes, a sharp contrast to the emerald hills we had left behind. Before docking, the captain eased the boat into position so we could watch Brown Boobies perched low in the trees just above the booming surf.

Everyone in our group made the uphill hike—steep, rocky, heart-thumping—but worth every step. The forest here felt different from Trinidad or even mainland Tobago: more open, more arid, shaped by wind and salt spray. Columnar cacti stored precious moisture in their ribbed, water-rich stems, and bromeliads perched on trunks like chalices, catching whatever rain the dry season offered and holding it in miniature leaf-tank ecosystems—reservoirs on an island in the rainshadow of Main Ridge. In this parched place, life builds ways to gather moisture from scarcity.

Along the trail we found Ocellated Geckos tucked into fissures of sun-warmed bark—tiny jewels of the island, endemic and patterned in pale spots that gleamed like scattered silver. A reminder that Little Tobago's wonders aren't only in the air; they cling to wood and stone too, living quietly in the margins where sea-spray and forest meet. A little farther on, we stopped in astonishment before the largest hermit crab any of us had ever seen—roughly the size of a softball, a slow, deliberate creature hauling its borrowed shell like a knight in snail armor.

At the top of the climb, the world opened like a curtain onto one of the great seabird stages of the Caribbean. The wind rose, the sea spread wide beneath us, and suddenly we were among them—Red-billed Tropicbirds arrowing past at eye-level, white phantoms with tail streamers trailing like ribbons. Magnificent Frigatebirds patrolled overhead, black wings edge-sharp against the sun, waiting for the perfect moment to steal a meal mid-air. Red-footed Boobies wheeled in three morphs—white, brown, and white-tailed brown—each one a page from the same evolutionary book written in different tones of plumage.

Zee stood with us at the cliff edge, eyes bright, voice carried by the wind. He pointed out nest after nest in the cliffside vegetation, tracking flight arcs the way others might read a news report. When a frigatebird stooped on a tropicbird, he narrated the chase like a story he'd witnessed a thousand times and still loved as if for the first. This was the very cliff where David Attenborough's crew once filmed frigatebirds harrying tropicbirds—fish dropping from bills, piracy on the wind—and as Zee spoke it felt less like history and more as if we were stepping into it ourselves. The sea crashed below, tropicbirds flashed white across the blue. Time softened, and for a moment the whole island seemed to balance on the rhythm of wings and wind.

Some spectacles wash over you in color and sound—like the ibis fire at Caroni—while others carve themselves quietly into memory. Little Tobago did both. Standing on that cliff, watching birds written in light against the

ocean, felt like a grand finale to everything we had seen—yet we knew there were encore moments still to come.

On the way down, Zee pointed out a narrow opening at the base of a bluff—a Sargasso Shearwater's burrow. To the naked eye it looked empty, just darkness behind roots and rock. But Russ, undeterred, cranked his ISO into the stratosphere and fired a shot into the void. On the screen, a face emerged: a beak, the bright bead of an eye—the ghost resident revealed.

By day these shearwaters remain hidden, tight in their burrows where frigatebirds cannot harass them or steal their catch. But at night they rise over the sea on quiet wings, foraging untroubled in waters lit by moonlight and the flicker of bioluminescence.

On the return journey to Tobago, our glass-bottom boat slid across Angel Reef, revealing a bright underwater world. Parrotfish scraped coral with beak-like jaws, wrasse flashed like colored confetti, Sergeant Majors hovered in neat ranks, and angelfish drifted like stained glass in motion. Butterflyfishes flickered in pairs. Linda watched the reef like someone returning home—years of Caribbean diving had made these fish old friends. Yet over the course of the tour we had watched her build a new set of friends above the waterline as well, savoring every encounter with hummingbirds, manakins, motmots, and tanagers with the same delight she once brought to coral gardens. The avian world seemed to be reclaiming her from the deep, one shimmering feather at a time.

The seabed rose into view—massive Brain Coral, its winding ridges crisp in the clear water, built by countless tiny polyps over centuries. A living monument. We drifted above it in quiet awe.

Once back at the dock we weren't done. A flock of Green-rumped Parrotlets appeared in a fruiting tree—tiny parrots the color of new leaves, so easily missed until they moved. Then the bird that had teased us since our first morning on Tobago finally gave itself fully: Rufous-vented Chachalaca. At first just one, then two, then four—then suddenly they seemed everywhere, loping across branches, gliding between trees, calling with that raucous, rolling chorus that sounds like the forest clearing its throat at dawn. Big, social, full of character. We had searched for them; now they surrounded us as if making up for earlier coyness. It felt like Tobago opening its arms wide, one last embrace before we let the day go.

The sun was lowering when we drove back across Tobago, tired but wired, replaying the day aloud in the van. Little Tobago felt like a dream—wind in our faces, birds stitching the air with white ribbons. As sunset flared over the western horizon, we traced plans for future trips, reluctant to let go of the day. Ocean light faded, but spirits burned bright.

After dinner we gathered for our final checklist, exhausted and giddy from the day's abundance. When we went around the circle sharing favorite birds of the trip, Chris said his highlight was "the camaraderie of the group"—with the White Hawk a close second. A perfect answer.

Then we stepped outside one last time to look for the White-tailed Nightjar that had eluded us. For a moment it seemed we might miss it entirely. We scanned the driveway's shadowed edges, tension building, and there—at last—eye-shine glimmered low to the ground. A nightjar, resting quietly. We watched in silence until it rose into the dark, white tail and wingbars flashing bright in a streetlight against the stars.

Mon., Dec. 1 Departures

Morning arrived bird-filled. Chachalacas posed openly, shaking the branches where they fed, their silhouettes prehistoric in the dawn. Trinidad Motmots glowed at eye level, turquoise and russet lit by the first light of day. Barred Antshrikes traded phrases across the understory—call and answer, like echo and reply. Violaceous Euphonias worked the berries near the pool, their gold throats catching the sun.

No one hurried. Some lingered with binoculars, reluctant to let the morning end; others walked the trails one last time, or shared quiet thanks with Regina and her staff, whose warmth shaped every day here.

Departure came in gentle waves—bags stowed, hugs exchanged, promises made. A final sunrise, a last sweep of green hills, one more hug from Regina—eighty-one years young, bare feet on the earth her family had farmed, the steady heart of this place.

Then homeward—carrying scarlet evenings and oilbird echoes, manakins dancing in the rain, and the easy friendship that grows when a group travels deep into nature together.

FAVORITE BIRDS OF THE TOUR
Russ – Trinidad Motmot
Jim – Pinnated Bittern
Anne – Scarlet Ibis (American Flamingo and Tufted Coquette as backups)
Libby – Oilbird
Linda – hummingbirds (manakins as backup)
Jennifer – Purple Honeycreeper (Channel-billed Toucan as backup)
Chris – "Camaraderie of the group!" (White Hawk as backup)
Steve H. – Brown Violetear

Photos: Group (Stephen Grace - SG), American Flamingos (James Bourne - JB), White-necked Jacobin (SG), Channel-billed Toucan (JB), Tufted Coquette (SG), Flowers (JB), Ringed Kingfisher (SG), Scarlet Ibises at Caroni Swamp (SG), Scarlet Ibis (JB), Birding by boat (JB), American Flamingos (SG), Plants (JB), Gray-lined Hawk (SG), Common Black Hawk (SG), Lineated Woodpecker (JB), Blue-chinned Sapphire (SG), Trinidad Piping Guan (JB), White-necked Jacobin (Russ Hedley - RH), Tufted Coquettes (females) (SG), Rufous-breasted Hermit (SG), Green Honeycreeper (SG), Blue-chinned Sapphire (JB), Asa Wright Nature Center (SG), Cane Toad (SG), Asa Wright Nature Center (SG), White-bearded Manakin (SG), Bearded Bellbird (SG), Oilbird (RH), Barred Antshrike (SG), Harvestman (SG), White Hawk (SG), Group birding (JB), Bay-headed Tanager (JB), Asa Wright Nature Center (SG), Bare-eyed Thrush (JB), Group birding (Jennifer Epp), White-cheeked Pintails (JB), Trinidad Motmots (SG), View from Fort James (SG), Cuffie River Nature Retreat (SG), Parlatuvier Bay (SG), Red-billed Tropicbird (JB), Cooks Sharon and Alicia at Cuffie River Nature Retreat (SG), Blue-gray Tanager (JB)