



TRINIDAD

A Christmas Birding Tour

**At the Asa Wright Nature Centre Dec. 21-27, 2014
With extension to Grande Riviere Dec. 27-29, 2014**

Guides: Roodal and Dave Ramlal, with Peg Abbott of Caligo Ventures, host, and nine participants: Buck, Margaret, Janet, Karen, Kay, Kathy, King, Will and Kim. This was a relaxed-pace tour on Trinidad to sample the birding highlights and celebrate the season. It was very successful with 194 species recorded.

Sun., Dec. 21 Arrivals at Asa Wright Nature Centre / Birding from the Famous Verandah / Night Walk

Most of our group arrived a day ahead of the tour, with two of the group, Kim and Will, adding a visit to Yerette to see hummingbirds en route to the Asa Wright Nature Centre

(AWNC). It was nice to have the early time to settle in, and by the tour start date an air of familiarity with species seen from the Verandah was apparent.

Ann Sealey, CEO and lodge manager of AWNC, joined the group for dinner on our



welcome night. Mukesh Ramdass came to take us on a night walk, and while the Ferruginous Pygmy Owl remained elusive



there was a lot to see in the plant, insect, (and sleeping bird!) realm on a beautiful tropical night.

Mon., Dec. 22 Lek Species on the Discovery Trail / Lunch and Hummingbirds in the Lopinot Valley



Our expert guide, Roodal Ramlal, arrived just after breakfast to help us seek out species along the Discovery Trail. Roodal has been with the Centre from its inception, first working at what is now the William Beebe Research Station with visiting scientists, and then with tour groups and lodge visitors from around the world. His mission this morning was to show off some of AWNC's signature species: White-bearded Manakin, Golden-headed Manakin, and a

species we were already hearing from above, the Bearded Bellbird.

The start of this path is lined with small, purple Vervain flowers which draw in hummingbirds like magnets. Here, Tufted Coquettes, often too shy to vie with more dominant species at the feeders above, find safe haven and places to sit



and preen. We found a male feeding and preening, along with Copper-rumped Hummingbirds and two very bright Violaceous Euphonias. A Spectacled Thrush and two Barred Antshrikes then put on a good show and we worked our way down through the garden area into the forest. A massive tree had busy leaf-cutter ants at its base, and Roodal pointed out Torch Ginger and other plants along our way, showing us which trees were in fruit (such as the Tremor trees) and thus good places to look for birds

when we returned.

We took a side trail over to a known lek of Golden-headed Manakins, and these bright gems did not disappoint us. Buck had come down earlier in the day and had them at very close range; ours were further away but very



cooperative in perching where they remained in view. This species gathers on arboreal perches, zipping back and forth from one to another when a female enters their view. This morning they were feeding rather than courting, but we got excellent views of their almost waxen, brilliant gold heads.

From this lek we could hear the wing-snapping of our next lek species, the White-bearded Manakins, which meant some courtship was going on down there. These little dynamos are active close to the ground, clearing off dance courts by their favorite horizontal perches. We spread out around the activity and had both male and female in view. They would go into rigorous courtship later in the season, but we could see enough to understand why Dr. David Snow chose



this location to study lek behavior. His work is featured in the book, *The Web of Adaptation*, and Peg heartily recommended this for all to read.

Not far from here and high above, a loud trio of male Bearded Bellbirds in their arboreal lek enticed us further down the trail. With some work, we found two of them and had excellent scope views.

Broken sunlight and thick branches of the area they inhabit

made photography difficult, but several members of this group were keen to try. Upon our return to the Verandah, finding a sunning Bearded Bellbird in plain scope view was welcomed by all.



Late morning, we enjoyed an outing away from the Centre selected by Peg in celebration of the holidays, a special lunch and hummingbird viewing at Lopinot, an adjacent valley in Trinidad's northern range. Roodal's capable son David joined us and we left just after breakfast in their two vans. This field trip is not on our Classic 10-day tour route, but is a field trip regularly selected by some of our independent birders, well worth adding a day to include for any Centre visitor. Three species of hermits were there to greet us!



Lopinot provides a great combination of nature and culture, and a hand-crafted lunch at Café Mariposa is a true delight. The restaurant is a family collaboration, and Bianca, Arthur, Hyacinth, Marcia and Brenda are doing wonders with local foods, spinning up delicious fare. Everything is hand-made and much of the food is grown in their organic gardens. We had a homemade corn and pumpkin soup, and chicken pastelles (similar to tamales) wrapped in banana leaves. And then came their famous, fresh-made tortillas with fillings and a lovely roasted garlic sauce. Some tried the local pepper sauce which



had a Scotch Bonnet kick. Each dish was enhanced by the presentation and very fresh greens and herbs.

Being Christmas week, they were out of their bars of 70% dark chocolate (we were crushed), but they found enough to decorate our dessert. This final course was most unusual, an avocado ice cream

and pomerac (Otaheite apple) sorbet – with homemade dark chocolates on the side. Bianca and her family entertained us with the story of how Café Mariposa began, and as lunch came to a close, serenaded us with song.



It was a lovely day to dine on the porch, surrounded by garden flowers and greens. But for our entire avid birding group, the real show stoppers were the birds, dozens and dozens of hummingbirds perched on plants



tones.

We spied all three species of hermits found in Trinidad: Little, Rufous-breasted, and Green. Blue-chinned Sapphires posed within arm's reach, showing off their electric intensity. At such close range the more subtle but lovely color tones of Copper-rumped Hummingbird feathers shone clear, their backs a mix of yellows, greens and rust, and their fronts a deep emerald green. A Yellow Oriole and Tropical Mockingbirds commanded attention, and both Blue-gray and Silver-beaked Tanagers made several passes through.

Here, and along our way to get here, it was a good day for raptor viewing, with both White and Zone-tailed Hawk spotted, and then two separate sightings of Merlin.

After lunch we toured the valley a bit (aka, took the wrong road to get to a local farm and then corrected our route), and did some yard-based birding at the farm of Cyril and Raji, good friends of the Centre staff and one of the leading farms in the region that have worked to bring cocoa back into production. Cyril showed us the different varietals, and showed us his grafts where he combined some of the heritage plants, experimenting with vigor and flavor. He showed us the drying shed, and picked fresh tangerines from his trees, sweet tasting and with an ambrosial smell. We knew from Café Mariposa that the different





farms produce different tasting cocoa which they use to their advantage producing dark chocolates, but it was fun to see and taste the fruit, and learn how it was processed. The birding was quite good around plantings of the house, the mix of plants providing good views of Golden-fronted Greenlet, Rufous-breasted Wren, Plain-brown and Cocoa Woodcreepers, Thick-billed Euphonia and Yellow-breasted Elaenia. A bright male Yellow Warbler, most likely a migrant, was spotted alongside a

resident Golden-crowned pair, and a female American Redstart was active nearby.

Several of us purchased some coffee roasted and produced here and we looked forward to trying it.

We made a brief stop at the Lopinot Valley historic site, learning about Charles Joseph Count de Loppinot who settled here with an invitation of the British government, taking refuge from uprisings in Haiti while bringing agricultural experience to the island. He was a Lieutenant-



General in the French Army that had left France to fight in Nova Scotia (then a part of Acadie), relocating first to New Orleans and then onward to Haiti in 1755.

He managed a farm producing sugar and became wealthy, owning great acreage and many slaves. When widespread slave revolt came to a head in the 1790's, he fought alongside the British, and he re-located in

Trinidad at the turn of the century, when expelled from Haiti as the British lost the battle. All around us were lands of his cocoa estate, La Reconnaissance. His family home is now a small museum, and a large cocoa drying shed can be found next door. These buildings perch under great spreading trees, adjacent to a clearing now used for a local soccer field. This open, central





part of the valley gives views all around of a verdant and green place of great beauty, serene with a sense of being lost in time.

After a full day we returned to AWNC, in time to enjoy the sunset parade of birds coming in, complete with scores of noisy Orange-winged Parrots and Crested Oropendola. Silver-beaked Tanager was a handsome regular by now at the feeders. We were pleased to have another good meal, as lunch was a hard act to follow! Based on client feedback, the cooks at the Centre have been working on some new recipes and presentation,

and dinner was just delicious with homemade soup, fresh greens, local fish prepared just right with sauce on the side, and a fruit mousse for dessert.

Tues., Dec. 23

A Change of Plans and a Night of Pink Clouds and Birds



Our intention this morning was to leave to go down to Port of Spain, to see the Queen's Park Savanna area with its "magnificent seven" buildings and Trinidad's Royal Botanical Gardens. En route we stopped to ensure that Kay found her desired species – the endemic Trinidad Motmot. Success for all to enjoy!

We also had good looks at three secretive species,

Gray-throated Leaf-tosser, Black-faced Antthrush, and White-bellied Antbird – quite a start to the morning.



We were to have lunch at a Caribbean café near the Botanic Gardens, but Peg learned in trying to reserve this for us that many restaurants close up shop for the holidays, giving staff time with their family, this closing an expected tradition. Her answer for lunch was to pick up a local favorite – doubles, a sandwich made with chick-pea flour and fillings—at one of the most popular stands in Arima and take them to picnic in the garden. Finding parking and navigating the crowds drawn into



town for shopping proved to be an adventure, but it was fun to sample the local grocery store and



tavern, where Will and King picked up some cold Carib beers to augment our fresh juice served with lunch. After the congestion here, Peg and the guides were taken aback by the virulent traffic already backed up at the turn to Port of Spain. They made a quick decision to go instead to an area out of the

city, to Waterloo with its mangroves and mudflats good for wading birds and shorebirds, and then on to Caroni National Park where we'd meet the boat in the afternoon.



This proved to be a great alternative, and looking back on our bird list it provided us with a number of species seen only at this location. Will found Black Skimmers right away, while Kim spotted a Marbled Godwit. We all enjoyed watching Mud-puppies (also called Four-eyed Fish) coming up on the mud, and especially as Buck was a marine

biologist, we learned about their life-histories.

Janet was absolutely thrilled to see her first Scarlet Ibis, a half dozen or so immature birds in molt, at very close range preening on branches of Red Mangroves. We had very good looks at Long-winged Harrier and Karen, quick at the draw, got a photo. Driving through traffic, we had both Short-tailed and Gray-lined Hawks aside.



Peg added in a cultural site as well, the Temple of the Sea. This lovely temple is surrounded by prayer flags which fan their vivid color over the waters of the Gulf of Paria.

We had our picnic here in the shade, joined by Laughing Gulls and a flock of Ruddy Turnstone. In the distance we saw freighters and fishing boats plying the waters between Trinidad and

Venezuela. The Orinoco River influences the straits here by adding sediments, and today the waters held aqua colors as sun and clouds danced intermittently above. We had hoped to find Yellow-billed Terns but none were present. We did find two Lesser Black-backed Gulls and many Laughing Gulls, perched on hulls of fishing boats for our inspection. Time passed quickly and soon we needed to head back north to find a few species of the mangroves ahead of boarding our boat into Caroni.



We had great looks at Black-crested Antshrike, an active pair, and a third male, ahead of boarding our boat. Lester Nanan, third generation boat captain of the Nanan family, was waiting for us and we left about fifteen minutes early to glide down the mangrove-lined Canal with time to watch for

sought-after species. Lester, like his dad Winston, is an excellent birder, helping us to find Masked (Red-capped) Cardinal, Green-throated Mango, Black Hawk and other species with ease. David helped bring in a Straight-billed Woodcreeper which worked low in the mangrove roots allowing for very good views. We were fortunate to see Bicolored Conebill, a species of the mangroves, very well as two males chased after a female, crossing the Canal again and again.



Two special treats were in store – roosting Boat-billed Heron, and then, marvelously camouflaged, a





Common Potoo. Perhaps as it was winter even in tropical Trinidad, we did not see many crabs or caiman, but we did see several Ruschenberger's Tree Boa (formerly Cook's Tree Boa), curled up in the trees. Lester told us their main food was bats and they posed where they could best catch them as they passed by on the wing.



We could have lingered longer, but it was time to get in place for one of Earth's great wildlife spectacles, that of Scarlet Ibis coming in to safe roosting spots in the mangroves of Caroni National Park. The intensity of color, a rich scarlet-magenta, in their plumage is hard to describe. That the Trinidad population is prospering was evidenced by a number of brown and white immature birds flying with the adults. Scarlet Ibis have been officially protected since 1962 when at independence from Britain, the species was placed on Trinidad and Tobago's coat of arms as the national bird.



We saw thousands of them tonight, coming in from all directions, some low against rich green mangroves and others fanning out to wind through pink clouds in the

sky. Panning them with our cameras produced an ever changing background. Boats are kept back so as not to disturb them, so our photos were scenic shots – tonight's combination of colors made them pretty spectacular! Janet took video, and laughed later to hear our background conversation to the spectacle which focused more on passing the rum punch than ecological details of the spectacle. David was the master pourer. We enjoyed the quiet too, taking in the beauty of this nightly ritual.

Wed., Dec. 24

Blanchisseuse Road / Trinidad's Northern Range

Day dawned at 6AM, finding many of us gathered on the Verandah for fresh tea and coffee and a rainbow of birds. This morning the Channel-billed Toucans were back on their regular perches, providing us great views in the scope. We had a distant Scaled Pigeon and our daily views of Common Black Hawk circling the lower valley. A Squirrel Cuckoo put on a good show today, along with two species of trogons: Green-backed and Guianan. Time passed quickly before the 7:30 breakfast bell rang, beckoning in for omelets and homemade bread with jam.



Our Christmas Tour was designed to be leisurely, but as our group was comprised of gung-ho birders, Peg quickly added a field trip to this day, with Roodal and David guiding us to find birds of the Northern Range, along the Blanchisseuse Road above AWCN. We left just after breakfast.



There are many stops along the way, but we did contend with rains as we topped out at the ridge. We waited a bit in the vans, then walked down the road that if we continued, would take us back to Lopinot far below. It was quiet, but we did get looks at Bay-headed Tanagers, Golden-headed Manakins, a number of Channel-billed Toucans and a few other species.

We found far greater activity down the road at the junction to Brasso Seco. Here we had a pair of Red-rumped Woodpeckers putting on a show, Boat-billed Flycatchers perching near Great Kiskadee for a great comparison, and a northern migrant that is an uncommon species to find, Olive-sided

Flycatcher. Golden-crowned Warbler and Stripe-breasted Spinetails were two other good finds. A stunning Caligo stayed perched for quite awhile, as if posing for our cameras.



We had lunch here, and a few cold Caribs thrown into the coolers by Will in the spirit of Christmas celebration. It was a lovely spot, lush forest all around, and lots of birds. The lunch was a macaroni pie (very popular in Trinidad), a lovely mushroom salad with corn and red pepper, and other treats. We were here an hour or more, taking it all in. We were absolutely taunted by a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl calling. It was surrounded by mixed flocks of tanagers, included our much-sought after Speckled of this higher elevation, but we got only quick views in flight as it changed perches in the dense vegetation. Further down the road we had good looks at Trinidad Euphonia.



We then headed down to the small village of Morne Le Croix, a lovely open spot about half way to the Caribbean Sea, now visible as clouds had opened up affording us views. We could see the communication towers up on Morne Blue, and a lovely line of heavily forested peaks. We were in search of Blue-headed Parrots and they obliged us well, coming right in to perch on the wires of the little town! We parked out of town off the side of the road, enjoying juice and cakes as the bird show

began. Hundreds of Gray-breasted Martins lined the wires, joined by a few Southern Rough-winged Swallows. More parrots graced the sky, a mix of Orange-winged and Blue-headed. Yellow-rumped Caciques flew in and out of a large nesting tree, while a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl taunted us again with its calls.

Christmas Eve, and our decorations were calling – jeweled tones of honeycreepers and hummingbirds awaited us at rum punch time on the Verandah. For the second night, right about 6:10PM, a Short-tailed Nighthawk made a quick pass flying through our view.



The dining room looked so pretty with a decorated tree, and garlands of greens and ribbon on the historic furnishings. Dinner was a lovely lamb with mint sauce and a variety of vegetable dishes, creamed Christophene (chayote), and cake for dessert.

Thurs., Dec. 25

Christmas Day at Asa Wright / Walk to the Oilbird Cave

We tucked in today for this special holiday, greeting the dawn for those who wished with more bird sightings on the Verandah. This morning Black-tailed Tityra, Euler's Flycatcher, and a mob of Turquoise Tanagers joined the mix. Caleb, supervisor of all the Centre guides, was with us this special morning and his keen ear for birds proved productive, including keying in on the calls of a Bright-rumped Attila.



Barry Ramdass, son of Charan Ramdass who had been with some of our guests on the day ahead of the tour, joined us to lead the walk to AWNC's conservation pride, the well-managed Dunstan Oilbird Cave, a nesting and roosting site for this odd, nocturnal, fruit-eating species. The hike down is fairly steep, but eased by handrails, and Kay our senior member did the trail with ease. Seeing the birds involves tucking one's head into the 'cave' which is actually a rock-walled grotto with a clear-water stream running through. Seeds from nightly foraging are all over the ground. We got good looks, and photos, and returned quite satisfied with the outing.



Christmas Dinner was served at Noon, and it was a feast. Christmas rice was fun with its bright red color (anato and cherries), callaloo soup, roasted turkey with gravy, and all sorts of side-dishes, we were stuffed! Rain came just in time to justify lounging and naps. Christmas Day in the tropics!

We rallied about 3:30 to walk out the driveway and to the newly established photo blind area above it, in the coffee-growing area of the historic Springhill Estate. The birds were fairly quiet, but we did hear motmots, leaftossers, and other species we'd worked to find in subsequent days. Sadly a lushly-fruiting Tremor tree had just blown down in the night next to the photo blind. It was frequented by a Bay-headed Tanager and Violaceous Euphonia's, but otherwise quiet.

Fri., Dec. 26

The Road to Nariva is Opened / Pygmy Kingfishers and Other Gems



Early November storms had washed out the road along the eastern coast in Trinidad, just south of picturesque Manzanillo. Our Caligo Ventures December tour had found an alternative spot with hundreds of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and water birds, but when Ann Sealey announced the road was OPEN to Nariva, we returned to this well-established tour route. Dave and Roodal were eager to see what condition it was in and they were confident we'd find a good mix of species.

We started at the Aripo Agricultural Station, where right at the entrance Roodal keenly spotted a pair of roosting Tropical Screech Owls which he put in the scope. Janet claimed this as the day's highlight right away! Margaret was torn between looks at these and two courting Savanna Hawks, which flew with talons dangling right before our eyes – as a Crested Caracara passed through our view. This was almost birding overload....





The Aripo Agriculture Station was a great place for Buck to find smaller winged species of which he had great interest, dragonflies and damselflies. He and Peg lingered back, assessing what was there and documenting the finds with photos. They would catch up quickly as birds were called out, Pinnated Bittern had all running to the scope quite quickly. What a great bird! Cathy had ample time to study the plumage details in the scope as it posed without moving, ready to strike if prey came into view. This is the species on our current Caligo Ventures checklist cover, a photo taken by Dave our



guide at this very spot. We found Wattled Jacana, Western and Least Sandpipers, Southern Lapwings, a Solitary Sandpiper, Grassland Yellow Finch, and one Kim really wanted to see, Red-breasted Blackbird. The site is also beautiful, down in the flats with great views of the verdant hills of the Northern Range with all its intricate valleys. We had to tear ourselves away from here!

We had a picnic lunch from the van, as the picnic area had been quite damaged by the flooding that washed out the road. Our guides quickly set up a portable table, and we ate standing, enjoying the surf and the Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans flying above it. We parked across from a small pond with more dragonflies, and seven or eight Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, more Wattled Jacana, and a Spotted Sandpiper. Let's say we got a little deep into the sand, but with some clever driving, teamwork and a bit of muscle, we were soon underway.

We then drove through Coconut Alley, and Peg was relieved to see numerous trees of this former Coconut estate still standing, having read that 1200 or more would have to be cut as they put culverts in to rebuild the road. There are 12,000 or more, so the area's beauty should continue even after full repair. We drove on a one-lane track for a ways, but by Bush Bush Creek all construction was done. We found good looks at Green Kingfisher and Pale-vented Pigeon here.



At the next major creek crossing we had quite spectacular looks at male and female Silvered Antbird, as well as Pgymy Kingfisher, which turned up right before our noses in the dense maze of mangrove roots. Karen spotted a Brown-crested Flycatcher and a Long-winged Harrier put on a good show, flying low over the road.



At the Nariva River outlet, a picturesque place of sand beach and waving coconuts, local fisherman



gathered and watched us as we stopped to survey the species. Dave spied an Anhinga drying its wings on a stately tree. Up the road we saw village life, baby Wattled Jacanas, Lotus blooms and a key hummingbird for the trip, the White-tailed Goldenthrout.

Again we had to tear ourselves away, but we wanted to be back to the Waller Field Area in time for Red-bellied Macaws to return to their roost. We got there in time, and they were right on schedule, about a dozen coming into view, flying around the area looking to roost for the night. Sulphury Flycatchers were evident, at least a

half dozen calling loudly and changing perches in the fruiting Moriche Palms. Sadly no Moriche Oriole, their populations are declining rapidly and very scarce these days.

Well satisfied with the day, we returned to Asa Wright Nature Centre, and the final night of the this special Christmas tour. Our flock would diverge tomorrow, Kay, Buck and Margaret enjoying another night at the Centre, Will and Kim going on to Tobago, and five of us going on to Grand Riviere, in search of Trinidad Piping Guan, and what would turn out to be a tally of 85 species in total over the course of two days.



Sat., Dec. 27 On to Grand Riviere and Trinidad Piping Guans



One last grand morning at Asa Wright Nature Center. Indomitable Kay went off in search of Little Tinamou, with Barry meeting her at 6AM for the prowl. We had heard it on each morning though never in one regular spot, but it was worth a try to sleuth it out. Others enjoyed time on the Verandah, now knowing just where the Green-backed Trogon might land for a view. Ann spied a Common Black Hawk that seems so large, we all got lessons in beak size and geometry – size being an elusive entity!

We enjoyed the drive over from Asa Wright, exploring a bit en route to Mt. Plaisir and the next part of our adventure at Grand Riviere. We stopped a few places along the way looking for new birds, and picked up Barn Swallow over the low fields. We stopped at a couple of bridges, hoping for kingfishers, but finding instead mixed flocks of tanagers, bananaquits and honeycreepers. After the stop at Toco lighthouse, we ran parallel to the ocean, and views were grand.

We had hoped to have lunch at a beachside restaurant in Toco, but being Christmas week just about everything was closed, so we called ahead to arrange for a late lunch at the lodge, and went off to explore the most northeast point of Trinidad, Galera Point, where a stately lighthouse dating from 1897 warns ships not to come in close. Waters here are turbulent as waters of the Atlantic and Caribbean meet somewhere in the vicinity. Roodal told us of bringing a marine biologist here that studied the tidepools and the influence of this mixing on island life forms. The view was stunning, with big waves crashing up over seastacks. The rocks of the headland on which the light is build have a lot of iron, quite red in color and laced by quartz intrusions. Coco plum trees were in fruit and Brown Pelicans and Magnificent Frigatebirds danced overhead.



We knew something was up when we turned down the small lane to Mt. Plaisir and cars lined the sides of the road, a flower-lined arbor was set up, large white tents with tables, all adorned with colors of turquoise and coral. We learned that there was to be wedding this night, a local couple tying the knot so just about everyone in the community would be there. This would not be a quiet beach night!

We had melt-in-your mouth fresh fish sandwiches, nice coleslaw, and fresh juices to fortify ourselves, then headed out for birding. Roodal had hopes of showing us Trinidad Piping Guans and he found them indeed, almost at the end of the day. We looked in a place we often find them, where wild Nutmeg trees abound and it was quiet, but being early in the day we continued on, finding some other new birds for our list – Giant Cowbird, Forest Elaenia, and good looks at Pale-breasted Spinetails. We also had glimpses of Silvered Antbird and Rufous-breasted Wren. Time passed quickly and Roodal said, “Let’s go back to the Nutmeg trees”. Just in time, we got great looks at two or three coming in to roost. They were close enough to photograph, and to look for the males’ extra blue wattle.



We came back to take in the last 45 minutes or so of the wedding, a rare glimpse into local culture. The preacher was eloquent, clear, and had a message of marriage well outlined. A woman joined with lively prayer, raising her voice to levels we could not imagine. There were many attendants, male and female, dressed in luscious coral, and children dressed in tiered skirts of turquoise and white. People offered poems, stories, tales of the bride and groom. Fathers on both sides spoke and joy was apparent. We had our dinner as theirs was served so we could still converse, but then the music began! It started off lively with a Caribbean flair, but by late turned into super loud techno-rants – some of us drifted off anyway (Peg in room 1 had close proximity but slept right through it), others

had a short night. They sent Japanese lanterns, lit, aloft, floating out over the ocean. Tiki torches lined the beach front – quite the event!

Sun., Dec. 28

In Search of Pawi



We arose early, and Piero was gracious to do so also, giving us tea, coffee, homemade bread and yoghurt ahead of our departure at 6AM. Nicholas came early to motivate us, and we made it to the top of the hill to await sunrise and hopefully guans – it turned out to be a big Trinidad Piping Guan day! We saw eight in total, first a pair while it was quite dark, then others as sun hit and they began to fly. With luck they seemed to get right into feeding at a tolerable distance, with the scope and our cameras we could watch them preen, feed, fly and greet one another. The white marks in their wings helped us spot them when in the thick bromeliad-clad cover of large trees. We heard only two of their high whistle calls and no

beating of wings – all in all for large mobile birds they were very quiet.

All around them Orange-winged Parrots were flying, two here, two there, all quite vocal. Nicholas pointed out the calls of Southern Beardless Tyrannulet and Trinidad Euphonia, and we got good looks at both. We had time with Tropical Pewee, and while not super good looks due to poor lighting, a fairly certain White-winged Becard, characteristic shape and wing pattern noted. The spinetails remained elusive, but what a day for raptors. Eagle-eyed Karen spotted Gray-headed Kites on the wing, and we had a good flight show of White Hawk as well. An Immortel tree held a



huge number of Bananaquits, Blue-gray Tanagers, a honeycreeper we just could not get enough detail on, and several Yellow-rumped Caciques. Crested Oropendola were displaying, their ridiculous calls carrying long and far. We talked to a local farmer clearing land for bananas, but otherwise had the place to ourselves, a vast and verdant forest all directions – lovely!

We headed back to a delightful breakfast, which included local bacon and French toast made with homemade bread. Some had omelettes with Piero's cheeses, and good strong coffee and tea.



Mid-day was free time for walks, photography, naps and relaxation. Mid-afternoon, Nicholas was successful in spotting a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl for us in plain view, scope view, and we all appreciated his efforts. He then took us to a path leading into Matura National Park, where we had opportunity for good views of Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, White-flanked Antwren, White-shouldered Tanager, Rufous-browed Peppershrikes, and other species. A spectacular grand finale bird

was the Crimson-crested Woodpecker, new for our list, and very cooperative by staying on an open perch atop a dead snag for quite some time.

This evening was quiet except for the sound of the sea and we loved it. We had a nice dinner and enjoyed each other's company, trading tales of other birding ventures, from Arctic to tropics and beyond. Our bird list tallied an impressive 85 species, and Peg was able to work out with Nicholas the start of a Grand Riviere circle for the Christmas Bird Count, hopefully in place for next year. We walked out onto the beach at nightfall, staring out at the ocean and happily filled with this tropical version of holiday spirit.

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| Mon., Dec. 29 | Photo Session with Pawi / Departures |
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You know the birding is good when the guides elect to go back out, even with no one choosing to join them, the final morning. Packing and breakfast made more sense to our group, which faced a long day of flights back home. As Peg was overnighing in Port of Spain, she was game to see what the Pawi gang was up to. The morning atop the hill where viewing was normally good was very quiet, lacking the general bird activity of the day before. But the lighting was promising, and just about the time she resigned to it just not happening this day, Nicholas said, "there are two..." For the next hour we feasted our eyes on ten Trinidad Piping Guans in total, watching all kinds of behavior including preening, foraging, courtship and male aggression. They were flying between large trees, at times coming up to face us against blue sky. The caretaker of a rental cottage right here below the Pawi trees was home, and the people renting the cottage joined in our search, inviting us up to the porch for bird's eye view of this very rare species. Holiday spirit once again – a great last morning!





En route back to the airport we had a scare, as we spun out on a slick area of diesel fuel spill we could not see. The ice-like road conditions grabbed our tires and sent us slowly careening into a ditch. The ditch actually caught us well, and locals came with a tow strap and had us pulled out in no time. Piero's tank-like Nissan had not a scratch on it. But we were jolted just the same and thankful it was a minor incident. Rain started down in earnest, so we carefully made our way to the airport. Three continued into town, where a Ringed Kingfisher was posed on the same wire Woody's group had spied it on two weeks before. They had lunch at Chaud's Café in Port of Spain – delightful!

All things must come to an end – we expect the tradition of a Christmas birding trip will continue next year!





Photo Credits:

- Pg. 1: Christmas Home, Peg Abbott (PA); POS Airport, Buck Snelson (BS); AWNC interior, Bud Ferguson; AWNC Verandah, PA.
- Pg. 2: Roodal, PA; Bearded Bellbird, Karen Chiasson (KC); Barred Antshrike, PA; Golden-headed Manakin, PA.
- Pg. 3: White-bearded Manakin, PA; Birder's at Lek Site, PA; Group, PA; Torch Ginger, KC; Hermit at Heleconia, PA.
- Pg. 4: Lopinot porch, PA; Lopinot music and lunch, Kim Nelson (KN); Rufous-breasted Hermit, KC; Copper-rumped Hummingbird, BS.
- Pg. 5: Blue-chinned Sapphire, BS; Yellow Oriole, KC, Cyril – Lopinot Farmer, PA.
- Pg. 6: Tropical Mockingbird, Greg Smith www.flickr.com/slobirdr; Kay and Raji, Lopinot Farm, PA; Group with Cyril, PA; Lopinot Historic Site, Mukesh Ramdass (MR).
- Pg. 7: Silver-beaked Tanager, KC; Group shots, PA; Trinidad Motmot, PA; White-bellied Antbird, Mike Boyce (MB).
- Pg. 8: Doubles! PA; Boat with Laughing Gulls, Janet Mersey (JM); Temple of the Sea, KN.
- Pg. 9: Temple of the Sea and Prayer Flags, PA; Mud Puppies, BS; Colorful Boat, BS.
- Pg. 10: Laughing Gulls, KN; Lester Nanan, PA; Caroni Boat, KN; Tree Boa, MB; Immature Scarlet Ibis, JM.
- Pg. 11: Sunset and Ibis; BS, Caroni Sunset, Five Ibis, BS; Ibis in Flight, BS; Dave with Rum Punch, PA.
- Pg. 12: Roodal and Karen birding, PA; Group birding, PA.
- Pg. 13: Roodal, Will and Kim, PA; Caligo, BS; Crested Oropendola, KC.
- Pg. 14: Oilbird, BS; Oilbird Sign with Barry, KN; Oilbirds facing, JM.
- Pg. 15: Savanna Hawks, PA; Antillean Skimmer (mature), BS, Antillean Skimmer (immature), BS.
- Pg. 16: Peg and Buck photographing, Margaret Flagg (MF); Pinnated Bittern, David Ramlal (DR); Flame-tailed Pond Hawk, BS; Red-faced Dragonlet, BS; Van Stuck!, Kathy Baker (KB); Lunch spread, PA.
- Pg. 17: Red-breasted Blackbird, DR; Pygmy Kingfisher, PA; Silvered Antbird, PA; Wattled Jacana immature, PA.
- Pg. 18: Nariva kids; KN, Red-bellied Macaw, KN; Toco Coast, PA; Kathy and King, PA.
- Pg. 19: Toco Lighthouse, MURA; Wedding scenic, JM.
- Pg. 20: Trinidad Piping-Guan, KC; White-necked Jacobin, JM; Mimosa, JM.
- Pg. 21: Trinidad Piping-Guan, MR; Orange-winged Parrot, BS.
- Pg. 22: Nicholas with group, PA; Rainbow, KB.
- Pg. 23: Trinidad Piping-Guan, PA; Tropical Screech Owl, MB; Pygmy Kingfisher, KC, Blue-tailed Emerald, KC; Bananaquit, KC; White-headed Marsh Tyrant, KC.
- Pg. 24: Orchid, BS; Orange flowers, BS; Green Honeycreeper, BS; Parang Band, KN; Achiote, MF, Green Honeycreeper, BS, Black Skimmers, PA; Long-winged Harrier, KC; Chestnut-mandibled Toucan, Chris West; Golden-olive Woodpecker, KC.