



## Trinidad and Tobago Trip Report

June 18–28, 2011

*Guides Carol Simon & Howard Topoff, with seven participants*

*Report by Wynne Brown (Trinidad) and Carol Simon (Tobago)*

### Saturday, June 18 - Asa Wright

It only takes an hour of being present at the Asa Wright Nature Centre to start melting into a mellow tropical torpor. The resplendent green, the flowers, the birds – even just the air seems opulent and decadently rich. Carol, Howard, and Wynne had just left behind the sparseness of drought-stricken Arizona where recent wildfire devastation was all too fresh in their minds.

Our guide for the week, David Ramlal, met us at the airport in a right-hand drive Nissan van, and drove us up a startlingly narrow steep road to the Centre – on the left side of the road (ah yes, that British empire...). David is married with three kids: two are sons, one in medicine, another in veterinary science who's getting experience at an agricultural (ag) station we plan to visit, and teaching ag science in a high school. University education is free in Trinidad for those whose grades qualify, and there are many high school programs where kids can get exposure to different fields. David's daughter, who turned 7 the week he was with us, is fascinated by all the guide work her dad does and is, of his three children, the most likely to follow in his footsteps. David himself started the guiding life when he was 7, working with his well-known father Roodal, and has been a professional guide here for 24 years. It was certain we'd be in capable hands.



Late afternoon found the whole group – Carol, Howard, Wynne (who'd all arrived two days earlier), Pattie, Peter, May, Fred, Dianne, and Jim – gathered on the Asa Wright Nature Centre verandah in a happy combination of introductions and reunions. Each individual already knew at least two others in the group, and some knew six of the nine!



We wandered around the grounds a little to see Lobster Claw (one of 15 species of *Heliconia*), Shrimp Plant, Angel Trumpet (a *Datura* that, like our SW species, can be a hallucinogen), towering bamboo, Impatiens growing tall and wild, and Amaryllis.

The pictures of the Centre don't do it justice. The land here is steep: 47 steps from the cabins we chose to the dining room. Just as well, since the food is based on local cuisine and is simple, plentiful, and good.

And birds! The famed Asa Wright verandah is everything promised. Bar



stools lined up, facing an open panorama of rain forest festooned with rising tendrils of mist, platform feeders below with bread and fruit protected by hardware cloth, not-quite-ripe mangos dangling in a tangle of passionfruit vines in the foreground, Port of Spain not quite visible in the distance.

The newcomers got a quick introduction to the joy of birding from the verandah with the ever-present Palm Tanagers, a rust-brown female White-lined Tanager, Green and Purple honeycreepers, ubiquitous Bananaquits, Copper-rumped Hummingbirds, White-necked Jacobins, the Agoutis and a Tegu Lizard both scarfing up fallen bread crumbs, sightings of a Channel-billed Toucan winging its way across the distant valley.

Carol and Howard gave their first of several presentations today, "An Introduction to Trinidad Natural History," explaining the geological history of Trinidad and that the island is only 7-12 miles from Venezuela – and may have even been connected with a land bridge as recently as 1,500 years ago. No wonder South American species are so well-represented here, and less so on Tobago, where the last known connection was some 11,000 years ago. The biodiversity of Trinidad is truly astounding: 300 kinds of trees per hectare, 100 kinds of mammals, and 470 species of birds.



We also got a preview of some of the wildlife we hope to see, complete with soundtracks of Red Howler Monkeys, Oilbirds, and Chachalacas, and videos of Surinam toadlets emerging from the backs of their moms. And who else but Howard would explain reflectivity in lizards by Photoshop-ing a flashlight to the reptile's ribs?

Armed with knowledge (and the Centre's famed rum punch), we gathered at a large round mahogany table that belonged to William Beebe, the famous tropical biologist, who established SIMLA, the biological research station just south of the Centre. The station has fallen into sad times, partly due to lack of funds, but more because of four limestone quarries that removed land below it, allowing the station's own property to collapse. That in turn collapsed the spring that supplied water, which now has to be trucked in. It is now up to the the Asa Wright Centre to carry on Beebe's legacy.

Dinner was pumpkin soup, carne asada, crisp green beans with garlic and carrots, stewed lentils, mashed potatoes, salad, and fruit compote for dessert.

This is definitely a gung-ho group! In spite of any travel weariness, within 30 minutes, everyone reconvened for a guided night walk, in the rain, with Elsa, one of the Centre's guides. We met and photographed the female Trinidad Chevron Tarantula that lives in the green pipe supporting the *Car Park This Way* sign, and saw a Manaku Crab. They're named for the Trinidadian word for opossum, come out after rain, eat everything, and raise their babies in a pouch. We also saw a harvestman, a whip scorpion, three millipedes, and a roosting bird, the Olivaceous Euphonia (bottom side only!). The hardy souls who braved the downpour also got to see a large Luna moth. Those who ducked the rain early examined a baby Coral Snake, *Micrurus circinalis*, found by May.



### **Sunday, June 19 - Asa Wright**

Pattie got the prize for Best Early Morning Sighting for the male Tufted Coquette.

We later learned this ridiculous-looking tiny cockaded bird is the smallest of all hummers in Trinidad, which is likely why it's best seen in early morning before other birds can persecute it. Interestingly, none of the larger hummers attempts to harass the female, which we saw quite often during the day.

Other birds new to us included Crested Oropendolas, Southern House Wrens, Great Kiskadees (named for the

French: *Qu'est que tu dit? What'd you say?*), and lovely dark red Silver-beaked Tanagers. After a breakfast that included omelettes made to order and (for some) smoked herring, we gathered on the verandah with David and set off down the Discovery Trail to learn a smattering of the thousands of plants: Powderpuff – or Mimosa, Sanchezia, Verbena, Trema tree, Jackfruit, a flowering epiphyte, Blackstick, various melastomatids with their distinctive double venation, Wild Tobacco with its adventitious flowers and fruits eaten by tanagers and manakins, Hot Lips, Sealing Wax Palm (named for the scarlet color of the prop roots), White Olivera and Tanapa (both trees valued for their wood), and Wild Nutmeg whose fruits are eaten by tanagers and manakins.



White-Bearded Manakin

We stopped first so that everyone could enjoy the group of Golden-headed Manakins who perched obligingly close, one of our sought-after species famous for its mating displays. Carol even saw one doing its famed “moonwalk.” We then ambled on down the trail to the White-bearded Manakin lek (an area used for courtship displays). We saw no females but enjoyed watching these engaging little black and white male birds hopping about and clapping their wings to make the characteristic *SNAP!* sound to attract females.

The next stop on our ramble was the Bearded Bellbird habitat, and in case we hadn't realized it already, now we discovered what a gifted guide David is! We could all

hear the plucked rubber band-like *plonk-plonk* calls, but would never have seen the bird itself with its telltale charcoal wattles without David and his trusty green laser pointer. (Guides are careful not to aim the pointer directly at the bird.)

As we drifted slowly back to the Main House, May and Wynne fell behind the group as David called in a pair of White-bellied Antbirds, a young male and female, both singing from their hard-to-see vantage point in the brown leaf litter.

Before lunch we enjoyed Carol and Howard's lively “Evolution of Communication” presentation in which the take-home lesson is “You can't get Something from Nothing.” All animal communication is derived from some sort of individual behaviors: preening, sky-pointing, dancing, wing-snapping – and more – that were useful in some way before they evolved into ritualistic courtship or territorial displays.

Next we pursued our own noonday ritual: lunch, including *calalloo*, (leaves of the tarot plant cooked and blended with garlic and onions), the tarot root, and plantains – as well as vegetarian rice, stewed pigeon peas, calypso macaroni, battered fish, oven-baked barbecue chicken, salad, and sponge cake with sauce. Not surprisingly, it was a very quiet afternoon on the verandah!

We gathered again for afternoon tea at 4 p.m., and then piled into two vans to head out to the Apori Ag Station. Walking along the road into the station provided us views of a Gray-Breasted Martins, Wattled Jacanas (which also goes by the local names of Lily Trotter and Jesus Bird), Black Vultures, Ruddy Ground Doves, Tropical Mockingbirds, Southern Lapwings, Tropical Kingbirds, Grassquits (also called Johnny Jumpups although the female doesn't do the characteristic jumping), White-headed Marsh Tyrants, Pied Water Tyrants, Shiny Cowbirds, Caribe Grackles, Wilson's Snipes, Yellow-hooded Blackbirds, Red-breasted Blackbirds, Yellow-chinned Spinetails, Palm Tanagers, Great Kiskadees, Smooth-billed Ani,s Yellow Orioles, Cattle Egrets, Striated Herons – and a Spectacled Caiman!



As dusk settled, we had rum punch (of course!) and a picnic supper of rice, lamb, beans, and salad. Carol identified an infant White-banded Gecko (*Gonotodes vittatus*) on the wall of the shelter, and, after supper, David called in a Tropical Screech Owl. We then piled back into the two vans to find nightjars – and did we ever! Despite the damp ground, we saw White-tailed Nightjars, around 30 of the slightly larger Pauraques (pronounced *pah-rah-kees*), and we debated the ethics of counting the eyeshine of the Potoo we saw. The sweet green air rang with frog songs, and we of course saw the introduced Cane Toad, formerly known as *Bufo marinus*. (The genus of South American *Bufos* has now been changed to *Rhinella*.)

Having seen more than 20 species, we called the evening a success and headed gratefully home to our Centre lodgings!

### Monday, June 20 - Asa Wright

After breakfast, we loaded up and headed to the Mont Bleu Power Station to check out various insects and any birds that might appear. Harlequin, Hercules, and Scarab beetles all cooperated for the happy photographers, as well as Barred Antshrikes, Summer Tanagers, Gray-breasted Martins, and a Channel-billed Toucan in the distance. The Blanchicheusse Road was lined with the lovely red and yellow Decne (*Chrysothemis* sp.) flowers, and most of those to get out and walk, happily ambling along the narrow road, looking at anything of interest. Butterflies included the Postman and Tiger-striped. A few of us saw a Speckled Tanager and Violaceous Euphonias.

Howard also amused the passing residents by hooking a young Cecropia tree with an umbrella and shaking it to show us the stingless *Azteca* ants come boiling out of the internodes where Muellerian bodies produce proteins that help sustain the colony. Ah yes ... crazy eco-tourists!

We stopped for lunch in the Brasso Seco Nature Centre, a picnic shelter overlooking a small creek, with banana, avocado, and tremor trees. Here, between gnashing into the giant chicken sandwiches packed for us by the Centre, we saw a Ruddy Ground Dove on a nest, Blue-gray Tanagers, Tropical Kingbirds, Green Kingfishers, Southern Rough-winged Swallows, a female Black-throated Mango, a handsome pair of Barred Antshrikes, a Rufous-breasted Wren, a Bare-eyed Thrush (also on a nest – good spotting, May!), a Magnificent Frigatebird winging way high in the clouds far above the Black Vulture, a Short-Tailed Hawk, a Boat-billed Flycatcher, and two stunning Rufous-tailed Jacamars, members of the bee-eater family. Several of us caught a good glimpse of a pair of Yellow-rumped Caciques, while others saw a Swallow-tailed Kite and a Gray Saltator.



After lunch, we continued the search for trogons and got thorough looks – and even great photos! – of both the White-tailed and Collared Trogons, along with a Chestnut Woodpecker.

Our last stop included a pair of Orange-winged Parrots, a Red-legged Honeycreeper, Blue Dacnis, a Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, Forest Elaenias, Crested Oropendolas, a Striped Cuckoo, a Scaled Pigeon and a Pygmy Owl – the last two in the David's digiscope view.

As we pulled into the Centre's parking lot, several of us commented that we hadn't yet seen a Blue-crowned Motmot. As obliging as ever, David led us behind one of the outbuildings, and there in the bamboo were three of them!

Even after a long day in the field, everyone reappeared an hour later for Howard's lively and fascinating presentation



on “Social Insects.” Chemicals are the driving force in insect communication, and some ants are able to send and interpret as many as 20 kinds of messages! No one was even tempted to nap as we watched Howard’s footage of the leafcutter ants (*Atta cephalotes*) we saw yesterday, along with videos of other colonies. Particularly enthralling was learning that we’d been standing on a tiny part of the colony’s roof and that their home is easily as large as the Centre’s verandah – but hidden underground. And not to be missed was Howard’s account of his army ant work in Costa Rica, especially the night he aspirated three of his research subjects ...

### **Tuesday, June 21 - Asa Wright, Nariva Swamp**

June is one of the wettest months of the year in Trinidad and rain came down in deluges last night and early this morning, but cleared in time for breakfast.

When David arrived wearing a wool cap as mosquito protection, the five sturdy souls who’d chosen the Nariva field trip wondered if perhaps we’d made a mistake. Four others were content in their decision to remain at the Centre for local birding and photographing – and possible napping.

As it turned, everyone had a superb day!

The Nariva crowd, later dubbed the Bush Bush Bowling League, headed out, pausing at David’s Mom’s house to be outfitted in Wellington boots before returning to the Aripo Livestock Station to pick up a few bird species we’d missed: the nearly invisible, looks-just-like-a-stick Pinneated Bittern, Green-rumped Parrotlets, Fork-tailed Flycatchers, Purple Gallinules, Savannah Hawks, White-winged Swallows, and Plumbeous Kites.

We then drove through the towns of Cumuto and Sangre Grande (named for the battle between the Spanish and British at which “large blood” was fortunately not spilled), where we stopped to pick up *roti* for lunch. YUM! *Roti* is an East Indian specialty, somewhat like a burrito or empanada, in this case with a curried chicken/potato/mango filling in a flour and chick pea pastry. We devoured ours (being careful of bones since whole chicken parts are included) at the Manazilla Bay beach with crashing surf, waving palm trees, passing Brown Pelicans – and fishing dogs! Trinidad’s scavenging canines are enterprising and have figured out how to snag mudskippers out of the shallows.



On the way to the swamp, we added Semi-palmated Plovers and Turkey Vultures to our list, and passed some locally raised Black-bellied Barbados Sheep, which look more like goats than sheep.

Once we’d stepped out of the van, we were very grateful to David for our boots! because it was a muddy slog along an agricultural road through deep puddles into the Bush Bush area. Once we got in there, after seeing a White-shouldered Tanager and Lineated Woodpeckers, we could hear the snapping of White-bearded Manakins, along with the raucous calls of Blue-and-Gold and Red-bellied macaws.

Soon we caught a glimpse of a couple of Red Howlers, then waited out a hard rain shower that gave us all an appreciation of why the rain forest is as green and wet as it is! and then walked some more. When we came to an area under a Cannonball tree, Howard set up some sticks – and the Bush Bush Bowling League was born! We’re still



debating if the combination of Carol and Wynne won – or if Peter was the true victor.

The highlight of the day was a terrific sighting and photo opportunity of a Red Howler posing cooperatively high in a tree above us. Once again, since the animal was silent, without David's expertise, we would never have seen it – so we considered the trip a howling success.

After a delicious curry dinner at the Centre, everyone was more than willing to call it a day.

### Wednesday, June 22 - Oilbirds and Caroni Swamp

More deluges in the morning, but, undaunted, we were all ready for the trip to the Oilbird colony on the Centre's property, armed with umbrellas.

Looking more like a line of obedient two-legged toadstools than humans, we made our way down the trail to the "cave," actually a slot canyon, where 171 adult birds live. They're named for the fact that the young are 50 percent heavier than the adults and so full of fat they used to be cooked down for oil for lamps. These are the world's only fruit-eating echo-locating birds, and the views we got were well worth the rain and mud.

The Centre's biologists monitor the colony carefully: Only guests who stay three days or longer are allowed to visit the colony, and even the biologists only go into the "cave" once a month. As a result, the Oilbird population continues to grow. Along the way, we also met the Costus shrub with velvety underside of leaves, the Tonca Bean, whose fruit is a natural blood-thinner, and the Sand Box tree, whose dolphin-shaped seed is often used as jewelry. In addition, we added a Golden-fronted Greenlet to our list.

Once we'd returned and changed into dry clothes, Carol and Howard did their "Monkey-See and Monkey-Do" presentation on primates, where we learned the differences between Old and New World monkeys, the meaning of "gummivore" (sap-eating), and which primates have trichromatic vs dichromatic vision. Interestingly, like humans, Red Howlers can see all three primary colors but lack the olfactory ability of their dichromatic relatives. Life is indeed a series of trade-offs.



Lunch included the requested breadfruit, which inspired a lively discussion of Captain Bligh, the *Bounty*, and the famous botanist, Joseph Banks, who had all survived on this ubiquitous tropical fruit.

Soon afterwards, David and another guide, Ramdass, returned to take us to Caroni Swamp with a stop at the sewage ponds for seeing a Gray-lined Hawk, Spectacled Caimans, Yellow-hooded Blackbirds, Snowy Egrets, White-headed Marsh Tyrants, and Purple Gallinules.

This being a group that takes local cuisine seriously, the first stop was at a streetside vendor, *Mom's Hot Doubles*, to sample another East Indian staple: A *double* is two *chapatis* (similar to fried tortillas) with chickpeas, sauce, spices – a drippy, but delicious treat that can be as mild or spicy as you request.

We then moved on toward Caroni passing a Giant Cowbird, a Limpkin, a Great Egret, and an Osprey. Once on the boat, driven by another guide named Lester, we saw Little Blue Herons (particularly the immatures with their splashy white wings with patches of blue), Greater Anis, Rufous-browed Peppershrikes, Boat-tailed Flycatchers – and one many of us had been hoping for: the Red-capped Cardinal, Trinidad birds now being called the Masked Cardinal.



How serene and magical to be surrounded by mangroves, their roots encased in oysters with small crabs scuttling about, deep dark termite mounds just above the high tide line, with the occasional group of dramatic red and black Scarlet Ibis passing overhead! The distinctive color of the Ibis is dependent on its varied diet of the crabs and oysters. If kept in captivity on the wrong food, their color fades in about a week.

The highlight for many of us was not one, but two Cook's Tree Boas coiled comfortably in the branches above us. We also got good looks at the American Pygmy Kingfisher, Common Black Hawks, Common Potoos, Ringed Kingfishers, and Straight-billed Woodcreepers. We also saw Yellow-breasted Flycatchers, Green-rumped Parrotlets, Green Kingfishers, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, Black-crested Antshrikes, Large-billed Terns, Neotropical Cormorants, a Yellow-headed Caracara, the nest of a Yellow Oriole, and a Tricolored Heron.

#### **Thursday, June 23 - Moving on to Grande Riviere**

After a free morning of packing and catching up on photographs, postcards, and spotting some final birds from the verandah, we all convened for one more presentation: "Biology of Marine Turtles" as

preparation for watching leatherbacks come ashore this evening. Some highlights include:

- This species weighs 700-1000 pounds – and eats its weight in jellyfish each day! Partly because of their size, they have a remarkably low heart rate: 37 minutes between beats.
- Instead of having a hard shell, their scutes are comprised of muscle tissue and osteoderms. One theory is that their flexible shell allows them to reach depths of 4,000' without cracking.
- The females come ashore six or seven times a season, laying a clutch of around 100 eggs each time. The eggs are preyed upon by vultures, feral dogs, and, in non-protected areas, people. Two months later, the emerging hatchlings themselves are vulnerable to the same predators – plus Frigate birds and all the fish waiting to snatch them as soon as they make the trek to the sea.

After a last lunch at the Centre, we piled into David's and Ramdass' vans for the 2.5-hour trip winding up and down through more forest and past several villages and towns and along the coast to Grande Riviere. Our group bid a fond farewell to our guides who provided such an astounding week of learning and fun, and settled into our new lodgings. Le Grand Almandier is right on the beach and managed by Cherry Ann, who made sure we had everything we might need. We wasted no time in heading out to watch the vultures and stray dogs feast upon broken eggs and any unfortunate turtle hatchlings that happened to emerge in daylight.

Being here at this time of year is a lesson in balance. To the human eye, the system is incredibly wasteful: Female leatherbacks use a phenomenal amount of energy to hoist themselves onto land eight to ten times a breeding season. Each lays 800-1000 eggs, and, with luck, one of those will result in a surviving offspring. Sometimes as many as 400 turtles will be at this 1.2-mile-long beach, all digging, flinging sand, and often inadvertently destroying one another's nests and hatchlings.

Yet, the system works. Trinidadian biologists have monitored the turtles at Grande Riviere, and the population is now four times what it was twelve years ago.

The authorities close the beach at 6 p.m. each evening to allow the turtles to come ashore without disturbance before the tours begin at 9 p.m. Fifty other eager tour-goers were waiting with us – which seemed like a huge group until we learned that crowds of 500- 600 could sometimes occur! Led by a couple of guides with red lights, we filed out to beach

to find a female heaving herself out of the water and up the beach. First she scooped out a depression – and, in the process, uncovered a batch of hatchlings struggling to reach the surface. Eager bystanders gathered the weakened babies by the handfuls and deposited them into waiting buckets. The guide explained the staff keeps them overnight to build up their strength and then release them after dark the next evening once the vultures and frigate birds have retired.

Once settled into her nest, the female used her back flippers to excavate a perfectly cylindrical hole for the eggs – astonishing to watch those clumsy paddles maneuver so delicately! Once the depth of the hole equaled the length of her flippers, she appeared to go into a “trance,” as eggs dropped from her cloaca into the cavity, looking like ping-pong balls wreathed in clear slime. When each turtle finishes laying, she fills in the cavity, then turns several times, flipping sand in every direction, in an attempt to camouflage the nest. Then, slowly, and grunting with each step, each 1,000-pound leviathan slowly makes her way back to the sea.

The morning after a busy night of egg-laying, the entire beach looks as if there’s been a drunken tractor pull.



### Friday, June 24 - Grande Riviere

Who says vacations need to be restful?! Having stayed up late to watch the turtles, we gathered blearily at 5:30 a.m. to meet with Nicolas, our birding guide. He’s also on the organizing committee for the turtle project, so we had a lively conversation walking up the nearby hillside hoping to see the famous Piping Guan, locally known as a Pawi.

Nicholas got permission for us to use a covered observation deck, and we saw Short-tailed Swifts, Bare-eyed Thrushes, Tropical Mockingbirds, Yellow Oriole, Purple Honeycreepers, Rufous-breasted Wrens, several Channel-billed Toucans, Silver-beaked Tanagers, Orange-billed Parrots, Streaked Flycatchers, Shiny Cowbirds, Blue-tailed Emeralds, Green Honeycreepers, Scaled Pigeons, Piratic Flycatchers, Smooth-billed Anis, a Crimson-crested Woodpecker, and the remaining trogon we hadn’t seen yet: the Violaceous Trogon.

And two of us caught a quick glimpse of a Trinidad Piping Guan (an island endemic) as it flew by!

The rest of the day was free to spend as we chose. Some played in the rough surf, then rode the freshwater river current as it flowed into the sea. Others wandered the beach, toured the village, and caught up on postcards, e-mail, photographs, and sleep.



In the evening, all nine of us, plus the pleasant young German couple we “adopted” early in the trip, somehow packed into Diane and Jim’s room for rum punch and a lively presentation on “Protective Coloration.”

After dinner, some trooped out again to watch turtles, while others turned in early to be ready for tomorrow’s departure for Stage II of the trip: Tobago!

*From Carol Simon:*

### Sat., June 25 – On to Tobago!

Today we drove the winding road back to Port of Spain. Saying good-bye to Wynne at the airport, the eight of us continuing on caught our 20-minute flight to Tobago, an island with a strong Caribbean flair. From the air, Tobago’s

scenic mountains were ringed by blue sparkling waters, sandy beaches, and inviting surf.

A smiling face met us at the airport, Gladwyn James, our local guide, with his very comfortable (air-conditioned) and large van. As we piled in to eat our lunches, carried from Le Grande Almandier Hotel, we were off and running, with Gladwyn pointing out birds in every direction. A quick drive to the lovely grounds of Tobago Plantations, with its ponds, lawns, large trees and more, resulted in our seeing 27 species of birds in the one hour we spent there – fourteen of them new to the trip! One new bird was the Rufous-vented Chacalaca, the large raucous bird that ranges from South Texas along the Caribbean coast to Tobago. In addition, we saw Ameiva Lizards and Spectacled Caimans. For the latter, eggs incubated at higher temperatures become females and those at lower temperatures become males.

We then drove for another hour plus, to our home for the night at the Manta Lodge in Speyside. An already long day encouraged some to take a nap and others to refresh themselves by jumping into the ocean, the hotel pool, or both. Dinner was just for us – at Frank's Birdwatcher's Restaurant. There was a lot of fresh lobster at the table on this evening!



### **Sun., June 26 – Little Tobago Island/Crossing Tobago's Mountains**

This morning we were transported to the boat dock at Blue Waters Inn (our normal abode, just filled by a wedding this trip) where we met our enthusiastic guide for the morning, Zolain Frank. Hopping on a small glass-bottomed boat, we visited Little Tobago, a small, rocky island with rugged cliffs that support a large seabird nesting sanctuary. This island was once called Paradise Island, as Birds-of-Paradise (long gone) were introduced here. Walking on a good trail, we saw both cacti and arid-habitat shrubs, as well as denser forests of Fan Palms and Gumbo Limbos, the “tourist tree,” always red and peeling. Red-billed Tropicbirds, with their elegant long tails, and Red-footed and Brown boobies, rewarded us at the top. Nineteen bird species were spotted, and Ameiva Lizards were abundant.

A quick descent along the trail put us back in the glass-bottomed boat headed for a colorful coral reef. Large Brain Corals, Parrot Fish, Sergeant Majors, Angelfish, and others provided our entertainment as we peered into the sea.

Returning to the Manta Lodge, we checked out and were met by Gladwyn. We picked up our lunches at Birdwatcher's and headed for the cooler Main Ridge Forest Preserve, the world's oldest forest reserve, established by the British Crown in 1765. Eating along a bridge in the preserve, the birds came to us. After lunch we walked on the Gilpin Trail,



a very nice rain forest trail in a narrow canyon. We saw eleven species of birds, including many Blue-Crowned Motmots, which seem much more common on Tobago than on Trinidad, a Collared Trogon, and the White-Tailed Saberwing, a hummingbird rediscovered here by Adolphus James (Gladwyn's father), after many years of absence.

Next we drove on to the Cuffie River Nature Retreat, a very fine place indeed, largely due to the efforts of Regina Dumas, the creative and welcoming owner and manager. Settling in for the late afternoon and evening, we headed for our beds, the pool, or simply hung out in the lovely public areas of the hotel. Dinner, served by Carolyn and Regina, was delicious, as are all the meals at Cuffie.

The after-dinner excitement was generated by the ever eagle-eyed May. A pencil-sized black “worm lizard” with

VERY tiny legs was spotted on the driveway in front of the lodge. This is a Microtiid in the genus Bachia. NO common name; sorry. This species lives in leaf litter and is pretty secretive.

### **Mon., June 27 – Cuffie River Nature Retreat**

Some slept through the raucous chacalacas at 5:00 a.m. Go figure.

Breakfast was followed by meeting our morning guide, Desmond, a local expert at spotting forest birds. At we slowly wound along a 4-mile trail through forests, meadows, and along streams, the low-key but charming Desmond showed us 23 species of birds, a squirrel, and a black snake that was too far away to be identified, much to Carol's disappointment. (But no worries, there are no venomous snakes on Tobago.) For many of us, our favorite bird was the Common Potoo, a nocturnal insectivore, which kindly perched at the very top of an open bare tree trunk, so it was very easy to see.

Many tiny spiders and insects piqued our interest along the way, so our walk was slow and satisfying for all. Returning to the lodge after four hours, we had lunch and then free time until 5:45 p.m., when the main event was in Room 9. Carol and Howard gave their final talk, "Coral Reefs," where topics ranged from the ecosystem producers, zooanthellae, to the wars launched between groups of sea anemones.

Our farewell dinner was spectacular Indian fare. Howard asked Regina the day before if we might have Indian food, not to mention chocolate ice cream, as many of us had gone into chocolate withdrawal during our stay on Trinidad and Tobago. Regina was amazing, going out on a special shopping trip for us, and helping to cook up a meal to be remembered.

### **Tues., June 28 – Departure**

We were picked up by Gladwyn at 8:00 a.m., right after breakfast, and driven to the Tobago Airport for flights to Trinidad and on to the U.S.

A terrific time was had by all!

*Photo credits: Torch Ginger, Carol Simon; Asa Wright porch, Palm Tanager, Tarantula, Asa Wright dining room, Mazanilla Bay roti lunch, Turtle hatchlings, Grande Riviere beach, Wynne Brown; White-Bearded Manakin, Oilbird, Cook's Boa, Howard Topoff; Harlequin Beetle, May Chen; Blue Motmot, group, Dianne Fristrom; Bush Bush Bowling League, David Ramlal; Tobago North Shore, Peter Ralston; Cuffie River Nature Retreat, Pattie Litton. Design Wynne Brown, [www.wynnebrown.com](http://www.wynnebrown.com)*

