

ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE CHRISTMAS WEEK TOUR | Trip Report

December 22 – 30, 2018 | Written by Kathleen Pasierb



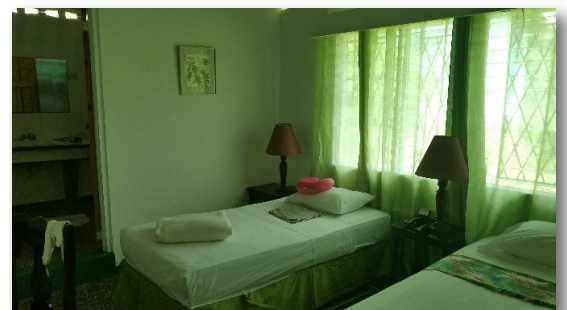
Participants: Richard, Katherine, Tom K., Patsy, Annabelle, Barbara, Donald, Connie, Tom F., and Vivian with host Kathleen Pasierb.

Friday, Dec. 21: Early Arrivals

At 2:30 pm my plane touched down at Piarco International Airport into balmy, tropical weather. From the air Trinidad measures a meager 50 miles by 30 miles surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean and looks small from above. I soon would learn that it is abundant in so many other ways. The mountains, sweeping valleys, dense tropical forests, bountiful wildlife and gracious people (Trinis) were immeasurable.

I met two early arriving participants at the airport customs area, Connie and Tom F. from California. We were greeted by Mahese, our driver and bird guide, outside the airport. He is an amiable and informative guide. We traveled by van along winding roads to Asa Wright Nature Centre in the mountains above Arima valley.

We were given a brief orientation and room assignments, then shuttled to clean and accommodating rooms. Without hesitation and forgoing unpacking, we rushed down to the main house through a lovely hallway and out to the popular bird viewing area, the famous Asa Wright Nature Centre veranda. We were met by Elsa and Elizabeth, both competent and amiable naturalists. We were amazed at the sheer number of birds we saw that afternoon. An aerial display of primary and secondary colors flittered all around us as we experienced a visual display of hummingbirds, honeycreepers, thrushes, tanagers and euphonious.





The darkness of the winter solstice was brightened by the full moon rising over the east ridge at AWCN. Birds seen along the way to AWCN were Carib Grackle, Shiny Cowbird, Crested Oropendola, and Bananaquit. Viewed from the veranda were a plethora of hummingbirds: White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-breasted Hermit, Green Hermit, Little Hermit, Brown Violetear, Ruby Topaz, Black-throated Mango, Tufted Coquette, Long-billed Starthroat, White-chested Emerald and Copper-rumped. Adding to the explosion of color was the Violaceous Euphonia.

Saturday, Dec. 22: Arrivals

On this our first morning we were greeted by Elizabeth, a pleasant and knowledgeable naturalist at the Centre. She talked us through the identification of birds from the viewing area of the veranda and then lead us on a guided walk along the Discovery Trail. It was an easy stroll from the Centre porch where we were shown the plants and their medicinal uses as more bird species presented themselves along the way. Golden headed manakin and white bearded manakin peaked between the green, leafy understory of the forest for a quick look. As we walked, we could hear the distinct metallic sounding call of the Bearded Bellbird, his vocalizations bouncing off the forest trees. Perched on a horizontal branch about ten feet away we encountered a male calling for a mate and announcing his territory to other males. Just off the trail a small grove of Hawaiian torch plants hosted Green Hermits.



A light rain fell periodically throughout the day adding a touch of coolness to the steamy warm air. By mid-afternoon the rest of the participants for this Christmas week in Trinidad had arrived. Richard, Catherine, Tom, Patsy, Annabelle, Barbara, Donald, all made it safely to the Centre. Vivian arrived two days later due to bad weather and flight cancellations. We gathered for dinner that evening in a beautiful well-appointed dining room sharing our stories of travel delays & bird sightings. It was indeed a wonderful first day for all. Other species seen for the first time on this first day were Crested Oropendola, Orange-winged Parrots, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Pewee.

Sunday, Dec. 23: Liponot Valley

After breakfast we had some time to ourselves until we boarded the van at 11:30 am for Liponot Valley. Mahese, our guide and

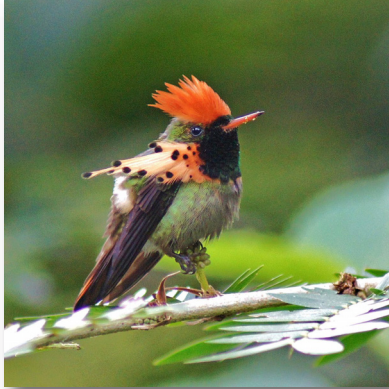
driver, is an excellent birder. At the summit of the Northern Range at Las Lapas, at an elevation of approximately 1,800 ft, were spectacular views of the north side of the range. The layers of green forest cascaded down to blue sea. From where we stood, we could see at roads end our destination to the tiny village of Brasso Seco, a place we would visit on December 27. We departed on foot to the left of the summit on a dirt road to our downhill destination, Café de Liponot. Along the way the elusive Trogon's calls echoed through the forest. At a junction in the road, we encountered aerial displays of raptors, Zone-tailed hawk, White hawk, Common Black Hawk, along with kettling Turkey and Black vulture.

The sun was nearly at its zenith when we arrived upon a forest opening and a small farm and plantation. This is the home of a family run business where organic cacao and organic coffee is grown. We received a warm and inviting welcome from Cyril Cooper whose wife treated us to a freshly prepared chocolate tea mixed with spices while Cyril explained the process of making chocolate. We had a delightful time learning about and tasting cacao fruit and cacao seeds. The farm produces 100% Sabor Criollo chocolate, a fine blend of Creole chocolate with cinnamon and nutmeg. We purchased chocolate chunks with anticipation of making hot cocoa once we arrived back home. Freshly ground coffee straight from the plantation was also available for purchase. Between the cacao plants we saw tent making bats. An American redstart flew in among the avocado and breadfruit trees. A Black hawk and more Turkey and Black vultures circled overhead.

Reluctantly, our schedule demanded that we leave the local hospitality of Cyril's plantation but with the promise of an amazing lunch at Mariposa Café located 20 minutes down the road into the Liponot Valley. Traveling through the town and across from the Café, we spotted two Yellow-headed Caracara sitting on posts in the local park.

To say it was an amazing lunch was an understatement as we dined on a 3-course meal of locally sourced foods. The lentil soup with cardamon and chocolate was especially tasty. Our lunch was lovingly prepared by four sisters and





then served with the utmost care by the young wait staff. We dined el fresco among hummingbird feeders swarming with many different species such as the stunning Tufted Coquette and the striking Ruby Topaz, White-necked Jacobin, Blue-tailed emerald and White-chested Emerald. Nearing the end of our meal the wait staff and the four sisters entertained us with lively holiday music.



On winding downhill roads, we made our way through Pinole Valley and back to AWCN in time for rum punch on the veranda. This was truly a fabulous day for birds, food and local residents of Trinidad. Topping off our visit in Liponot Valley was a clear sighting of a Channel-billed Toucan posing for us on a branch over the deep valley. Other species seen on this day were Magnificent Frigatebird, Neo-tropical Comorant, Gray-lined Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk, Southern Lapwing, Ruddy Ground Dove, Rufous-breasted Hermit, Orange-winged Parrot, Guianan Trogon, Rufous-breasted wren, Cocoa, Spectacled & White-necked Thrush, Yellow Warbler, Turquoise and Bay-headed Tanager, Violaceous Euphonia.



Monday, Dec. 24: Full Day at AWCN

The morning was relaxed and pleasant as we strolled along AWCN driveway to the "bus stop" at the junction with Blanchisseuse road.



Today was a time for settling in at the Centre for the day, enjoying a birding walk on the well-marked trails, the AWCN driveway and discovering more birds from the veranda and the surrounding area. After lunch we enjoyed an educational presentation by Martyn Kenefick, author of the Field Guide to Birds of Trinidad and Tobago and board member for the Centre. The general Manager, June, was excited to arrange a night of live music as a Christmas gift from Caligo Ventures. The dining room tables were festively decorated in green and red and the Christmas Eve dinner was delicious.

Tuesday, Dec. 25: Christmas Day and Dustan Cave for Oilbirds

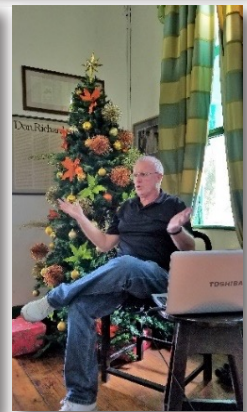
After a relaxing morning of personal time and an orientation walk, we had a festive holiday lunch. Martyn gave a splendid presentation on the Birds of Trinidad. In the afternoon we

walked to Dunstan Cave to view the Oilbirds. Osana, our naturalist trail guide, informed us about the precautions the Centre takes about visiting the cave. She was knowledgeable about medicinal plants we encountered along the trail to the cave. We hiked down a steep trail into a ravine, crossed a small stream, and came up upon the cave as quietly as possible. The nocturnal oilbirds are as big as Northern Harriers and easy to see. We knew that they would be asleep on stone ledges where we would view them in small groups at a time for about 30 seconds. A steep climb out of the ravine and back on level ground was well worth the effort to see the Oilbirds. How privileged we felt seeing these rare and magnificent creatures. Hawks seen on this day were Common Black Hawk, Gray-lined Hawk, Zone-tailed Hawk, Black Hawk Eagle, and other species such as Guianan Trogon, Golden-Olive Woodpecker, White-bellied Antbird, White-flanked Antwren, Barred Antshrike, Black-crested Antshrike, Forest Elaenia, Slaty-capped Flycatcher, Bearded Bellbird, Rufous Breasted Wren.



Wednesday, Dec. 26: Birding the Driveway and Caroni Marsh

After a delicious lunch at the Centre we boarded the van and headed for Caroni Marsh in anticipation of witnessing the spectacular flocks of Scarlet Ibis coming to roost on mangrove trees. This trip was a very productive day for bird sightings. At the gate entrance we saw Gray-breasted Martin, Short-tailed Swift, Osprey and Masked Cardinal. At the dock prior to boarding and on a wire sat a Gray Kingbird and Tropical Kingbird. Along the channel the highlight was a Boat-billed Heron hidden in the darkness of the mangrove channel. We also saw Great Blue Heron, Striated Heron, Little Blue Heron, Tri-colored Heron, Black-crowned Night Heron, Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Great Egret, Snowy Egret, Cattle Egret and Reddish Egret, Smooth-billed Ani, Tropical Screech Owl, Green Kingfisher, American Pygmy Kingfisher. Other species included on this day were the Silky Anteater wrapped around a mangrove branch sound asleep, a Ruschenberger's Tree



Boa just hanging around, long-tongued bats clinging to branches and tiny tree frogs.

The channel opened up to a huge shallow lake where we passed by American Greater Flamingo. Lester, our expert bird guide and boatman anchored on the lake about 1 hour before dusk. Lester is a fourth-generation family of conservation minded local Trinidadians. Mahese offered us rum punch and we waited. Then they arrived! First one, then three, then forty, and soon one hundred scarlet Ibis at a time flew overhead and landed precisely on their chosen mangrove branch like a choreographed dance of winged bright red gowns. On this warm evening, the spectacle sent chills down our backs as we watched in complete silence. At sundown we boated back to the dock through a darkening and mysterious mangrove marsh. The van was unusually quiet as we journeyed back to the Centre. I imagined we were filled to the brim with such a rich and rewarding shared experience at Caroni Marsh. This day was truly a full day of fantastic birding and comradery.





Thursday, Dec. 27: Blanchisseuse Road to Brasso Seco in the Northern Range

On this sunny day we traveled Blanchisseuse Road to the summit at 1,800 feet and down to the 500 ft community of Brasso Seco. Mahese and Martyn took us to their favorite stops along the roadway to see many bird species. Magnificent Frigatebirds cruised above in a blue sky accompanied by kettling Turkey and Black Vulture. Ornate Hawk Eagle were spotted in between the branches of the upper canopy of the forest. Common Black Hawk, White Hawk and Short-tailed Hawk were observed as well. We stopped for sightings of Olive-striped Flycatcher, Strait-billed Woodcreeper, Barred Antshrike, Green-throated Mango, Collared-Trogon, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Red-rumped Woodpecker, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Blue-headed Parrot, Black-tailed Tityra. Flying above at regular intervals were Gray-breasted Martin. For color a Blue Dacnis and Green Honeycreeper scaled the branches of the trees with Bananaquits just about everywhere.



We arrived at the small community of Brasso Seco where we listened to an introduction by our lovely hostess then lunched on local fair and chocolate. We took the opportunity to support the local business by purchasing local coffee and homegrown, processed chocolate. As we left the lunch spot, a Blue Dacnis flew in within a few feet of the group. Beautiful!!! With minds, hearts and stomachs full of the day's fare, we journeyed up the mountain and down again to home. As usual we arrived in time for rum punch and dinner. Other species seen were Antwren, Speckled Tanager, Olive-striped Flycatcher, Squirrel Cuckoo, Ruddy Ground Dove, Yellow-rumped Cacique, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Jacamar, Smooth-billed Ani, and Giant Cowbird.



Friday, Dec. 28: Nariva Swamp

Today was our final day to enjoy the sights and sounds of Trinidad. It was a full day of adventure as Mahese and passengers made our way to the coast in a blustering rain storm. We traveled past open fields where we saw perching adult Savannah Hawk and juvenile Yellow Oriole sitting off the roadside, Yellow-rumped Cacique, Tropical Mockingbird. Brown Pelican sailed on updrafts above the ocean edge as four Black-bellied Plover scoured the exposed shoreline at low tide. At a stopping point we encountered an Anhinga striking a pose and my favorite bird, the Rufous-tailed Jacamar sitting above a very large Tegu Lizard resting on the bank of a small wetland inlet.



We headed toward Nariva Swamp to find a delightful array of wading and savannah birds. Snowy, Little, Great & Cattle Egret, Great Blue, Tri-colored & Striated Heron. A Long-winged Harrier cruised by just above the grasses while Savannah, Zone-tailed and Gray-lined Hawk appeared higher above.

Moving slowly through the wetland ditches of Nariva Swamp were Wattled Jacana with four fledglings huddled near mother, Southern Lapwing, Stilt Sandpiper, Purple Gallinule, Pied Water Tyrant, Red-headed Meadowlark, Yellow-bellied Ealenia, White-headed Marsh Tyrant, Blue-black Grassquit while Smooth-billed Ani looked on from farmland to the left side of the road.

We had lunch on the bleachers of a field looking out over the Swampland and village lining the road of the grassland. A wonderful day again with Mahese, our expert driver and guide was had by all.

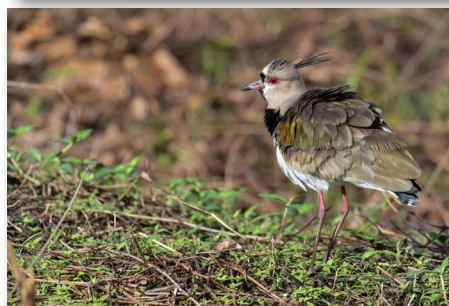
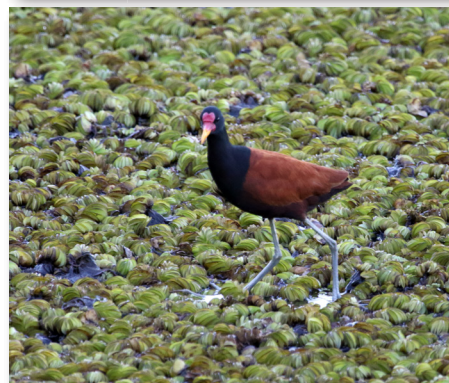
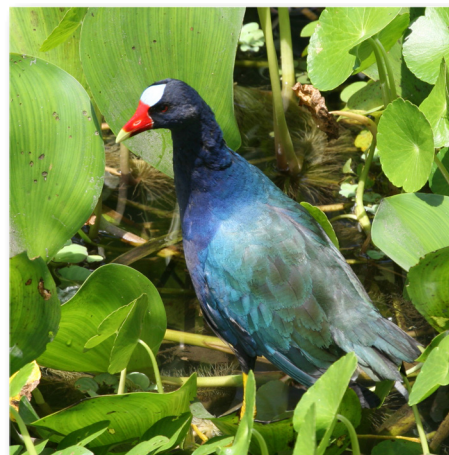


Photo credit: All photos in *italics* by Kathleen Pasierb. All others: Trinidad forest view, AWNC driveway, AWNC stock; *Comfortable and clean rooms*; *Full moon rise at Asa Wright Nature Center on the Winter Solstice*; *Violaceous Euphonia*, Greg Smith; *White Bearded Manakin*, Dennis Main; *Crested Oropendola*, Alex Vargo; *Summit view to the north side of the Norther range at Blanchisseuse road summit*; *Patsy & Annabelle inspecting cacao groves at Café de Liponot and seeing Tent making bats*; *Tasting chocolate at Café de Liponot with June, Connie, Don and Tom F.*; *Cyril Cooper and his chocolate factory*; *Cacao seeds*; *The vegetarian plate at Café Mariposa as colorful as Trinidad*; *Tufted Coquette*, Mukesh Ramdass; *Channel-billed Toucan*, Robert Martinez; *The ladies take a break at the 'bus stop' at the end of AWNC driveway from left to right. Katherine, Barb, Vivian, Yvonne, Annabelle, Patsy*; *Tom K. found a nutmeg seed along the driveway*; *Oilbirds*, Janet Metzger; *Oilbird Trail sign*, Dodie Logue; *Christmas tree at the nature center*; *Martyn giving*



his Birds of Trinidad presentation at AWWC; Yellow-crowned Night Heron, Peg Abbott; Our fabulous boat guide and knowledgeable birder; Katherine and Vivian spot a Ruschenberger's tree Boa hanging from a mangrove tree in the marsh channel at Caroni; Don and Yvonne floating down a mangrove-lined channel at Caroni Marsh with Mahese, our birding guide, and participant Vivian in the background; The amazing scarlet Ibis coming in to roost; View from the summit at Blanchisseuse Road; Blue-headed Parrot, Mike Boyce; At Brasso Seco with our lovely host; Homegrown, organic chocolate; Purple Gallinule, Wattled Jacana, Peg Abbott; Southern Lapwing, Mike Boyce; Last dinner together with the Christmas week group; A surprise birthday cake for Katherine at after dinner dessert.