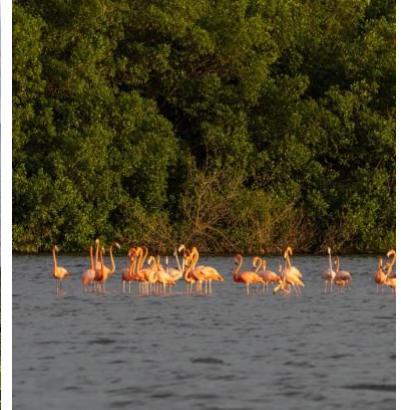


Ultimate Trinidad & Tobago | Dec. 1 – 11, 2022

Trip Report | by Sheri L. Williamson



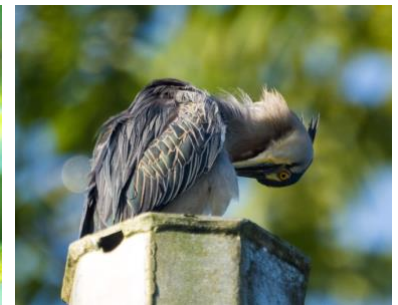
With guide Sheri L. Williamson and participants: Anne, Becky, Brian, Jim, Sarah, and Scott



Thurs., Dec. 1

Early arrivals at Pax Guest House

Five of the six participants arrived in time to enjoy the fine food and gracious hospitality of Pax Guest House, perched on the mountainside overlooking Port of Spain. Host and kindred spirit, Gerard Ramsawak, joined us on the balcony to enjoy the frenzy at the sugar water feeders and chat about Trinidad's avian treasures. Feisty mobs of Purple Honeycreepers, Bananaquits and dozens of hummingbirds of eight species came and went constantly, keeping our heads constantly swiveling. The 33 species recorded from the balcony between breakfast and lunch included a dark-morph/light-morph pair of Short-tailed Hawks, a Zone-tailed Hawk and a Black Hawk-Eagle soaring overhead; the haunting tremolo of a Little Tinamou, an exquisite Long-billed Starthroat with aquamarine crown and garnet throat, and two iconic, male Ruby-topaz Hummingbirds.



After lunch, our Trini birding guide, Dave Ramlal, picked us up for the trip to Hacienda Jacana, our home-away-from-home for the next few days. Dave stopped at a few urban birding spots along the way, adding some waders and shorebirds to our list including the first of many Southern Lapwings. A very brief stop in traffic gave the group its best look at a Red-breasted Meadowlark (think Eastern Meadowlark crossed with a chocolate-covered cherry). After a brief birding stop in the town of Brazil, we arrived at Hacienda Jacana, had a delicious dinner prepared by a local restaurant and settled in for the night.

Fri., Dec. 2 Hacienda Jacana

Birding around Hacienda Jacana before and during breakfast was a neotropical feast. As advertised, a pair of Wattled Jacanas patrolled the pond beside the dining pavilion as Ruddy Ground-Doves flitted about. A constant cacophony of bird sounds rang around us: Orange-winged Parrots, Great Kiskadee, Palm Tanager, Barred Antshrike, Tropical Mockingbird, Crested Oropendola, Green-backed Trogon and more. A flowering hedge of *Stachytarpheta jamaicensis*, also known as Blue Porterweed, Blue Snakeweed and Jamaica Vervain was the center of activity for Copper-rumped Hummingbirds, White-chested Emeralds, Blue-chinned Sapphires, a female Tufted Coquette and a variety of butterflies. A small flock of prehistoric-looking Smooth-billed Anis lounged nearby as if vying with the hummingbirds for the photographers' attention.

After breakfast, Dave Ramlal and Lester Nanan picked us up for a trip into Trinidad's Northern Range via Blanchisseuse Road to the community of Brasso Seco. Along the way we enjoyed heart-melting views of a White Hawk and male Golden-crowned Manakin, a swirling flock of Band-rumped and Gray-rumped swifts, a pair of Crimson-crested Woodpeckers and a variety of small forest birds. We even heard a couple of distant Bearded Bellbirds giving their unmistakable "BONK" calls.



Our midday stop in Brasso Seco included a delicious traditional lunch and an orientation on how cacao is grown and processed into chocolate. Our host gave us an opportunity to taste the sweet, white pulp inside the cacao pods (nothing like chocolate!) and the lavender-colored, raw nibs (so bitter!) before passing around samples of the locally produced chocolate. Around the village after lunch, we were treated to fabulous views of both Green-backed and Guianan trogons. After loading up on Brasso Seco chocolate bars, we started back over the ridge of the Northern Range, with a few birding stops along Paria Morne Bleu Road and Blanchisseuse Road. Near the ridgeline, a Magnificent Frigatebird soared by, emphasizing how close we were to the Caribbean Sea.

Sat., Dec. 3 West Coast Birding | Temple in the Sea

After more morning birding and breakfast at Hacienda Jacana, we climbed into Dave's van and headed for Trinidad's west coast. Among fallow fields, mangrove forest and shoreline habitats, the group added many new birds to the list. The jetty at Orange Valley (which was neither orange nor a valley) provided our first encounters with Scarlet Ibis (Trinidad's national bird) and American Flamingoes, along with Black-crested Antshrikes, Bicolored Conebills, a flock of Western Sandpipers feeding in the shade of the mangrove forest, many Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans, a Lesser Black-backed Gull and more. A Great Black Hawk, spotted by Dave as it fed on something along the mangrove roots, was a locally rare find, as were three Roseate Spoonbills.

At nearby Waterloo, the big attraction is the Temple in the Sea. The temple and its peninsula owe their existence to the indomitable spirit and backbreaking work of Sewdass Sadhu, an indentured laborer from India and devout Hindu. After British authorities razed a temple Sadhu built nearby on dry land, he undertook to create new land in the Gulf of Paria on which to build a place of worship. The current temple is a reconstruction that reopened in 1995 to commemorate the arrival of the first Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad. The path to the temple is lined with flowering shrubs that attract hummingbirds, butterflies and other small creatures, and shorebirds and waders hang out along the manmade peninsula's rocky shoreline. At the community of Carapichaima, the group visited a spectacular 85-foot statue of Lord Hanuman, a Hindu god associated with courage and strength. A variety of birds around the parking area including Green-rumped Parrotlets, White-



winged Swallows and Yellow Orioles made it another culture/nature stop. On our way back along the east side of Caroni Marsh, a couple of quick stops added Greater Ani and Long-winged Harrier to our trip list.

Sun., Dec. 4 Rahamut Trace | Debe

This morning we had the privilege of being guided by Dave, Lester and my friend Martyn Kenefick, author of *Birds of Trinidad & Tobago* in the Helm Field Guide Series. Because the better-known birding destination of Nariva Swamp was inaccessible owing to road damage from recent heavy rains, the group visited the Rahamut Trace area on the southwestern corner of the island. This area of marsh and fallow fields was extremely birdy, producing several species not seen elsewhere. Spectacular close encounters with a Long-winged Harrier, Large-billed Terns, White-headed Marsh Tyrants and Pied Water Tyrants, and scope views of a singing Striped Cuckoo, were definite highlights for the group. Dave, Lester and Martyn were even more excited by scope views of a rarely seen Stripe-backed Bittern and glimpses of a Lesson's Seedeater. It was also a morning of "counterparts," with Yellow-hooded Blackbird, Giant Cowbird and Gray Kingbird standing in for their northern relatives. The grand finale was a stop at one of Martyn's most reliable locales for White-tailed Goldenthrroat, an uncommon marsh-dwelling hummingbird. We were rewarded with stunning views and photos of two males squabbling over feeding rights at a stand of flowering *Thalia geniculata*, a bizarre heliconia-like plant in the same family as the "prayer plants" often kept as indoor ornamentals.

A stop in the town of Debe for a traditional lunch of "doubles" was the perfect end to a morning of intense birding. Doubles are a native Trini street food, a filling of curried chickpeas (channa) ladled into two soft, puffy flatbreads and seasoned with sweet and/or spicy condiments. (Food was definitely one of the highlights of this itinerary!) Returning to Hacienda Jacana, we spent the rest of the afternoon relaxing, birding and photographing around the grounds, and stalking hummingbirds and butterflies at the vervain hedge.



Mon., Dec. 5

Pre-breakfast birding at Hacienda Jacana included an invitation from Anne and Becky to stop by their cottage to watch flocks of Violaceous Euphonias and various tanagers feeding on the pea-sized fruits of a wild fig. After breakfast, Dave took us on a short walk around the property where we found Channel-billed Toucans, Squirrel Cuckoos, Streak-headed Woodcreeper, Black-tailed Tityra, Green-backed and Guianan trogons, Gray-lined Hawk, Turquoise Tanagers and much more. This morning's off-site field trip took us to the Aripo Savannas. An accommodating Savanna Hawk delighted the group with stunning scope views, and we got additional views and photo ops of some of the same species we enjoyed at Rahamut Trace. A stop in a small residential area produced a variety of forest and edge-loving species, including Rufous-breasted Wren and Sooty Grassquit. We returned to Hacienda Jacana for lunch and some retail therapy with renowned local hummingbird photographer Rachel Lee Young. Rachel brought a variety of items printed with her spectacular hummingbird and flower photos. For photographers, Rachel's work is inspirational. After a mid-afternoon break, we headed out intending to do some night birding at Waller Field, a former U.S. military airstrip now owned by the University of Trinidad & Tobago. Unbeknownst to Dave, the site was temporarily closed to visitors after a security breach. We managed a few minutes of birding, including our first views of the uncommon Sulphury Flycatcher, before being escorted out by security. Our night birding plans thwarted, we rendezvoused with Lester for a lavish picnic dinner at the entrance to the Aripo Livestock Station.

Tues., Dec. 6

Yerettê Hummingbird Sanctuary | Caroni Swamp Dinner Cruise

We got the day off to a great start with a female American Pygmy Kingfisher perched and preening in a bush at the edge of the pond by the dining pavilion. The grounds at Hacienda Jacana were busy with other birds, as usual, including Spectacled Thrush, Trilling Gnatwren, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and a variety of tanagers. One of my personal favorite field trip destinations in Trinidad is Yerettê Hummingbird Sanctuary, and this visit was even more amazing than before! Retired agronomist Theo Ferguson and his wife Gloria have turned their hillside yard into a miniature paradise for hummingbirds and the people who love them, with flowering plants, feeders, and plenty of bare twigs for the birds to pose for perfect portraits. Theo is an accomplished hummingbird photographer, and large prints of his exquisite images adorn the walls of the house. At this one site, the group



saw 13 of the 17 hummingbird species on Trinidad's list! It was hard to leave Yerettê, but Lester had something special planned for this evening: a dinner cruise in Caroni Swamp. We arrived at the departure point for the Caroni boat tours to find our spacious tour boat had a table running down the middle. As the boat glided down the canal and under the cathedral-like canopy of mangroves, Lester pointed out Greater Anis, a panhandling Masked Cardinal, Spotted Sandpipers and American Redstarts on winter vacation, Yellow-crowned Night-Herons waiting for dusk to fall, a roosting trio of Tropical Screech-Owls, and several Ruschenberger's (Central American or Trinidad) tree boas. Out in the open part of the marsh, Lester and crew served drinks and dinner as flocks of Scarlet Ibises, herons and egrets glided past on their way to their roosts. The deep green mangroves gradually took on a rosy tint as they filled up with ibises. A flock of 39 American Flamingoes, glowing coral in the evening light, rounded out a perfect evening.

Wed., Dec. 7 Rainforest Lodge | Grand Riviere

As much as we hated to say goodbye to Hacienda Jacana, we had a long and exciting day ahead. After packing up the van, we headed out to another location new to me, El Suzanne Rainforest Lodge. The entrance road alone was worth the stop, with five species of tanagers, including the striking Bay-headed, plus Rufous-breasted Wren, Tropical Parula, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, White-bearded Manakin, Golden-fronted Greenlet, Rufous-tailed Jacamar and both Guianan and Green-backed trogons. At the lodge, our gracious host Dianne welcomed us and served refreshments on her expansive terrace with eye-level views into the canopy of the Tamana Rainforest. After introductions and a short history of the site, we sat down to another delicious meal.

After lunch we thanked Dianne for her hospitality and continued northeast around the east end of the Northern Range. Our destination was Grand Riviere, a coastal community famous in summer for the world's largest nesting population of leatherback sea turtles and year-round for the critically endangered, endemic Trinidad Piping-Guan, known locally as "Pawi." We didn't get in much birding on the drive, but the scenery was spectacular! Both the coastline and the sea are much rougher here than on the west coast, with jagged volcanic rocks pummeled by crashing surf. At Le Grand Almandier, our seaside hotel overlooking a quiet cove, we



checked in as quickly as possible before jumping back into the van for a short ride to a favorite hangout for the Trinidad Piping-Guans. As we pulled up to a private home not far outside town, trees on both sides of the road were shaking from the movement of large birds. Pawis! There was much oohing, aahing, and clicking of shutters as a flock of 10 piping-guans clambered about the trees in search of the tastiest fruits, their electric blue wattles fluttering like curtains. Though most of our time was spent gawking at the guans, a variety of other birds ensured no shortage of photo subjects. Back at the hotel, we enjoyed a delicious dinner and toasted our successful encounter with one of Trinidad's rarest and most unusual avian jewels.

Thurs., Dec. 8 Monte Video Road | Cuffie River Nature Retreat

We were up early for another field trip up Monte Video Road. A quick stop at the previous evening's piping-guan site turned up a small group in poorer light, so after a few minutes communing with the Pawis, we continued up the road in search of smaller birds. At couple of strategic stops, Dave was able to call up White-flanked Antwren, Silvered Antbird and White-bellied Antbird, all skulky and difficult to see unless you happen to find them attending an army ant swarm. There weren't many birding opportunities on the way back to the airport, but after our experience with the Pawis and the morning's birding, no one seemed to mind. Disembarking at Crown Point on the western end of Tobago, we gathered our bags and met Jason Radix and his driver Sean, who loaded our gear into a little tour bus and took us almost halfway across the island to Cuffie River Nature Retreat. After a hectic travel day, it was a relief to be welcomed by our host Regina Dumas and settle into our rooms before dinner.

Fri., Dec. 9 Cuffie River

Bird activity ramps up early at Cuffie River, starting with dawn choruses from Orange-winged Parrots and Rufous-vented Chachalacas (Tobago's national bird, known locally as "Cocorico"). As fresh fruit and refilled hummingbird feeders go out, the Bananaquits, tanagers and hummingbirds swarm in for breakfast. Among the hummingbirds, one stands out for its large size, deep green and blue coloring and long, boldly patterned tail: the White-tailed Sabrewing. This near-endemic species occurs only on Tobago and in the Cordillera de Caripe and



Paria Peninsula of extreme northeastern Venezuela. The species' small range, vulnerable habitats and declining populations have earned it Near Threatened status from the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Only adult males have primary feathers with the thickened, flattened shafts that inspired the name, "sabrewing." It's a regular visitor to the hummingbird feeders at the lodge.

After breakfast, we took a walk around the property with local naturalist Desmond, whose intimate knowledge of the birds as both species and individuals helped us add several new birds to our list and get better views of a few seen previously. A favorite of visiting birders is the Rufous-tailed Jacamar, known locally as the "King Hummingbird" for its long, pointed bill and iridescent emerald plumage. We counted 11 in a 1.5-mile walk, including a pair in the process of excavating a nest burrow in a steep bank. Trinidad Motmots, ironically easier to see here than on their namesake island, were also at work on nests. A more elusive prize was Blue-backed Manakin, much harder to see than its Trinidad cousin the White-bearded Manakin. Though we heard at least four, we caught only fleeting glimpses. A lone White-necked Jacobin, the only one we saw on Tobago, was a first-of-season according to Desmond. Many tropical hummingbirds undertake short-distance, seasonal migrations, and on both Tobago and Trinidad a few species become scarce or disappear entirely for a few weeks each year (mostly late summer through fall).

Jason had more adventures in store for us for the afternoon. At Adventure Farm and Nature Reserve, another new site for me, owner Ean Mackay lays out a sumptuous spread for his abundant feathered clientele. Once the feeders are restocked with fruit and sugar water, Ean literally rings a dinner bell, and the birds come flocking! The birds are so accustomed to people that we were able to admire a Trinidad Motmot from scarcely more than an arm's length away. The aptly named Ruby-topaz Hummingbird is the star attraction here, and luckily for us the first few males had recently returned from their fall hiatus. After a short stop in Plymouth at a park overlooking Great Courland Bay, where we found Eared Dove, Gray Kingbird, Black-faced Grassquit and dainty Carib Grackles, we struck off in search of wetland birds. The Centre Street effluent ponds were busy, with handsome White-cheeked Pintails, families of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Least Grebes and Common Gallinules, and a nice selection of wading birds including Green Heron, which replaces Striated Heron here on Tobago. A male Ring-necked Duck and a small flock of Lesser Scaup, which wouldn't earn a second glance at



home, are rare on Tobago and an exciting find for Jason. A bit of excitement erupted when a wintering Merlin strafed the edge of the ponds. Species diversity was a bit lower at the Bon Accord sewage treatment ponds, though a European-type Whimbrel was an interesting addition to our list. On the way back into Cuffie River Nature Retreat after sunset, we spotted two White-tailed Nightjars sitting on the entrance road.

Sat., Dec. 10 Main Ridge Forest Reserve | Little Tobago Island

Our last day on Tobago was another big one. Our morning destination was the Main Ridge Forest Reserve. Established by the British Parliament in 1776 “for the purpose of attracting frequent showers of rain upon which the fertility of lands in these climates doth entirely depend,” it’s the oldest legally protected conservation area in the Western Hemisphere. At 9,780 acres, the reserve is home to a wide variety of wildlife, including some unique to Tobago. Walking trails beneath the towering rainforest canopy is always an awe-inspiring experience. The height of the trees and their dense foliage make birding and photography frustrating at times, but with Jason’s expertise and guidance, we managed to add Stripe-breasted Spinetail, Plain Antvireo, Yellow-legged Thrush and White-necked Thrush to our trip list.

Our last destination was one of the most fascinating. Little Tobago Island is a volcanic crag jutting out of the sea off the eastern end of Tobago. The scarcity of land-based predators makes it a safe haven for nesting seabirds, including hundreds of elegant Red-billed Tropicbirds. At the dock next to Blue Waters Inn, Jason put the group into the capable hands of local naturalist guide Zolani “Zee” Frank. After a short boat trip over choppy seas and a hair-raising walk down a surf-washed jetty, we were safely on Little Tobago. Zee led us up the steep trail, stopping strategically to share his encyclopedic knowledge of the island’s natural and human history (and let us catch our breath). The island’s conservation history began in 1908 when it was purchased by Sir William Ingram to serve as a refuge for the Greater Bird of Paradise. Ingram imported 47 of these magnificent birds from their native New Guinea, where the species was in danger of extinction from the plume trade. After his death in 1924, Ingram’s heirs gave the island to the government of Trinidad and Tobago to be managed as a wildlife sanctuary. The birds of paradise persisted for another four decades until Hurricane Flora tore across the island in 1963. Today, the native fauna and flora of the island are the star attractions for tourists as well as subjects of research



and conservation efforts. At the top of the trail, a wooden platform overlooks the island's steep northern slopes covered in scrubby shrubs and trees, intimidating cacti and nests. So. Many. Nests. Red-footed and Brown boobies, Brown Pelicans, Magnificent Frigatebirds and of course, the tropicbirds. Adults and recently independent juveniles glided by at eye level and played on the updrafts. An unforgettable sight, and the perfect grand finale to our tour of Trinidad and Tobago.

Sun., Dec. 11 Departures

Departure morning of a tour is always bittersweet. As the group finished one last sumptuous breakfast at Cuffie River and prepared to say their goodbyes, we drank in the frenzy at the feeders and the serenity of the surrounding forest. So many wonderful memories, many captured in pixels to share with friends and family and relive for years to come.

Photo Credits: Group Photo (Jim Dehnert - JD), Flamingos (JD), Broad-winged Hawk (JD), Blue-throated Sapphire (JD), Barred Antshrike (Anne Orsene - AO), Crystal Clear Water (Sheri L. Williamson - SW), Balcony at Pax Guest House (SW), New Friends (AO), Bananaquit (JD), Green-backed Trogon (Scott Page - SP), Copper-rumped Hummingbird (SP), Striated Heron (JD), Group Birding (SW), Savannah Hawk (SP), Striated Heron (SP), Yellow Oriole (SP), Pink Flowers (AO), Ruddy Turnstones (SP), Yellow-hooded Blackbird (JD), Wattled Jacana (AO), Large-billed Tern (JD), Smooth-billed Ani (JD), Birding by the Water (SW), Yellow-rumped Cacique (JD), Birders! (AO), Poolside (SW), Squirrel Cuckoo (SP), Pygmy Kingfisher (SP), Violaceous Euphonia (JD), Scarlet Ibis (JD), Portrait (AO), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (JD), Tufted Coquette (JD), Great Kiskadee (JD), Trinidad Piping-guan (JD), Group on Bridge (SP), Bananaquits (SP), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (JD), White-tailed Sabrewing (SP), Trinidad Motmot (SP), Group Hike (SW), Blue-backed Manakin (SP), Scenic (SW), Red-crowned Woodpecker (JD), Domestic Goat (JD), Group along Water (SW), Scenic (SP), Balance Beam (AO), Red-billed Tropicbird (SP), Cuffie River Nature Retreat (SP)