

Trinidad & Tobago: Birds & Wildlife | Mar. 15 – 25, 2023 | Trip Report | by Dave Mehlman



With guides Mahase Ramlal, Lester Nanan, Jason Radix, and Dave Mehlman and participants: Barb, Don, Janet, Lanny, Linda, Maura, Paul, Rebecca, and Sue



Wed., Mar. 15 Arrival in Port of Spain

Members of our group arrived at various times today and on prior days. Barb and Don came in a few days early for extra time for birding and photography with Mahase. Lanny, Sue, Paul and Rebecca arrived the previous day and went straight to our early night lodging at the lovely Pax Guest House. Maura and Dave arrived quite late the evening before and were picked up at Piarco Airport, transferring to Pax. All the Pax people were treated to great hospitality by hosts Gerard and Oda. The Guest House is located high in the hills overlooking Port of Spain and provides great views, food and birds. Before and after breakfast today, the Paxers enjoyed the feeder traffic, beginning to get a feel for the wonderful birds we were about to encounter. Hummers included Copper-rumped and Ruby-Topaz Hummingbirds, White-chested Emerald, Black-throated Mango, White-necked Jacobin, Blue-chinned Sapphire and Green Hermit. We then took a short walk together on the road outside the guest house,



observing Orange-winged Parrot, Crested Oropendola, a close-by Zone-tailed Hawk and a magnificent White Hawk soaring high in the sky. After returning, Gerard took us down a short trail to see Rufous-tailed Jacamar, which breeds near the House. After this fun start to the tour, we enjoyed lunch and were then picked up by Mahase in the van for our trip to Hacienda Jacana.

Of course, no trip anywhere in Trinidad with Naturalist Journeys is without a birding stop or two, so Mahase briefly took the group to the Trincity Golf Course, right on the way, to see what we could find. Although viewing was not great, we found our first shorebirds of the tour (Black-necked Stilt, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs), Pied Water-Tyrant, Wattled Jacana and the first of many Southern Lapwings. Continuing, we arrived at the wonderful Hacienda Jacana near the town of Talparo about mid-afternoon. On arrival, we met Ezra, the local host and manager, who showed everyone to their rooms. Our group occupied four cabins along the road or were in the house at the top of the hill. We then met Barb and Don, who were already there, and Janet and Linda, who had arrived today straight from Piarco Airport. Most then returned to the dining pavilion later in the afternoon for a short walk with Mahase and Dave around the grounds to see what was out and about. Even late in the day, birds abounded. A massive hedge of vervain yielded a seemingly unending sequence of foraging Ruby-topaz Hummingbirds (and Don and Barb assured everyone that Tufted Coquette was “guaranteed” here in the morning!). Birds on the property included a pair of Crimson-crested Woodpeckers, Yellow Oriole, Piratic Flycatcher, Crested Oropendola, Yellow-rumped Cacique and Green-rumped Parrotlet—we were really going to like it here, everyone could tell! After a brief rest, we all met again in the dining pavilion for introductions and an overview of the tour, followed by the first of many superb meals arranged by Lester Nanan and served by his wife. After dinner, as Lester arrived to say hello, the power went out due to a truck accident down the road, so our first meeting with him was actually in the dark! We all took that as an omen and went back to our rooms using headlamps and flashlights and turned in for the evening.

Thur., Mar. 16 Blanchisseuse Road

Many began today with what would become a ritual of our stay at Hacienda Jacana: watching the vervain hedge in hopes that one or more coquettes would appear (in fact, they did appear on almost every day!). This was followed by breakfast and then the arrival of Martyn Kenefick, our special guest for the day and author of the acclaimed “Birds of Trinidad & Tobago.” After breakfast, Mahase and a large bus showed up and we loaded up for a full day in the Northern Range exploring the mountain birds of some of the highest elevations in the country. Unfortunately, we soon discovered an inescapable fact of traveling on Trinidad: horrible rush hour traffic, particularly when trying to get on the main east-west Churchill-Roosevelt Highway. Fortunately for all of



us, we did not have to drive, especially since (coming from the U.S. and Canada) we were not used to driving on the left! Our able drivers handled all the stress. We soon got through the crush and started up the Blanchisseuse Road into the Northern Range, a classic Trinidad birding route. With Mahase and Martyn leading, we made periodic stops at various points along the road to sample the wonderful birds there. Highlights among various stops included White, Common Black, and Zone-tailed Hawks; Crested Oropendola; Guianan Trogon; Sooty Grassquit and an amazingly cooperative perched Chestnut Woodpecker! A stop at the well-known Las Lapas overlook included ice cream (a treat from Don!) as well as superb looks at an Olive-sided Flycatcher perched high in a tree, Plumbeous Kites soaring overhead, Bay-headed Tanager and the most perfectly posed Common Black Hawk any of us had ever seen. At this point, we had crested the range and we continued down the north side to the small community of Brasso Seco, where we had an enjoyable lunch in the community pavilion and had a talk from a local community member on the production of cacao, which is this community's specialty. After lunch, we proceeded further down the road to the area called Morne La Croix and were quickly rewarded with several flying and perched Blue-headed Parrots, the main specialty of this site. A bit of time at this site also yielded a Rufous-tailed Jacamar, a female White-bearded Manakin and Golden-fronted Greenlet. After finishing here, we retraced our route back up and over the Northern Range and returned to the Hacienda Jacana. After a brief rest, we reconvened for another excellent dinner arranged by Lester and to review our daily checklist before retiring for the evening.

Fri., Mar. 17 Orange Valley | Temple in the Sea | Hacienda Jacana

Gathering for breakfast at the pavilion, we were rewarded by a Gray-cowled Wood-Rail wandering around through the plantains right near the building—one of the few looks we had at this more terrestrial rail species. After breakfast, we loaded onto our large bus for a day exploring Trinidad's west (Caribbean) coast. Our first stop was in the town of Waterloo for a bathroom break at Playboy's Bar & Lounge (hey, when ya gotta go, you are not very picky!) and then we checked out the coast at Brickfield. Unfortunately, the tide was very high there so little was to be seen except for an Osprey. We continued to the coastal town of Orange Valley, which has a small stone jetty. This site, though not being orange, nor having orange trees, nor, in fact, being a valley at all, proved to be a great shorebird site. We scoped the mudflats and adjacent mangroves and turned up lots of additions to our bird list including Black-bellied Plover, Willet, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Semipalmated Plover, a few Red Knots (one or two even beginning to show a little red) and some Whimbrels. White-winged Swallows flew by, and Magnificent Frigatebirds soared overhead as we picked out Black Skimmers, Royal Terns, Laughing Gulls and a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron among the avian crowd. A few sharp-eyed members of the group also noticed a bunch of Ruddy Turnstones perching on fishing boats and a few Scarlet Ibis wandering far off among



the mangrove roots. We also noticed the peculiar mudskipper, or four-eyed fish, swimming around, seemingly watching below the water and up in the sky at the same time. Our next stop on the coast was the famous Temple in the Sea. The temple is a Hindu shrine, originally constructed on the spot by an indentured laborer, Sewdass Sadhu from Uttar Pradesh, who came to Trinidad in about 1907. Sadhu's original temple was destroyed, and he was imprisoned for building it on private land, so he personally reconstructed a new temple in the sea by transporting rocks and sand to the site by bicycle. The current temple is a reconstructed version at the same site since the original deteriorated. It houses idols of the deities Shiva, Ganesh, Hanuman, Durga and Krishna. Mahase was very helpful in interpreting the site and the Hindu deities for the group, which we all appreciated. On our walk out to the temple along the causeway, we noted a large cluster of Ruddy Turnstones huddling on a fishing boat in the shade of the cabin—any port on a sunny day, to mix some metaphors! Continuing our tour of the west coast, we next stopped at the amazing 85-foot-tall statue of Lord Hanuman at the Dattatreya Yoga Center. Walking the grounds, we admired the architecture and bold colors of the entire facility. Some fruit set out in one of the small temples attracted Palm and Blue-gray Tanagers and Yellow Orioles while Gray-breasted Martins flew around the buildings. What a spectacular cultural introduction to Trinidad! We then made our way back to Hacienda Jacana, with another rest stop at Playboys, and arrived there in time for a late lunch. After a bit of a rest in the heat of the afternoon, Martyn and Dave led the group on a short walk on the Jacana's grounds, our first real chance to explore and bird the lovely grounds of this special place. Indeed, the birding was excellent here, even in the afternoon, and we had great views of Piratic and Streaked Flycatchers, Gray-lined Hawk, Long-billed Starthroat, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Black-crested Antshrike and both Orange-winged and Yellow-crowned Parrots. After this outing, we said goodbye to Martyn, who had to fight his way home through traffic, then reconvened for dinner and our daily checklist, before calling it a night.

Sat., Mar. 18 Asa Wright Nature Centre | Night Birds

After breakfast at Hacienda Jacana, we dove right into the traffic and made our way to the Asa Wright Nature Centre, located in the Northern Range outside of the Port of Spain suburb of Arima. We actually had passed the entrance to it two days earlier on our Blanchisseuse road excursion. This was one of the anticipated highlights of the tour due to Asa Wright's having been closed for several years during the covid pandemic. We were fortunate that its ongoing renovation had come to the point where, although not finished, the Centre was able to host visitors for the day and provide lunch for groups. After Mahase got us to the Centre's parking lot, we promptly



stormed the veranda! Actually, no, we just walked onto it and immediately enjoyed the view and the great birding from there. One of the Centre's local guides, Caleb, was there, and he and Dave recognized each other from a previous meeting in 2020—what a pleasant and fun surprise for both of us, especially since Caleb was our local guide for the day. Our first avian distraction was a pair of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls perched in the large tree in front of the veranda, easily visible with binoculars and spotting scopes. The two birds of slightly different shades of brown, sat next to each other doing some allopreening—a very cute sight. We also watched the incessant traffic of White-necked Jacobins, Black-throated Mangos and Purple Honeycreepers coming and going from the hummingbird feeders—looks like Asa Wright is indeed baaaaack! After this fun start, most of the group assembled with Caleb in the lead and we headed out for a morning hike down to the Dunston oilbird cave, birding and botanizing along the way. Caleb introduced us to the basics of rainforest ecology along the trail, pointing out various plants and birds, including Golden-headed and White-bearded Manakins, Trilling Gnatwren, Golden-fronted Greenlet and Northern Waterthrush. Arriving at the cave itself, we all took turns (along with another group that was there) entering in small groups where a dim spotlight revealed several Oilbirds sitting on the walls. These intriguing and mysterious birds are nocturnal, forest-dwelling, fruit eaters, and this cave has long been known as the most reliable and accessible site to see them throughout the neotropics. Newbies were pleased to add this great lifer to their bird lists, and some of the old hands were pleased to see that the colony was still there and visitable.

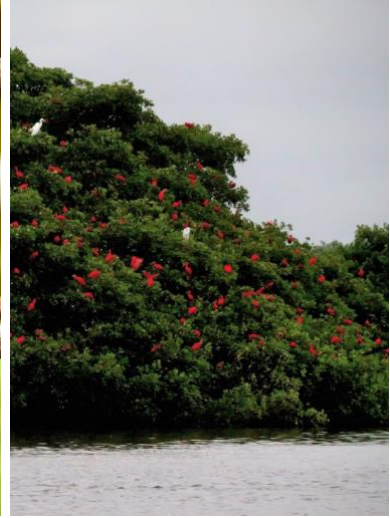
After returning from the cave hike, most in the group continued down the main trail with Mahase in search of additional birds, being serenaded by the eerie sound of the bamboo clumps creaking in the wind. Mahase first located a perched Common Potoo for us, always a popular find, and then, following its unmistakable calls, an incredible male Bearded Bellbird flying back and forth in the mid-canopy. These are two of the most distinctive species to be found at Asa Wright, and great views and photographs were obtained of both. On our way back to the main building for lunch, Rebecca and Dave (who were lagging behind) were treated to a lone male White-bearded Manakin performing its lekking dance. For this species, the male leaps back and forth horizontally between various sticks very low to the ground, snapping its wings all the time—fascinating to see this in action! We then enjoyed a lovely buffet lunch in the Centre's dining room, followed by a bit more veranda time. During this session, we discovered a few more things, including a White Hawk soaring in the distance, and White-chested Emerald, Rufous-breasted Hermit and Brown Violetear at the hummingbird feeders. Wrapping up our delightful day at Asa Wright, we piled back into our van and negotiated our way back to Hacienda Jacana for a rest. While there, many in the group noted the pair of Red-bellied Macaws that had a nest in a hole in a dead



palm stump—we were to see these birds pretty much every day while at the Hacienda. Mahase returned in the late afternoon to collect us and take us east to eTech Park (the former Waller Field) for a “dinner in the field” and some night birding. Upon arrival, we were greeted by the wonderous site of dinner tables all set up by Lester in the woods along the old roads—what a treat! While waiting for dinner, we walked around the area, finding the only Sulphury Flycatchers and Scaled Pigeons of the tour. Dinner was truly a treat, and Lester outdid himself with the food, drinks (rum punch anyone?) and the setting—a memorable experience. At dark, we got back in the van, Mahase got out his spotlight and we drove around the old runways and some of the roads to see what we could find. Fortunately, we were able to spot several Common Pauragues and White-tailed Nightjars, mostly when they flew off as the van approached. However, one memorable sighting was of some bright eyeshine along the side of a road that clearly indicated something very interesting! We got out, stalked it and then got close enough to determine that we had encountered the rare “plastic bottle” bird! We all had a good laugh about that one, but it was truly odd how the bottle reflected the car lights back exactly as if it had a pair of eyeballs. After that, we headed back to Hacienda Jacana, a bit tired after a long, but very rewarding evening, and went to our cabins for a well-earned night’s sleep.

Sun., Mar. 19 Aripo Savannah | Nariva Swamp

Martyn returned for another day with us at breakfast at Hacienda Jacana. Our morning destination was a variety of sites near and on the Aripo Livestock Station; birding consisted of stops along various roads with short walks. We visited parts of Mexico and Sellier Roads and the entrance road to the Station itself (where we met our lunch!). This interesting morning yielded a variety of species, including Savannah and Gray-lined Hawks, Pied Water-Tyrant, Giant Cowbird, Trilling Gnatwren, and many, many Black Vultures at the Station (where it seemed a large vulture convention was happening that we were not invited to!). Of great interest to the birders, particularly Martyn and Mahase, was a patch of grasses off Sellier Road. This patch, upon close inspection, yielded Blue-black Grassquits, a Dickcissel and both male and female Yellow-bellied Seedeaters, rare for Trinidad. A completely different animal that Mahase and Martyn pointed out to us at the Station was a Buffalypso, a breed of Trinidadian water buffalo that can produce both milk and meat. An article I found about it says that it is, “truly Trini to de bone”! After completing our morning birding and picking up lunch, we proceeded to the east (Atlantic) coast of Trinidad and the town of Manzanilla, where we proceeded south along the narrow



strip of barrier beach that separates the Atlantic Ocean from the vast Nariva Swamp. Unfortunately, the northern part of this road had been hit the past fall by massive inland flooding and an ocean storm, which had basically destroyed the road and most of the houses along it, making for slow going. Eventually, we reached the building housing Nariva Swamp Boat Tours, which was our lunch stop. After arriving, we arranged tables and chairs and laid out another delicious home-cooked meal along with cool drinks. Following lunch, we explored the mangroves immediately around the building, though not much was to be found except for ubiquitous Tropical Mockingbirds. We got back in our bus and continued exploring the large area just inland of the Nariva Swamp. While most of this birding was from the road, either from the bus or while walking along the road, the area proved quite productive. The ditches held many waterbirds including a variety of herons, Purple Gallinule, Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers and the only White-headed Marsh-Tyrant (a male) of the trip. Savannah Hawk, Yellow-headed Caracara and a distant Long-winged Harrier were seen at various distances from the road. At the end of the afternoon, based on Martyn's knowledge of the area, we waited patiently at an intersection and as predicted, a few Blue-and-yellow Macaws flew into a nearby tree making a brief, but spectacular, appearance. These are part of a reintroduced population that is established in this area, and one of the top targets for Trinidad birders at this location. After that satisfying conclusion to our long day, we got back in the bus and traveled back to Hacienda Jacana where we enjoyed a late dinner and then retired for the evening.

Mon., Mar. 20

Trincity | Blue Waters | Yerette Hummingbirds | Caroni Swamp

After breakfast and a relaxed morning at Hacienda Jacana, which included a visit by local Artist Rachel Lee Young who brought by some of her lovely crafts for us to admire and purchase, we loaded up in our van with Mahase and headed out for more Trini adventures. Our first stop was the Trincity area near the golf course, which a few had visited on the very first day. We had a productive visit there, with several shorebird species in the small creek, Ringed Kingfisher, excellent views of a close-in Rufous-browed Peppershrike (usually much easier heard than seen), a few Saffron Finches out on the golf course and several Red-breasted Meadowlarks in the open fields, the only sighting of the tour. We then continued to the nearby Blue Waters Plant and its surrounding ponds. The main highlight there was a Pearl Kite nest and, though hunkered down, one parent bird was visible



on the nest, apparently incubating eggs. The ponds produced Ringed and Green Kingfishers, Solitary Sandpiper, Pied Water-Tyrant and a small flock of Yellow-hooded Blackbirds. Finishing these productive stops, we headed up into the foothills of the Northern Range to Yerettê, the home of the hummingbird. This lovely house and gardens, owned and operated by Theo and Gloria Ferguson, is THE must-visit site for hummingbirds in Trinidad. We first got seats on the porch and were treated to an entertaining talk by Theo about hummingbirds, their place in ancestral peoples' world, and some of their basic biology. It was hard to concentrate on the talk due to all the action going on behind Theo! After the talk, we enjoyed a tasty lunch on the patio, constantly accompanied by bird traffic of all kinds. We found a total of 11 species of hummingbirds during our several hours there including the usual suspects (White-necked Jacobin, Copper-rumped Hummingbird, Black-throated Mango) and several we had not found including Brown Violetear, Little Hermit and Long-billed Starthroat. Non-hummers putting in appearances included Purple Honeycreepers and Yellow Orioles, among many more. Tearing ourselves away from this delightful place, we boarded the van for our next stop of the day at Caroni Swamp.

Arriving at the Caroni Swamp boat dock a bit before 4:00 p.m., we encountered Lester and his team getting the boat ready to go. We climbed aboard our decked-out boat, with a table in the middle covered with a red tablecloth, for the famous Caroni Swamp boat tour. Our guide/driver was, of course, Lester himself, the third generation of his family to do these tours in Caroni. The tour did not disappoint, though the skies were a bit overcast. The first part of the tour runs along a mangrove-lined canal that was full of wildlife. The fun sightings in the mangroves and along the canal included Masked Cardinal, Greater Ani, Green-throated Mango, a pair of Tropical Screech-Owls, Little Cuckoo, Straight-billed Woodcreeper and a few Ruschenberger's (or Mangrove) Boas lurking on the branches. As we moved further down the canal and into taller mangrove forest, a few Scarlet Ibis began to appear, perched in the treetops and sign of what was to come. Other birds that Lester somehow spotted among the branches included a Common Potoo, Northern Scrub Flycatcher and Yellow-hooded Blackbirds. Meanwhile, in the boat, Lester began to dig into his various storage bins and boxes from which wonderful foods began to appear, beginning with saheena and pholourie appetizers, and proceeding with many courses of wonderful food. Dave was deputized as bartender and prepared rum punches, beer and other beverages for all. Indeed, life was good for us that night! Continuing into the large lagoon, we passed a big flock of American Flamingos standing in the shallows, then tied up to a post to watch the ibis and heron flocks return to roost for the evening. What a treat to watch the skeins of brilliantly colored ibis come wafting in from all directions and land in the trees, complemented by smaller flocks of Tricolored Herons and a variety of other species, all coming to their nighttime roost. An unforgettable experience to be sure. As dusk descended, we returned through the mangroves to the boat dock, aided by a spotlight to look for night creatures. Arriving back



at the dock, we carefully climbed out of the boats and got into the van, then Mahase drove us back to our cabins at Hacienda Jacana where we all promptly fell into a great night's sleep with images of ibis flapping around our heads. What a day!

Tues., Mar. 21 Hacienda Jacana | Arena Forest | El Suzanne Rainforest Lodge | Grand Riviere

Although this was our last morning at Hacienda Jacana, we continued our routine with another great breakfast and some last-minute photo ops around the vervain hedge and dinner pavilion. After Mahase and Dave gathered all the bags from the rooms and deposited them in the Hacienda's office for Lester to pick up later in the big bus, most of the group began a short walk with Mahase along the entrance road, a part of the area we had not previously explored. This proved to be a delightful walk with great views of some species we had encountered before, but not so well, such as Barred Antshrike, Violaceous Euphonia, Rufous-breasted Wren and Plumbeous Kite, along with a few things we had not encountered yet, most notably Channel-billed Toucans perched high overhead. Finishing this walk, we loaded into Mahase's van for the start of our trip to Trinidad's North Coast. Our first stop along the way was on the roadside in the middle of the Arena Forest. Although fairly quiet, this stop yielded some real goodies including great views of a pair of White-winged Becards, at least two Yellow-olive Flycatchers (really making Don's day!!!) and a couple more Channel-billed Toucans. Continuing our journey, we arrived at the elegant El Suzanne Rainforest Lodge where we were greeted by Diane, the hostess and owner of the Lodge. We took a brief walk around the main building grounds, which were quite except for a soaring Short-tailed Hawk overhead. Returning to the patio, we enjoyed a delicious lunch prepared right in the kitchen and watched various hummingbirds, lizards, and butterflies foraging in the vervain or running around the patio. After lunch, Lester showed up in the big bus with all our gear and we said good-bye and a hearty thank you to Mahase, then boarded the big bus for our several hour trip to the North Coast and the town of Grand Riviere.

We steadily wound our way east and then north to the coast, admiring great views of the Atlantic Ocean along the way. We made a brief stop at the Toco (or Galera Point) Lighthouse to admire the view (and the stiff ocean breeze!), where we saw plenty of Magnificent Frigatebirds, Brown Pelican, Yellow-headed Caracara, White-tipped Dove and a nice fly-by Zone-tailed Hawk. Continuing, we arrived in Grand Riviere in the late afternoon, but with enough time for those interested to walk up a road in search of the Trinidad Piping-Guan, the real avian specialty of the area. Several in the group undertook the walk up the steep hill, with Lester in the lead. This



lovely afternoon walk produced some very nice birds including Golden-fronted Greenlet, Cocoa Thrush, Turquoise Tanager, Euler's Flycatcher, a constantly calling Cocoa Woodcreeper and, on our way back down, several Trinidad Piping-Guans, which perched nicely very close to us in the trees. One was even observed for a while eating leaves, an interesting behavior which not too many species do. We then drove the very short distance to our hotel for the evening, Le Grande Almandier, right on the beach. Everyone got settled in their rooms and had a bit of brief downtime with some beverages before we had dinner in the open dining room. Meanwhile, Lester had gone off to arrange a turtle viewing later in the evening with the local guides and rented a few red flashlights for the group. After dinner, we waited and waited for the guide to show up, and some began to give up and head upstairs. However, just at the point when folks were turning in, a great fuss went up: turtle alert! Everyone hurriedly put on whatever clothes they needed, grabbed their red lights, and headed out to the beach with the guide. In the darkness, we discovered a huge Leatherback Sea Turtle female that had finished laying and was energetically covering up the nest with sand using her huge fore and hind flippers. What an amazing sight! Truly impossible to describe the scene in mere words. The guide estimated this individual to be around 600 pounds! After what seemed like an eternity of covering, the turtle eventually turned toward the sea and began its slow crawl back to the ocean from whence it came. At that point, most returned to the hotel to sleep, but Linda put in some extra time and got to watch a different female further down the beach actually laying its eggs. An unforgettable experience for sure.

Wed., Mar. 22 Grand Riviere | Tobago Wetlands | Cuffie River Nature Retreat

Most in the group began the day early, before dawn, with a quick trip to the beach to look for turtles. Indeed, a few of the very last arriving and laying turtles were still there, finishing covering their eggs and doing their slow crawls back to the ocean. Once again, an amazing, unique and awe-inspiring site to watch these huge animals return to the sea. Rendezvousing at the dining room, we had an early breakfast and then loaded in the bus for another trip to the nearby hills in search of guans and other birds. This time, since the bus had no luggage, we could drive all the way up to the viewing platform, where we met local guide Nicolas, who hosted us and helped spot birds. A guan or two perched in the tree crowns, providing good scope views for everyone, including those who had not seen one the previous day. The platform and nearby road provided great viewing for a variety of species, most notably a Gray-headed Kite, along with Violaceous Euphonia, Green Hermit, Forest Elaenia, Boat-billed Flycatcher and a Green Honeycreeper. We then went back to the Grande Almandier, loaded all our bags into the bus, and began the long drive back to Piarco airport. Along the way, Lester spotted a soaring Black



Hawk-Eagle, which caused an immediate bus stop; this was the only one of the tour, so it was quite a fortuitous sighting. We arrived at Piarco in plenty of time for our early afternoon flight to Tobago, so we bade farewell to Lester and Dave and got everyone organized to check in at Caribbean Airlines for our flight. Lester had arranged for someone to drop off rotis for everyone, so the group found a few tables in the food court and enjoyed a lunch of this Trinidadian staple. We then went through security at the Tobago gates and boarded our plane for the short hop to Tobago. After landing in Tobago, we deplaned, got our checked bags, and went out to meet our Tobago guide Jason Radix, who had a large bus waiting. After piling in all our gear, we set off immediately for a few birding stops on the way to our lodging at Cuffie River Nature Retreat. Our first stop was the Bon Accord sewage ponds (which we knew by the name was going to be good!) and provided great birding, although all the viewing was through a fence. Anhingas were perched seemingly everywhere, complemented by small groups of Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, Common and Purple Gallinules, a few Least Grebes and some Soras wandering around on the aquatic vegetation. Meanwhile, White-winged Swallows and Caribbean Martins cruised overhead and Green Herons, Greater Yellowlegs and a somewhat unusual Willet were in the roadside ditches. Quite fascinating the differences in the avifauna in Tobago from Trinidad—the more Caribbean appearance of Tobago was quite apparent. Our next and final stop of the day was at the Canaan sewage ponds, which involved a short walk from the road to the ponds, but this time there was no fence. The most interesting birds here were ducks: several White-cheeked Pintail were present, including a hen with many chicks; a very unusual female Lesser Scaup and some Blue-winged Teal (migrants from North America). Also around were an abundance of Least Grebes, Black-crowned Night-Herons, Barn and White-winged Swallows, and our first Rufous-vented Chachalaca of the tour. Finishing up here (and quite satisfied with all the new additions to our trip bird list) we continued through the hills of Tobago to Cuffie River, where owner/host Regina welcomed us and showed everyone into their lovely rooms. We reconvened later in the afternoon downstairs for a happy hour and our daily checklist, then adjourned to the dining table for the first of many meals at Cuffie River. While at dinner, several White-tailed Nightjars began calling and feeding on insects attracted to the lights outside the building, including one which repeatedly returned to a bamboo stub perch for nice viewing. After dinner, we retired to our rooms with a cool Caribbean breeze wafting over us—delightful!

Thurs., Mar. 23

Cuffie River Trails | Adventure Farm | Fort James

Today started with a lovely morning of early coffee and birding right from the main building at Cuffie River. At various distances, there were loud choruses of Rufous-vented Chachalacas making their rollicking sounds (and their presence known). The fruit feeders attracted legions of Palm Tanagers, with the occasional Blue-gray Tanager, Bananaquit and Trinidad Motmot sneaking a bit of fruit in between. The hummingbird feeders attracted a horde of White-necked Jacobins, complemented by Ruby-topaz and Copper-rumped Hummingbirds, Rufous-breasted Hermit and a few White-tailed Sabrewings. The latter is only found on Tobago and small portions of the Venezuelan mainland, so is one of the Tobago specialties to be looked for, though they could be



hard to pick out among all the jacobins, which also have white tails. Alert observers spotted Red-legged Honeycreepers in the orange-flowering immortal trees out back, both birds and flowers blazing in the rising sun! What a spectacular place to start the morning!! All this was followed by a tasty breakfast—food for the eyes and stomach. About mid-morning, local guide Desmond Wright came by to lead us on an extensive hike on the roads by Cuffie River. Desmond knows pretty much everything there is to know about birds, plants and culture here, and we enjoyed his company. He promised us more jacamars than we would be able to shake a stick at and, indeed, he delivered: Rufous-tailed Jacamars, both males and females, were seen and heard many times throughout our walk. Other species that turned up that were new for us on the tour were Pale-vented Pigeon, Brown-crested and Venezuelan Flycatchers, Giant Cowbird, Chivi Vireo and White-fringed Antwren. Desmond also unearthed a Common Potoo perching on a bamboo stalk to top things off. This all worked up our appetites, so we returned to the Lodge for lunch and a brief rest.

Jason returned in the afternoon to lead a birding trip for those interested. About half the group went birding, and the other half chose to relax in the afternoon, particularly after eyeing the swimming pool with its starfruit tree next to it (which, we later discovered, had a Green Heron nest in it). The birders' first stop was the Adventure Farm and Nature Preserve, another privately owned place that opens its doors to birders and naturalists. The feeders here were also quite active, with an interesting mix of White-lined Tanagers, Shiny Cowbirds, Spectacled Thrush, White-tipped Dove, Red-crowned Woodpeckers and Barred Antshrikes coming and going. A short walk on the grounds yielded the apparently ubiquitous Trinidad Motmot, Northern Waterthrush, a Fuscous Flycatcher and a great view of a female White-fringed Antwren. Leaving here, we made one more stop at the end of the day at Fort James, overlooking a small harbor. The waterbirds here included Laughing Gull, Brown Pelican, a few Royal Terns and a bunch of Sandwich Terns. Most of the latter had pure yellow bills, but some research and field guide use revealed that these were "Cayenne" Terns, currently considered a subspecies of Sandwich Tern (though the taxonomy is a bit complicated). After that we made our way back to Cuffie River, bade farewell to Jason for the day and then had a great happy hour, checklist and another fine dinner. Then off for another delightful rest in the pass-through breezes.

Fri., Mar. 24 Main Ridge Forest Preserve | Little Tobago Island

Our last full day of the tour, and on Tobago for that matter, began with breakfast at Cuffie River, as was beginning to seem normal. We then left for a full day in the field exploring parts of the Island we had not visited yet. We traveled for over an hour along the Caribbean shore of Tobago, eventually turning inland to enter the amazing Main Ridge Forest Preserve, arguably the first protected area anywhere in the Americas, established in 1763. Our first stop was right on the road through the preserve (which runs across the ridge to the Atlantic side) at a massive fruiting fig tree that was literally crawling with birds. Jason and Dave worked hard to get everyone



on all the species, which were coming and going constantly. Some of the more common visitors, which everyone eventually saw, included Blue-backed Manakins (males and females), White-necked and Yellow-legged Thrushes, Collared Trogon, Trinidad Motmot and perhaps best of all, Red-rumped Woodpecker. Wow, that was a tree to remember for both the birders and the photographers! We continued to the Bloody Bay Recreation Site near the top of the ridge, which had great views of the Caribbean side of the island. Traveling on, we began to descend on the Atlantic side of the island and made a final stop at the Gilpin Trace. At this point, some artists had set up shop with some decorated bamboo, and some delved in to acquire some local artisanry. Most of the group then went for a hike along the trail with Jason, winding through lovely, tall, Caribbean forest. The Yellow-legged Thrushes were in full song, and many interesting species were found as we walked quietly along the trail. Highlights here included Olivaceous Woodcreeper, several Stripe-breasted Spinetails foraging on the forest floor, Ochre-bellied Flycatcher, Rufous-breasted Wren and Scrub Greenlet. As the morning grew on, however, we ran into larger groups walking the trail, evidently from a cruise ship that had recently docked, so we turned around and headed back to the bus. Those who bought the bamboo art paid for their purchases and we loaded up and continued to the town of Speyside.

We enjoyed a pre-ordered lunch at the very nice (and appropriately named!) Bird Watcher's Restaurant, then drove to the nearby Blue Waters Inn for the boat to Little Tobago. We promptly met the legendary Zolani, local guide for Little Tobago tours, but had to wait a while for the boat to return to the dock from wherever it was. At the point where several of us were beginning to eye the bar longingly, the boat returned (a glass bottomed boat, in fact) and we climbed aboard for the 20-minute ride to Little Tobago. As the island drew nearer, we began to pick out the bright white and long-tailed, Red-billed Tropicbirds flying around plus several Red-footed Boobies and one Brown Booby flew by, providing a taste of what was to come. Arriving at Little Tobago around 4:00 p.m., we carefully climbed out of the boat and negotiated the jetty to the little pavilion on the island. Most then got their packs on and began the steep climb to the top of the island, with Zolani narrating as we went. As luck would have it, there was an Audubon's Shearwater nest right by the pavilion and, with a little peering and imagination, a downy chick and an egg could be seen in the burrow. The forest on Little Tobago is extremely dry, especially so at this time of year, and the local rangers put up supplemental water troughs to try to help the wildlife out. As we walked up the trail, despite the dryness, we did find quite a few birds with Zolani's help. He first pointed out another Audubon's Shearwater nest, this one with an incubating adult partly visible inside. Other things that showed themselves as we climbed were Chivi Vireo, Brown-crested Flycatcher and Yellow-bellied Elaenia. At last, we reached a small platform near the top that overlooked the seabird cliffs, and what a site it was! Red-billed Tropicbirds constantly streamed past, screaming their calls and attempting to land on the hillside. Constantly flying around and visible in the trees and in the distance were hundreds of boobies, some on



nests with eggs or young. Careful looks with binoculars and the scopes revealed both white and white-tailed morphs of Red-footed Boobies nesting in the trees and vegetation while a few Brown Booby nests could be found on the ground. Of course, many Magnificent Frigatebirds soared by, sometimes trying to harass the tropicbirds and boobies into coughing up a free meal. A great breeze blew in our faces, though sometimes it brought with it the distinct odor of seabird guano to enhance our senses. Finally, the time came to return down the mountain. As we hiked down, we had some poor views of a few Scaly-naped Pigeons, a Little Tobago specialty. Arriving back at the boat, we walked back out on the jetty and carefully climbed aboard, most sitting below to watch through the glass bottom. Indeed, part of our trip back took us slowly over a reef where we could clearly see various corals, sea fans and some of the fish species that inhabit this environment. We got back to the dock, climbed out, thanked Zolani and his crew then got back in our bus and returned to Cuffie River. On arrival we had a late dinner, then retired to our rooms to prepare for leaving the next day and for some rest. Overall, a long, but very rewarding day on Tobago.

Sat., Mar. 25 Departures

Alas, our trip came to an end today, albeit at various times throughout the day. Barb and Don, in fact, stayed for a few more days in paradise. We all made sure to settle our bills with Regina and had all our things ready to go. Everyone left in small groups, depending on the time of their flight back to Trinidad. The larger groups were taken to the airport by Jason in his minivan, while a private driver came for the solo travelers. Oddly, this very friendly private driver stunned everyone by consistently being early, a first for the entire tour! In any case, we all reluctantly left these beautiful islands, thinking all the time of the great birds, superb food and interesting people we had met.

Photo Credits: Little Tobago Scenic (Dave Mehlman - DM), Snowy Egrets (Lanny Lund - LL), Red-bellied Macaw (LL), Birding at Asa Wright (DM), Blue-chinned Sapphire (DM), Wattled Jacana (Janet Baker - JB), Trinidad Motmot (JB), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (LL), Palm Tanager (LL), View from Guest House Balcony (LL), Pax Guest House (DM), Oropendola Nests (JB), Carib Grackle (JB), Common Black Hawk (DM), Orange-winged Parrots (LL), Orange Valley Boats (DM), Dattatreya Temple (LL), Ruddy Turnstone (JB), Blue-gray Tanager (LL), Asa Wright Group (DM), View from Plane (LL), Savannah Hawk (LL), Spectacled Thrush (JB), Solitary Sandpiper (LL), Bay-headed Tanager (JB), Purple Honeycreepers on feeders (LL), Smooth-billed Ani (LL), Birding at Yerettê (DM), Copper-rumped Hummingbird (JB), Scarlet Ibis Roost (LL), American Flamingos (LL), Galera Point Lighthouse (DM), Leatherback Turtle Tracks (DM), Guianan Trogon (JB), Trinidad Piping Guan (DM), Cuffie River Nature Retreat (courtesy of CRNR), Channel-billed Toucan (LL), White-cheeked Pintails (JB), Common Potoo (LL), Relaxing at Cuffie River (DM), Rufous-tailed Jacamar (DM), Barred Antshrike (JB), Tobago Coastline (DM), Jason Radix & Statues (DM), Laughing Gulls (LL), Yellow-crowned Night Heron (LL), Masked Cardinal (LL)