

# Trinidad's Biodiversity and Animal Behavior: A Celebrity Tour with Carol Simon & Howard Topoff

June 16 – 24, 2018 | Written by Carol Simon & Howard Topoff



Participants: Local Guide, Charron Ramdass, along with Fred, Helena, Linda, Mary Kay and Mike.

## Saturday, June 16 Arrivals in Port of Spain / PAX Guest House



Five of us (Carol, Helena, Howard, Linda and Mary Kay) arrived one day early, the evening of June 15<sup>th</sup>, and consequently had a free day to explore a bit today. Caligo Ventures asked PAX Guest House to arrange a driver for us, Ryan, and off we went to explore the more civilized aspects of Trinidad's capital city. The Magnificent Seven Houses are located in the northern part of Port of Spain, alongside a park, Queen's Park Savannah. The houses were all built between 1902 and 1910 and represent an array of architectural styles and functions. They range from disrepair to excellent condition, the latter represented by the Queen's Royal College, a striking building.



Also along the Queen's Park Savannah is another impressive building, the National Academy for the Performing Arts. Designed with a notably modern style, it houses a 1500-seat theater plus much more.



When it was time for lunch, we went to a local roti establishment. Roti, the West Indian version of sandwiches, consists of chickpea and meat or vegetable fillings plus curry and other spices, wrapped in a thin dough and then cooked. Ours were soft, messy and tasty. We took our lunches to a picnic spot that was high above Port of Spain with excellent views. Fort George was built in 1804, complete with cannons and dungeons, to protect the city from military threats. The site never experienced any conflict and was retired in 1846. We ate our lunches at the picnic tables.

Afterwards, one of us casually mentioned Haagen Dazs and the next thing we knew we were happily eating ice cream. Afterwards we visited the Royal Botanical Gardens until a light rain sent us back to the PAX Guest House. Here we met another of our travelers just arriving, Mike, and together we enjoyed dinner on the patio.

During the day we were paying attention to birds and other wildlife, of course. Without trying very hard we saw 34 species of birds (many courtesy of the PAX Guest House feeders), Red-tailed Squirrels, the Common House Gecko, Leaf-cutter Ants, a scarab beetle and more.

## **Sunday, June 17 PAX Guest House to Mt. Plaisir Estate Hotel, Grand Riviere**

With the addition of Fred, who arrived late last night, our group was complete with seven of us. After breakfast, Carol and Howard presented the first of their talks, "An Introduction to Trinidad and its Natural History." We learned about the country and began to look forward to some of the animals and plants that were highlighted.



After the talk we were picked up promptly by Alexis, our driver, and we began the long, winding journey — akin to Mr. Toad's wild ride — to Grand Riviere. We certainly saw a slice of Trinidad as the next few hours unfolded. We made one stop at the Toco Lighthouse, on the northeastern most point of Trinidad. Here the waters of the Atlantic and Caribbean meet and there are lovely costal views.



We arrived at the Mt. Plaisir Estate Hotel in the afternoon and checked into our second story rooms with porches overlooking the ocean. We were right on the beach and it didn't take us long to realize that the baby Leatherback Turtles were hatching. The predatory Black Vultures helped us to focus in on this event. That afternoon and evening baby turtles were literally bubbling up out of the sand everywhere. It was quite a spectacle. The little turtles had a lot of help from local children and adults to navigate to the sea.



After dinner we had permits to go onto the beach with a guide to look for nesting female Leatherbacks with our dim red flashlights. There was only one female present, but she was at least six feet long and had just finished laying her eggs and was busy covering them up. This is an exhausting procedure for such a large sea animal. Several of us waited until she managed to drag herself back into the sea. Leatherbacks do not have a bony carapace. Instead of scutes, they have a thick, leathery skin embedded with tiny, bony osteoderms.



Even though we spent most of this day listening to a talk, driving and standing on a dark beach, 32 species of birds were sighted. An early morning at PAX Guest house helped. The hummers were especially crowd-pleasers and included the White-necked Jacobin, Rufous-breasted Hermit, Ruby Topaz, Black-throated Mango, Long-billed Starthroat, White-chested Emerald and Copper-rumped Hummingbirds.

## Monday, June 18      Grand Riviere to Asa Wright Nature Centre

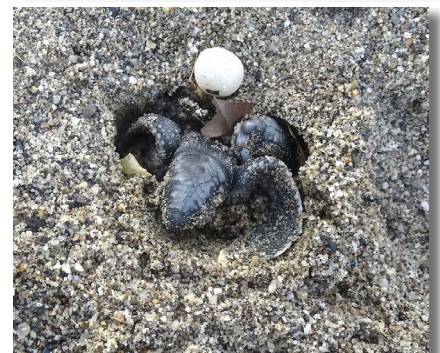
We had an early wakeup and found two more female Leatherbacks finishing their nesting. By 6:00 a.m. we were traveling with local birding expert, Nicholas, just a short distance to look for Trinidad Piping-Guans. Locally known as Pawi, they are endemic to Trinidad. These critically endangered, large, turkey-like birds are mainly arboreal and feed on fruit, leaves and flowers. We were fortunate to see a dozen of these birds at once!

We returned to our lodge for breakfast, and WHAT a breakfast it was. We were encouraged to try to local food and it seemed that the waitress brought us some of everything. Favorites included eggplant and tomato choka, as well as the coconut bake.

Next came Carol and Howard's talk about sea turtles, featuring the Leatherbacks, of course. We learned about the low survival rates of these animals, how they return to their nesting beaches as adults, or at least to the general area, and how their throats are adapted to keep their main prey, jellyfish, from escaping. We pondered the fact that turtles that eat a lot of jellyfish also swallow plastic bags. It is now believed that there are 5.25 trillion pieces of plastic debris in the ocean. Yikes.

After lunch we started our journey to the Asa Wright Nature Centre, a new destination for some, but not all of us. Once again the twisting road was notable and we were all glad WE weren't driving. We arrived at Asa Wright about 6:00 p.m. and were greeted by board member and Trinidad bird guide author Martyn, as well as other staff members. Carol and Howard were pleased to see Martyn as they had just had dinner with him in Portal, Arizona, where he was visiting colleagues at the Caligo Ventures/Naturalist Journeys office. Small world.

Dinner was served. It was the first of our delicious meals prepared and served by the Asa Wright staff. We were well fed throughout.



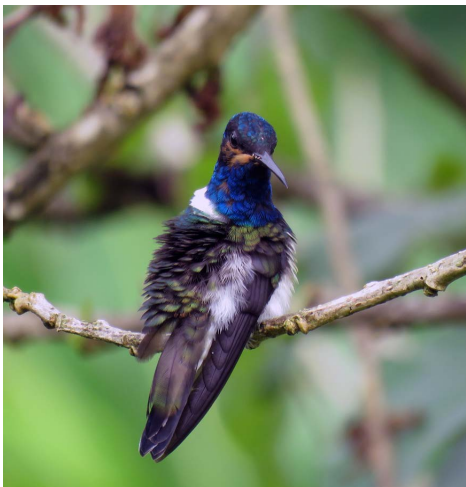
Mike managed to go on the after dinner night walk but the rest of us folded after our long day, starting before dawn to prepare for the Piping-Guan expedition. The day gave us 41 species of birds, many of them pointed out by the very talented Nicholas in the early morning. We also saw squirrels, agoutis, lizards, frogs and so much more.

## Tuesday, June 19 Asa Wright Nature Centre



Settled into our home for another five nights, most participants showed up early on the famous Asa Wright Nature Centre verandah. With morning coffee and scores of new birds, many visitors could spend their entire stay on this most comfortable porch. As White-necked Jacobins whiz by your ears, it is hard to know what to look at first. Great Antshrikes, Crested Oropendulas, Bananaquits, Blue-gray Tanagers and the Barred Antshrike were all common visitors.

After breakfast Martyn kindly provided us with an orientation to the Centre and then we were ready to go into the field. Asa Wright Nature Centre maintains a network of trails, although it seemed that several were in need of repair at this time. The main Discovery Trail was cleared and available though. We started down this trail with Jesse as our local guide, and discussed epiphytes, various plants and the difficulty of identifying many rain forest plants since they are so diverse. Nevertheless, we learned a few, adding the family Melastomaceae to our list.



On this day we saw 43 species of birds. One of our favorites was the Golden-headed Manakin. These striking black birds with golden heads were seen displaying on a lek. Each perched male rapidly jumps, slides, or darts to other perches. The display is accompanied by the whirring of the wings and a buzzing *zit-zit* call. More common were the White-bearded Mankins, flitting from branch to branch right near the trail. Fun to watch.

Rain ended our observation period and we headed back to the lodge for a late morning talk by Howard concerning the social insects of the tropics. As a long-time researcher of army and slave-making ants, we heard many entertaining stories about field work and learned a great deal about insect life histories.



An afternoon walk on the same trail featured information about medicinal plants and a too close viewing of a Fer-de-Lance. This is the most feared snake in Latin America because it is so common around populated areas and its venom is high in hemotoxins. A Red-tailed Boa was seen today also. This is simply a subspecies of



*Boa constrictor*, at least for now. The Giant Ameiva was also present, a large whiptail lizard with a bright green color. It is ground dwelling and often tongue flicks to find food and gather other information. Once again our walk ended quickly with rain. Those of us from Arizona, where we have had very little rain in the last year, were pleased to see it!

**Wednesday, June 20**

## **Blanchisseuse Road / Trinidad's Northern Range**



Today we traveled with Charron through the very pleasant Northern Range of Trinidad towards the seaside town of Blanchisseuse. These mountains are a continuation of the coastal Andes in Venezuela and reach just over 3000' in elevation. Our road allowed us to get to 2200'. The day was cooler and very pleasant. We managed to avoid rain. Today we saw 57 species of birds, some at Asa Wright Nature Centre and some on this trip. These included all three trogons, the Green-backed, the Guianan and the Collared, as well as Blue-headed and Orange-winged Parrots and a Bearded Bellbird. Male bellbirds, with their

unfettered "beard" of black stinky wattles, make a repeated metallic "tonk-tonk-tonk-tonk" that is hard to miss.

Lunch was very pleasant at the Brasso Seco Visitor Facility in the village of Brasso Seco. The local women were eager to serve us, tell us about their area and show us how they make chocolate from regional cocoa.



After sampling the varieties of chocolate, we were each given a favorite chocolate bar as we left. This was after the homemade ice-cream!

Returning to Asa Wright Nature Centre, Carol and Howard presented their talk, "Rainforest Botany", at the cocktail hour. The talk considered rain forest soils, the evolutionary advantage of spines on trees, the problems of shallow roots and much more. Several local visitors and some of the staff joined in. We considered why some plants have their leaves arranged in a spiral pattern.

After dinner, Fred and Carol took the night walk that was offered during many of the days we were at Asa Wright. Each is led by a local guide. The definite highlight of this walk was the huge Oilbird with a three-foot+ wingspan that was flying over the swimming hole. We also saw a half-dozen Trinidad

Chevron Tarantulas, often occupying the open ends of railings made of pipes. Centipedes, millipedes, the local Land Crab and Harlequin Beetles all added to our enjoyment of the evening. The land crabs are predators, feeding on other animals, including their own species. They will eat frogs, insects and even small snakes.



## Thursday, June 21 Asa Wright Nature Centre

We all looked forward to another full day at the Asa Wright Nature Centre, a pleasure not to get in a vehicle. Right after breakfast, Howard and Carol presented their talk entitled "Bird Brains." The next hour examined in depth how birds see, hear, smell, taste (not much) and use the earth's magnetic field to orient.

Next, we walked on the Asa Wright Nature Centre grounds, again with Jesse. This time we had the goal of seeing a Bearded Bellbird close up. They were seen from the verandah, in the distance, but we wanted a closer view and had been consistently rained out on previous days. Today we were successful and of course saw many other creatures along the way including the common Land Crab.



At 11:30 a.m. we had another talk, this one concerning primates, in anticipation of our upcoming visit to Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctuary. Only two species of primates live in Trinidad: Red Howlers and White-faced Capuchins. The talk focused on them but also highlighted some other Neotropical primates, showcasing their astonishing adaptations. After lunch we had a free afternoon, a treat for everyone.



Later in the afternoon we heard a guest speaker, Dr. Luke Rostant, of the University of the West Indies and the Asa Wright Nature Centre Management Board. Luke is a local bat expert and talked to us about the bats of Trinidad. There are approximately 70 species of bats here and they include those that eat insects, fruits, fish and blood! Yes, Vampire Bats are here. After dinner Luke set up some mist nests to trap bats, and captured five different species.



Today was a day of intense learning, with three talks. There was still time to see 46 species of birds, eight mammals, a lizard and numerous invertebrates. Something for everyone.



## Friday, June 22 Nariva Swamp / Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctuary

Today was a long day away from the Asa Wright Nature Centre. Once again Charron was our capable driver and guide and we were pleased to be with him. We hoped to see two the species of Trinidad primates today.

The Nariva Swamp is Trinidad's largest mangrove freshwater wetland, located behind lush coconut groves. Within the swamp, there is the Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctuary, home to more than 200 species of birds and animals. Here, amongst the monkeys, butterflies and birds, live anacondas, caimans, anteaters, the endangered Ocelot and the peaceful Manatee, indigenous to Trinidad. The reserve spans about 24 square miles of wetlands, marshes and swamps.

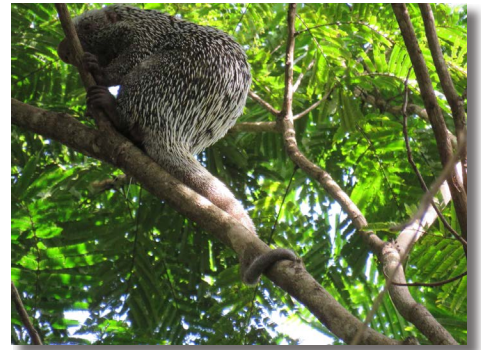
Within Nariva is the Bush Bush Wildlife Sanctuary, and this was our destination. With 63 species of birds spotted today you might think there was little time for anything else, but there was. Here we had good views of Red Howlers and a Prehensile-tailed Porcupine. The porcupine is an adept climber, and these animals live most of their lives in trees, feeding upon leaves, buds, bark, roots, shoots and fruits. The capuchins eluded us today.

One of the trees in Bush Bush was the Cannonball Tree, allowing us the opportunity for some rain forest bowling. (See the picture showing Fred.)



We saw several lizards, including the Giant Ameiva and its dead relative the Beachrunner. Both are in the family of whiptail lizards (Teiidae) and actively pursue their prey, often flicking out their tongues. We also had

a glimpse of the large Golden Tegu, also a Teiid. Tegus are common at the Asa Wright Nature Centre but we have seen very few because of the intermittent rain; they like sunshine. They are large, predatory lizards that very opportunistic.





On the way home for dinner we stopped at an old airfield for our evening rum punch and some birding. There, a number of new birds, including the Common Pauraque appeared.

## **Saturday, June 23      Oilbirds and the Caroni Swamp**

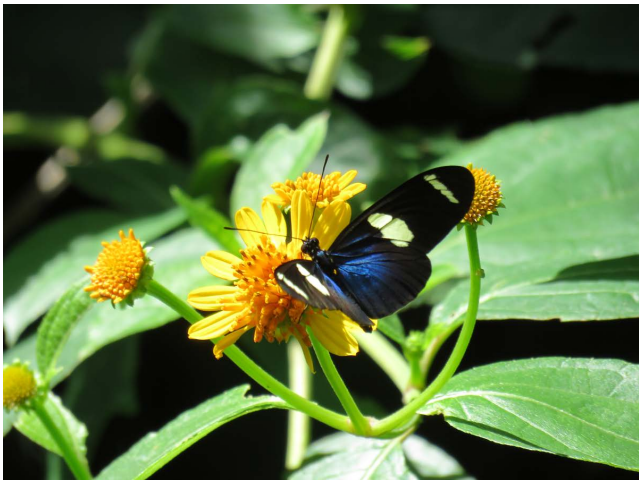
Today came the time for our much anticipated visit to the Oilbirds. With Centre guide Caleb guiding us, we carefully walked the steep and slippery trail until we arrived at Dunston Cave. Along the way we passed a swarming colony of Army Ants out searching for a food supply. Since Howard described this event several days ago, we had more of an appreciation for this behavior. Interestingly, we were alerted to the ant swarm (which we carefully stepped over) by Plain-brown Woodcreepers that were following the army ant colony to snatch the insects that were disturbed. The photo shows an army ant temporary nest or bivouac. The nest is composed entirely of the interlocked bodies of the ants.

The cave is on the grounds of the Asa Wright Nature Centre and requires permission to visit. It houses a colony of fruit eating, nocturnal, echolocating Oilbirds. They nest and roost on ledges



in the cave. Initially oil derived from the young birds was used for cooking and other fuels. Although these birds use echolocation to navigate, they have excellent vision also, with an incredible density of rods in their eyes for nocturnal viewing.





At 11:30 a.m. we were back at the lodge to hear Carol's presentation about the reptiles and amphibians of Trinidad. She focused on common frogs, toads and snakes, some of the latter venomous and some constrictors. We learned how anti-venoms are made and how pit vipers have superior sensory systems for detecting chemical cues and warm-blooded prey. This was the last talk in a series of seven. Right on cue, there was an Oliver's Parrot Snake waiting for us as we exited the Mango Room.

After lunch and little free time we met Charron at 4:30 p.m. to travel to the Caroni Swamp. Charron was careful to get us a top guide for Nanan's Bird Sanctuary Tours. Lester Nanan comes from a proud heritage of environmentalists and knew the area well. He is a third generation boatman in this area; his family is responsible, in part, for the protection of the diverse 12,000 acre swamp on the west coast of Trinidad.

It was just our group in the boat as we glided through the mangrove waterways. Highlights included a Masked Cardinal, Common Tent-making Bats and a Silky Anteater, curled up in a ball. Soon we were seeing the occasional Scarlet Ibises coming in to roost for the night as they returned from feeding areas as far away as Venezuela.

The waterway opened up to a larger lagoon and we tied up the boat to drink our late afternoon rum punches and watch the developing spectacle before us. In the distance we could see a large group of American Greater Flamingos. Closer in, the Ibises continued flying in to roost in the mangroves. This was not a time of year when thousands were

present, but we were happy with the colorful 100 or

so when saw. The Scarlet Ibis' bright orange-red color comes from the pigments from their food: crabs and other crustaceans, small fish, mollusks, worms, and insects. This bird is protected in both Trinidad and Tobago.

When it began to rain, we headed back to the dock with a tarp pulled up over all of us. We were quite late for dinner but the staff was prepared for that and served us with their usual graciousness. There were 50 birds today plus several mammals, herps and insects. It was a very full day.



## Sunday, June 24

## Departures

We ate our last meal together this morning and soon said good-bye to Fred, Helena and Mike. Those of us remaining took a morning walk on the main road and down to the swimming hole. There Carol saw a Trinidad Stream Frog.

Returning for lunch, we all took the afternoon off, to pack, read, write in journals and get ready for our night flights home. Asa Wright kindly let us keep our rooms until 8:15 p.m. when Charron appeared to take us to the airport. It was a fine journey — all of it.



Photo credits: All photos by Carol Simon or Howard Topoff except where noted – First group photo: Helena Allan; Piping Guan, Peg Abbott; Hatching Leatherback Turtle, Alex Vargo; AWCN verandah, Steve Wolfe (Lone Wolfe Photography); Golden-headed Manakin, Bob Rodrigues; Lunch on June 16, Mike Stake.