

Trinidad & Tobago | Trip Report

March 11 – 18, 2020 | Written by Kathy Pasierb



With Caligo Host Kathy Pasierb, and participants Robin, Greg, Carolyn, Kathryn, James, Jim, Marie, Kara, Margaret, and Marvin.



Preface

We could call this tour, Birding Trinidad & Tobago on the Eve of the Pandemic, a precious opportunity cut short before our eyes. On March 10, the US report 224 new cases of COVID-19, localized in a few geographic areas. By March 17, the US had 1822 cases new cases more widespread and by March 18 it had been recorded in all 50 states. During that week our minds were on Tufted Coquettes and what was coming for dinner—sort of a blissful innocence before the storm.

We learned on March 16 that countries around the world were waking up to the rapid spread of COVID-19 and taking unprecedented quick action by closing borders. Though our group of American and Canadian visitors were immersed in nature and beauty, the excitement of travel, we had to suddenly shift into making quick exit plans. It was a scramble to secure flights, but possible for all. Three went on to Tobago and spent a



lovely last day there, including a chance to visit Little Tobago. Then all left safely for home to shelter in. No one could imagine that one month later in April, the daily average would reach 30,000 new cases. How thankful we are for the memories of this trip that sustain us, and thanks to all involved for their help in getting travelers safely home. Enjoy the memories here!

Wed., March 11 Arrivals

Asa Wright Nature Centre staff welcomed ten participants on March 11th, arriving staggered throughout the day and into the evening. As folks settled in, we enjoyed casual birding at the verandah. Flocks of bird species vied for a position along the feeder gallery below the verandah to get a taste of sugar water from hummingbird feeders, and a pinch of sliced banana and watermelon laid out on wooden platforms. The combination of colorful birds seen at arm's length, along with tea and cakes at 4:00 pm and rum punch at 6:00 pm, brought many smiles.

When the dinner bell rang, we all wondered if it could get any better than our first glimpse into the world of the AWNC and the lush, birdsong-filled forest surrounding us. We all gathered together at dinner and had a lovely meal at the dining hall round table, reserved especially for us. Everyone seemed in good spirits and happy to have reached their destination, pleased with their accommodations and AWNC hospitality. After dinner, Randell, a young and knowledgeable naturalist, showed an educational video, Natural History of Trinidad-Tobago narrated by Graham White, AWNC Chairman to sleepy eyed participants. A good first day.

Seen at the gallery of feeders and around the verandah were abundant hummingbird species. Brown Violetear, Black-throated Mango, Tufted Coquette, Blue-chinned Sapphire, White-chested Emerald, Copper-rumped Hummingbird, and White-necked Jacobin. Also seen were Cocoa, Spectacled and White-necked Thrush, White-lined, Silver-beaked, Blue-gray, and Palm Tanager, Purple and Green Honeycreeper, Barred Antshrike, Great Kiskadee, Tropical Kingbird, Tropical Mockingbird, Bananaquit and Crested Oropendola galore, Violaceous Euphonia, White-bearded Manakin, House Wren building a nest in the eaves of the verandah, Common Black Hawk fly-by, and three flocks of Orange-winged Parrots exploding from the upper canopy of trees above the Centre rooftop.

Total species: 29

Thurs., March 12 Centre Orientation | Night Birding

On this official first morning after breakfast, the group met Mahase on the verandah. He introduced himself as our driver and guide, spoke about the Centre and his long family history's relationship with it. He gave us a summary of the week's birding activities and logistics.

We then embarked on our first bird walk from the verandah onto to the discovery trail. At once we were treated to close up views of Tufted Coquettes visiting colorful garden flowers, nest-making Bananaquits in an overhanging branch, and a quick look at an elusive Cocoa Thrush—all while hearing the anvil sound of the Bearded Bellbird. As the Bellbird beckoned us down the concrete steps of the trail, several White-bearded



Manakin hopped through giant green foliage only to disappear through the towering nutmeg trees. Great Antshrike called at a distance, as Bellbird called all around us. Suddenly there they were! Three Bellbirds saying to each other, “this is my territory.” Overhead, the sound of their call was nearly deafening. The group enjoyed excellent views as cameras clicked. Deviating from the discovery trail, we encountered views of the beautiful Bay-headed Tanager on our way back to the Centre.

After lunch and a restful afternoon, we embarked on a night birding adventure from town toward an abandoned airstrip. Along the Centre driveway we saw two Plain Brown Woodcreepers, working their way up the trunk of a tree and a Guianan Trogon posing for all to see. On Blanchisseuse Road, heading into town, there were two Green-backed Trogon. Reaching our destination as the sun was setting, we dined alfresco and made a rum punch toast to four Red-bellied Macaws that silently flew overhead with palm nuts in their beaks. Sulphury Flycatchers congregated in the canopy communicating noisily with one another. At nightfall we ventured out on to the weedy tarmac, searching for and finding White-tailed Nightjar and Common Pauraque by locating the eye shine made from a flashlight.
Total species: 40 birds, 1 click beetle and 1 Common Opossum.

Fri., March 13 Blanchisseuse Rd. | Northern Range

Our group went birding all day along Blanchisseuse Road, down to the village of Brasso Seco, and back. Traveling along the narrow, winding roadway we encountered birds carrying nesting materials but saw very little movement among the forest trees along the roadside. Occasionally we would see Cocoa Thrush and White-necked Thrush darting across the road as we drove. The forest was filled with bird calls especially from the Trinidad Motmot and Great Antshrike. When we saw birds, they were usually in pairs. From observation we deduced it was nesting season surmising that would have accounted for so few sightings. Luckily, we had good views of the Collared Trogon sitting on a nearby roadside branch. The Trinidad Motmot presented himself as well. Driving to 1,800 feet at Las Lapas, we saw flybys of two Channel-billed Toucan, a single Blue-headed Parrot, Black and Turkey Vulture, and a Magnificent Frigatebird. We observed two Southern Rough-winged Swallows sitting on a wire and a Golden-olive Woodpecker peeking out from a nest hole. Bursting from the top of a tall tree were a pair of Orange-winged Parrots and a pair of Black-tailed Tityra.

Detouring off Blanchisseuse Road, we encountered the sleepy village of Morne la Croix. We witnessed many Crested Oropendola chatting it up around astonishingly constructed pendulous nests. Nearby, at least 30 Yellow-rumped Cacique were causing a great deal of commotion around their nests in tall pine trees and below a Rufous-tailed Jacamar sat quietly in the shadows of a tree.



Lunch at Brasso Seco was lovingly prepared by the staff was a welcomed respite from a busy morning. The chocolate and coffee presentation was accompanied by tasting a variety of chocolates and a cocoa drink. Total species: fifty-eight (58) species of birds

Sat., March 14 Nariva Swamp

At 8:30 am, we ventured out for all-day birding, making several stops at hotspots before arriving at our final destination, Nariva Swamp. Mahase was on his game today spotting difficult to see birds. Our first stop in Trincity was an open field with tree lined streets. Sightings were brilliant yellow-colored Saffron Finch flying from tree to tree, Red-breasted Meadowlark on a fence post, two Green-rumped Parrotlets, a pair of Savannah Hawk with the male on the ground then flying up to a tree branch where he mounted the female, Tropical Kingbirds, Carib Grackle, and Zone-tailed Hawk.

At the golf course there were twelve wading Black-necked Stilt, fifteen Southern Lapwing, at least forty-five Wattled Jacana, six Little Blue Heron, Great Egret, twenty Cattle Egret, two Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Lesser and Greater Yellowlegs, two Black-crowned Night Heron, and a fly-by Striated Heron.

Further down to the town of Sangre Grande, there were fly-bys of Gray-lined Hawk and Plumbeous Kite. At Manzanilla in a cricket field there was a Giant Cowbird, then along a mangrove swamp near the road a Green Kingfisher cruising the waterway, a Golden-fronted Greenlet and two Jacamar in the mangrove



canopy. At Manzanilla beach were many Magnificent Frigatebirds flying overhead and four Ruddy Turnstone walking in the shallow water of the sandy shoreline.

Our final destination was Nariva Swamp. A Limpkin was poking into the soil in a field while a Striated Heron, Pied Water Tyrant, and Spotted Sandpiper fed in the shade of a drainage ditch. Many Smooth-billed Anis were seen as well as Ruddy Ground Dove, Southern Lapwing, Wattled Jacana, Pale-vented Pigeon. Gray Kingbirds sat posing on wires above the road and Yellow-headed Caracara cruised with two Black Vultures overhead. The grand finale was a fly-by of fifteen Blue and Yellow Macaws.

Sun., March 15 Aripo | Arena Birding

This really early start was worth getting out of bed for. We traveled down Blanchisseuse Road with many productive stops of bird sightings along the way, especially for flycatchers. At an overlook into the valley south of AWCN, we saw Variegated, Piratic, and Striated Flycatcher. Two Squirrel Cuckoo, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Southern Beardless Tyrannulet, three White-flanked Antwren and Little Hermit presented themselves as well. Moving on to the lower road was Boat-billed and Sulphury Flycatcher, a White Hawk, Plumbeous Kite, Blue-chinned Sapphire and Blue-throated Mango. Ruddy- Ground dove, Fork-tailed Palm Swift were abundant. Closer to town were two Grayish Saltators in a tree, and a couple of White-tipped Dove in an open field. It began to rain as we turned onto the road to Aripo, where we saw a Zone-tailed Hawk circling with Black Vultures and an Ochre-bellied Flycatcher on a wire. Retracing our steps back to the main road and into a burned area we saw a Merlin in a tree, a young Pearl Kite fly-by, many Green-rumped Parrotlets, a Yellow-headed Caracara fly by, two Masked Yellowthroat moving through a thicket, a Yellow Oriole on a pendulum shaped nest and an immature Peregrine Falcon.

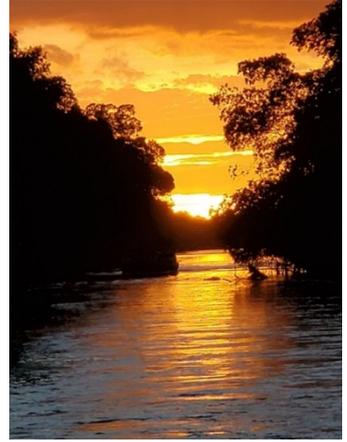
We traveled into the Arena area for a nice lunch as rain began to fall in earnest. Driving out we encountered a Black-crested Antshrike, two Channel-billed Toucan preening each other and a Lineated Woodpecker on a utility pole. It was quite a morning for bird sightings thanks to our incredibly skilled driver and guide, Mahase. We arrived back at the Centre with some time to ourselves before dinner.

By this day, news was reaching us via text messages from the office and our various homes that there could be border closures coming, particularly the US / Canada border and there was thought that Trinidad could close inbound traffic, meaning fewer flights home. We had a few days to consider, but it brought us angst, soothed certainly by nature, but still there. For now we could adopt a wait-and-see for a few more days.

Mon., March 16 Oilbirds | Caroni Swamp

From the Centre this morning, we walked to the Dunston Cave to witness the Oilbirds quietly roosting on dark, damp ledges inside the cave. Caleb, a Centre Naturalist was our guide.

After lunch we were off to Caroni Swamp, one of the highlights of our stay at Asa Wright. Victor was our boatman and bird guide. This truly remarkable wildlife experience afforded us close-up views of birds, a sleeping Silky Anteater, bats, frogs, a Ruschenberger's Tree Boa, and crabs as we slowly cruised down the swamp channel. As dusk was drawing near, we arrived in a wide, open channel and tied the boat to a post





protruding from the shallow water. As if on cue, flocks of several hundred Scarlet Ibis flew overhead to settle on their evening roost, turning the green of the mangrove trees to red.

At dusk we made our way down a narrow channel as the sun set behind us.

Our last evening view from the verandah presented us with a spectacular lavender sky. At dinner we recollected all that we had seen over the last 7 days. And mulled over the very sobering news that for many, it was best to get home soon. June de Gale Rampersad, the General Manager, kept us well-informed, and each of the group struggled to make the decision for their exit time and necessary flight re-booking. Somehow the view from the verandah seemed exquisitely poignant, the calm of nature, there chaos coming to our world.

Tues., March 17 Goodbye to Asa Wright | Departures

Last minute birding at Asa Wright Nature Centre included sightings of White-Bearded Manakin, Tufted Coquette, all coming in close enough to touch. Mahase drove us to the Airport where 7 people chose a path for home. Kathy, Robin and Greg flew on to Tobago to meet our guide for afternoon birding then on to Blue Waters Inn.

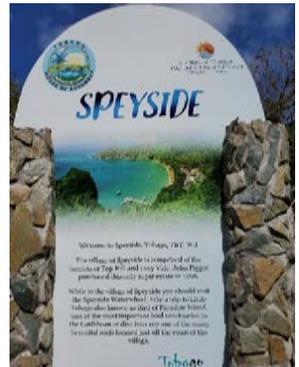
We met Jason, our bird guide and drove to two birding hotspots on the island: the sewage treatment ponds which afforded easy sightings of three Green Heron, Ringed Kingfisher, (a local rarity and the only one present in Tobago), Tricolored Heron, Great Egret, two Snowy Egret, Cattle Egret, four White-cheeked Pintail, four Blue-winged Teal, Little Blue Heron, Neotropic Cormorant, Anhinga, five Caribbean Martin on a wire, two Eared Dove, Grey Kingbird, Greater Yellowlegs, and 25 Laughing Gull!

At Blue Water Inn (BWI) the constant presence of many Rufous-vented Chachalaca and Ruddy Turnstone was a delightful accompaniment to the beautiful and well-appointed Inn. Behind the Inn were Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Trinidad Motmot, Bananaquit, and Magnificent Frigatebird overhead.

Wed., March 18 Blue Waters Inn to Little Tobago Island

This morning we had time for ourselves to have a leisurely breakfast and lunch, take in the amenities of the Blue Waters Inn, and search for the Motmot beyond the Inn parking lot. Casual birding included sightings of Red-crowned Woodpecker, White-tipped Dove, at least 20 Rufous-vented Chachalaca, and a Trinidad Motmot. Two giant Ameiva lizards and a Red-rumped Agouti rounded out the morning discoveries. At 2:00 pm we made our way to the dock to board the glass bottom boat for a





highly anticipated cruise to Little Tobago island. Boating on gentle rolling waves across the blue water bay, we arrived in 15 minutes and docked on Little Tobago Island.

Our guide, Zolani Frank, was very knowledgeable about the ecology of the island and the politics that has affected the island environment over time. We followed the trail up a hill all the while learning about the flora and fauna of the island until we came upon two Trinidad Motmots perched above the trail. We were thrilled to have gotten a close-up view. Onward and upward we walked, reaching the viewing platform near the summit of the island. Calling above the sound of the crashing waves below, flights of Red-billed Tropicbirds cruised at eye level on up drafts from the steep ocean cliffs. Much to our delight, our guide pointed out a Tropicbird and her nestling right at our feet. Down the hill and onto the boat for our trip back to the Inn, we slowly cruised to view the reef fishes and corals through the boat floor.

Arriving back at the Blue Waters Inn dock, we felt like we had journeyed to some magical island far away from civilization and the difficulties in the world, with its looming threat of a widespread pandemic and COVID-19 coming fast. But the need to exit was more urgent and we packed to head to the airport, getting safely home but missing our last day. We will return!

Photo Credits: Thank you to Kathy Pasierb and Greg Johnson for providing the photos for the Trip Report.

On the discovery trail for orientation, Kathy Pasierb (KP); The group toasting, KP; taking a break, KP; Yellow-rumped Cacique, Greg Johnson (GJ); Trinidad stream frog, GJ; Brasso Seco chocolate making, KP; The group at Las Lapas, KP, the highpoint along Blanchisseuse Rd, KP; Greg and Robin looking at a white form of a Little Blue Heron at Nariva Swamp, KP; Kara photographing Ruddy Turnstones at Manzanillo Beach, KP; Little girl fishing in the Nariva Swamp ditch, KP; Pied Water-Tyrant, GJ; Arena Lunch Stop, KP; Black-throated Mango, GJ; Selfie style, KP; Caroni Swamp Boat tour, KP; Caroni Swamp sunset, KP; Masked Cardinal, GJ; Waiting for the Scarlet Ibis spectacle at Caroni Swamp, KP; sunset at AWNC, KP; Blue-gray Tanager, GJ; Barred Antshrike, GJ; June de Gale- Centre General Manager, KP; Tufted Coquette, GJ; Leaving AWNC, KP; Ruddy Turnstone joining us for lunch, KP; Chachalacas, KP; Beach at BWI, KP; Pool & Hot tub at BWI, KP; Blue Water Inn, KP; View of Speyside shoreline from Little Tobago Island, KP; Red-billed Tropicbird, GJ; Caligo Host Kathy Pasierb at Top of the hill on Little Tobago Island with view of Speyside shoreline, GJ; Docking on Little Tobago, KP; view from BWI room, KP; Trinidad Motmot, GJ; Red-billed tropicbird from platform, GJ; Speyside sign, KP; View of Little Tobago, KP; glass bottom boat crew, KP; Island trail, KP; overlook at speyside, , KP.