

## THE BIRDS

At the time of our visit we realised that it would not be the best for seabirds or hummingbirds. Sooty Terns, Brown Noddies and White-tailed Tropicbirds are absent during November. Indeed **Laughing Gull** is not common at this time of the year either. On the plus side we hoped to see waders and warblers winter visitors from America. As always there were surprises. According to the books the commonest wader species should have been Semi-palmated and Western Sandpiper, and we did not see either of these!

**Red-billed Tropicbird.** Our trip to Little Tobago Island was rewarded by superb views of this stunning species. For whatever reason we had imagined there would be a couple of dozen pairs breeding, in the event we saw circa 800 birds. The parasitic piracy of the ever-watchful **Magnificent Frigatebird**, earns them a meal amongst the Tropicbird colony. On our visit to the Blue Waters Inn we saw 400 or more flying from the mainland to the islands. Magnificent Frigatebirds are without a doubt magnificent!

The heron family is well represented we saw seven species. According to the checklist **Great-blue Heron** occurs only on Trinidad, however, we found one at Buccoo Swamp, a bird with what looked like a nasty wing injury.

Birds of prey we knew were going to be limited. We caught up with **Great-black Hawk** in the forest region. From our hotel **Osprey**, **Peregrine** and **Merlin** were recorded, as was the *Mystery Hawk* (on four occasions). The latter bird caused us the biggest headache, as we could find nothing in the book, which looked like it. Since arriving home and seeing illustrations of **Yellow-headed Caracara**, we felt this might be the species involved. In the forested hillside by the Blue Waters Inn, we saw a large immature raptor, Buzzard sized or larger, which, despite reasonable views, escaped identification.

**Waders.** On the sandy beaches near our hotel, **Turnstones** and **Sanderling** were present, being joined on one occasion by a **Semi-palmated Plover**. These plovers are noticeably smaller than Ringed Plover with shorter bills. At Buccoo I had excellent views of **Short-billed Dowitcher** down to five metres, an adult in winter plumage, as was the **Willet** we saw on a small inlet by the coast. The commonest species being **Greater Yellowlegs** and **Spotted Sandpiper**. To my eye the most obvious difference between Greater and **Lesser Yellowlegs** was the bill's shape and size, the Lessers' being fine and straight and Greater thicker longer and slightly upturned. All in all Greater reminded me of Greenshank, whereas Lesser appeared more like a large Wood Sandpiper.

Pigeons and Doves do not present a particular identification problem. A nice little group. The only swift species were **Short-tailed Swift**, at a distance this could be confused with Grey-rumped Swift.

Hummingbirds should never be rushed until you are confident of your identification criteria. **Rufous-breasted Hermit** has an enormously long decurved bill, far more spectacular than is indicated in some illustrations. **Rufous-tailed Jacamar** behaves pretty well like a Bee-eater, although genetically unrelated. Seen by forest edges and even by the roadside. *Impressive.*

## THE BIRDS cont:

**Red-crowned Woodpecker** commonly seen in parks, secondary growth and lightly wooded areas, sometimes several birds together.

During our walk in the rain forest we were lucky enough to encounter a lek of **Blue-backed Manakins**. It was here we also saw **White-tailed Sabrewing**, found for us by our guide. The species to get to grips with on your first days birding are **Tropical Kingbird**, **Grey Kingbird** and **Tropical Mockingbird** they are all similar sized grey birds. One of the commonest species on the island is **Carib Grackle**. Small 'starlings' which will help you eat your breakfast, and other meals for that matter. We saw a small brown cuckoo on three occasions, but it was not until our penultimate day that we confirmed our suspicions, that it was indeed **Yellow-billed Cuckoo**. The characteristic rufous patch in the wing is diagnostic.

**Shiny Cowbird** could be overlooked for Carib Grackle, I know, I did it! But it did not fool Jackie. We saw three large all dark birds in flight in the Arnos Vale area, and realised that they could only be **Giant Cowbirds**, as there are not crows on the island. **Crested Oropendola** are bigger than we expected, about the size of a Magpie, with large yellow bills, the species is highly gregarious, an agricultural pest, yet aesthetically very pleasing.

In Britain we have never had any luck with American passerines so it was good to get to grips with three species in Tobago. **Yellow Warbler**, **Northern Waterthrush** and most pleasing for us **American Redstart**.

The Tanagers are easy to identify but **White-line Tanagers** exhibit sexual dimorphism. The males being black and the females brown. **Bananaquits** are an abundant, locally known as 'sugarbirds' because of their fondness for sweet things. A pair at our hotel had nested in a houseplant in the dining room! The parent birds were quite unconcerned about humans, they would help themselves to jam, honey and fruit juice from the breakfast bar. I also noted that they took drinks from the optics at the bar on a regular basis! Grackles and Blue Grey Tanagers would visit the dining areas for scraps. Most of us tourists made sure that there was plenty of 'scraps' available.

### Doubtful Species.

Fuscous Flycatcher and White-winged Becard (female). The birds we saw were identified as these species, and the probability is they were, however, we were not 100% certain.

### Reference Books taken

**A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago** Richard Ffrench Published by Helm.  
*Disappointing.*

**Shorebirds** An identification guide to the waders of the world. P Hayman J Marchant  
And Tony Prater. Published by Croom Helm

**A Field Guide to the Birds of North America** Published by the National Geographic Society.

**A Checklist of the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago.**

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TOBAGO November 1998

Key to sites

- A) Coco Reef Hotel Environs
- B) Coco Reef Hotel Environs
- C) Coco Reef Hotel Environs and Botanical Gardens Scarborough
- D) Coco Reef Hotel and Grafton Nature Reserve
- E) Tour of Rain Forest and Little Tobago Island
- F) Coco Reef Hotel Environs
- G) Buccoo Swamp Grafton Nature Reserve & Hotel Environs
- H) Hotel Environs and Grafton Nature Reserve
- I) Buccoo Swamp – Stour Point area (Sea-watch pm)
- J) Arnos Vale – Manson Hall – Mt. Irvine Bay
- K) Coco Reef Hotel Environs (Light Birding only to-day)
- L) Speyside – Blue Waters Inn – New local area pm
- M) Coco Reef Hotel – No active Birding
- N) Coco Reef Hotel – Last minute Birding

## **SITE DESCRIPTIONS**

### **COCO REEF HOTEL ENVIRONS**

The hotel area consisted of sandy palm fringed beach, coastal scrub, secondary forest growth, parkland, undeveloped plots near the shopping centre and the hotel gardens.

### **PIGEON POINT AREA**

A beach peninsular with mangrove, lake, palms secondary growth and parkland. The area was good for passerines including Red-crowned Woodpecker, Crested Oropendola and flycatchers. It was here that we first sighted Yellow-billed Cuckoo. The park area was a regular site for Yellow-crowned Night Heron. Waders were present on the beach by the fishermen's huts on most days, we had our only sighting of Semi-palmated Plover here. The coastal palms here were the regular haunt of a very shy Belted Kingfisher.

### **BOTANICAL GARDENS SCARBOROUGH**

Seventeen acres of formally laid out gardens, with various trees, shrubs, hedgerow and flowerbeds, together with a small lily pond. Of little ornithological interest.

### **GRAFTON NATURE RESERVE**

A large forested area on the slopes of the hills near Mount Irvine Bay. There are three main tracks two into the lower forest and one which climbs high up the hillside. There is a visitor's centre where the birds are fed and therefore easy to see. This is the place for none birdwatchers to see Blue-crowned Motmot and Rufous-vented Chachalaca. There is no admission fee but donates are requested, no pressure. The warden is very helpful and friendly.

### **THE RAIN FOREST**

The rain forest lies along the ridge in the centre of the island, and cascades down to the shore in places. There are several paths into the forest some well known and others used by locals who hunt armadillo with dogs. The most popular tracks used by locals are off the road Roxborough, which cuts across the island from coast to coast. It is probably best to go with an experienced birder, as this will considerably increase your chance of seeing the birds and prevent you from getting lost.

### **LITTLE TOBAGO ISLAND**

Once in Speyside you will have no difficulties finding a boat to take you to the island, however, boats go directly from The Blue Waters Inn Hotel. The island is forested with lookout points to observe the seabirds.

### **BUCCOO SWAMP**

Found on the main coast road near to the village of Buccoo. The main entrance is not at all obvious, just a nondescript gate. It might be as well to go on an escorted visit the first time to get to know the site, after which you could visit on your own. The site consists of a large wooded area, pasture, swamp and a large lake. Cattle roam the swamp but did not take objection to us being there. I did hear that there could be a charge, but we did not have to pay on either visit.

## **SITE DESCRIPTIONS cont:**

### **STOUR POINT**

This is just about the most southerly tip of the island. Seawatching can be of good value from here at times. Any birds migrating from South America or Trinidad would be most likely to hit this point first.

### **ARNOS VALE AND MANSON HALL**

The area is mostly hilly and forested with streams and waterfalls. At Arnos Vale there is a redundant watermill and visitors centre. Here you buy food drink and souvenirs. High Tea being a speciality, although a little expensive. It is a good area for birds, there are walks through the grounds and surrounding area.

### **THE NEW LOCAL AREA**

Taking advantage that we had the hired car until next morning, we went on an evening's exploration. On our map, between our hotel and the Shirvan road, was a blank. And this was the area we turned our attention too. What we found was a well laid out infrastructure to what must have been a works or housing estate. However, apart from the roads there was little else. This site was now a marsh, with willows and drainage ditches with mangrove as an added bonus. Naturally this meant that there were birds here, well worth a regular visit we thought, pity it was the end of our holiday. It is to be noted that Buccoo Swamp is only two or three mile from here.

### **ADVENTURE FARM PARK RESERVE ARNOS VALE**

A privately owned, twelve acre estate on the Arnos Vale road. There is a mango and citrus fruit orchard, included in the admission of US\$3 is fruit and a drink. A chance to get good views of common birds. The owners once ran one of the large hotels on the island and are now taking guests at this Eco-friendly spot.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The holiday was arranged via Teletext (Suntex), on behalf of Tropical places. At a cost of £1399 per person plus £20:00pp for because we travelled at weekend. The flight was from Gatwick Airport at 14:00 arriving at approximately 19:00 local time, a flight of around eight hours. Time difference of four hours.

The holiday was not primarily a birding trip, but we intended to see as much as possible whilst having a relaxing time. We had done quite an amount of homework researching the birds, sites and area. The Trinidad and Tobago Tourist Board forwarded us general information on hotels, restaurants and travel within the island. Dave Rich kindly provided us with site information and the names of the best birders on the island.

### **General**

Tobago is twenty-eight miles long by seven miles wide, it is twenty miles north of Trinidad which lies twelve miles from Venezuela. There are Caribbean and Atlantic sea coasts, the former having calm tranquil waters the latter being more windswept and rugged, where swimming can be dangerous. Tourism on the island has only been in operation for three to four years. The majority of the hotels being at the southern end of the island near the capital Scarborough. The people were warm, helpful and friendly. The population of this tropical island is merely 50,000 consequently nearly everyone knows each other. The main hotel in the north of the island is the Blue Waters Inn, set in the forest and close to the Islands were the sea birds breed. It is also near the main birding areas of the rain forest reserve. However, the island is small and travel by hired car is relatively easy. Driving is on the left-hand side of the road and traffic is mainly light. Birding trips are easy to organise from the UK or from your hotel. The principals ones being to the islands, the rain forest, Buccoo Swamp and Grafton Nature Reserve.

### **Money**

The local currency is the Trinidad and Tobago Dollar TTD. At the time we were there the exchange rate was 10.25 in the bank and 8.25 at the hotel for the £ sterling. By using the banks rate of exchange it made conversion nice and easy one TTD = 10p. There was no problem with currency, we took sterling travellers cheques US\$ were just as acceptable. Transactions of TTD on plastic cards were converted into US\$ then to £ sterling. Nevertheless the exchange rate is most competitive. In short no problems with money.

### **Car Hire**

We hired a vehicle from 'Thrifty' at Crown Point, which was recommended to us by the Tropical Places representative. The cost was \$US 40 plus \$10 CWD, this worked out at to £32 for a FWD air-conditioned hard topped jeep. Petrol was inexpensive at circa 23p per litre.

LOCATION	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N
SPECIES	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
<b>Pandionidae</b>														
Osprey	1		3	3					2		1	1	2	
<b>Falconidae</b>														
Peregrine												1	1	
Merlin	1		1					1	2	2	1			
Unidentified Falcon												1		
Mystery Hawk		1		2				1	1					1
<b>Cracidae</b>														
Rufous-vented Chachalaca	5	2	1	40			30	40		30	1	20		
<b>Rallidae</b>														
Common Moorhen								8		8				
<b>Jacaniidae</b>														
Wattled Jacana							15		12					
<b>Charadriidae</b>														
Southern Lapwing							10		30					
Grey Plover					2				1					
Semi-Palmated Plover		1								4				
<b>Scolopacidea</b>														
Turnstone		5	5	9		7		10			10	8		
Lesser Yellowlegs			1				1		4					
Greater Yellowlegs			1				10		8			3		
Spotted Sandpiper							10		6	3		6		
Willet											1			
Whimbrel							1		1	2				









