

A taste of the Carribean - 2 weeks in Trinidad & Tobago 15-29 March 2009

Participants: myself & Anne, Alan Rosney, Gareth Jenkins, Dave Bush, Huw Thomas and Mike Wheeler.

An idea originally mooted by Gareth Jenkins came to fruition when 7 of us took off for a fortnight in "T&T" on 15th March 2009. Gareth had booked our tailor made holiday through the very helpful WildWings outfit based in Bristol. We had full board and a guide for the 10 days in Trinidad, and B&B in Tobago, and a guide organised by ourselves. Flights were with BA from Gatwick.

Accommodation

[i] 7 nights at Pax Guest House, Trinidad. This is a very pleasant building, once part of a Benedictine monastery in the northern range of hills. The monastery is still there and is much used as a peaceful retreat by islanders. The hosts, Gerrard and his wife are very attentive and the food excellent, as are the rum punches served on the veranda in the evening before dinner! The house overlooks a forested valley with the skyline comprising an excellent ridge for raptor watching. The veranda itself has hummingbird feeders, and it is very pleasant to sit out in the early evening sun after a hard days birding, with a rum punch in hand, watching the raptors soaring and the hummers hovering at the feeders - two extreme ends of the T&T avifauna.

[ii] 3 nights at the famous Asa Wright Nature Centre, not far from Pax but higher up in the northern range forest. The 3 nights stay is the minimum required in order to be able to visit the Dunstan caves which are used as a daytime roost by the Oilbirds, of which more later.

[iii] 4 nights at Blue Waters Inn, Tobago, by a beautiful secluded bay at the NE end of Tobago a mile outside the small town of Speyside, and near to the offshore island of Little Tobago.

Highlights

At Pax we had the same guide for the 7 nights, a Trinidadian called Kenny who was typically laid back, but an excellent guide with very good knowledge of all species and their vocalisations, and habitats. Trinidad is not a location where you would explore alone - the crime rate is quite high and rental vehicles are easily identified by an R [or possibly H] in the registration number, and hence are easily targeted, so a guide is essential. Also driving yourself would not be a good idea - the rules of the road are ... there are no rules of the road, or at least what rules there are, are to be disobeyed at all times!

The first day was a break-in day, birding along the road that runs up past Pax, where we began to become familiar with the common species - Great Kiskadee, Tropical Mockingbird, Ruddy Ground-dove, White-tipped Dove, the very common Orange-winged Parrot, a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl in the tree outside the guesthouse, Palm- and Blue-grey Tanagers, Barred Antshrike, Crested Oropendola and many others. Overhead were Short-tailed Swift, Fork-tailed Palm-swift, and the inevitable Turkey- and American Black Vultures, and also Zone-tailed Hawk. Tropical Kingbirds are also numerous.

Great Kiskadee



The following day we visited Aripo Agricultural Research Station where birding groups are welcomed - this is in the low-lying savannah area - highlights included Wattled Jacana, Southern Lapwing, Solitary Sandpiper, Least Sandpiper, Cooi Heron, White-winged Swallow, Red-breasted Blackbird, Giant Cowbird, Pied Water-tyrant and White-headed Marsh-tyrant, and when we re-visited one evening, Common Pauraque [a nightjar] and White-tailed Nightjar. The same day included a visit to the Nariva rice fields where Pinnated Bittern was the star, together with Pale-breasted- and Yellow-chinned Spinetails, and Crimson-crested Woodpecker [a biggie]. A drive along by Manzanilla Beach which is backed by palms, produced Crested- and Yellow-headed Caracara, and coming to roost, the scarce Red-bellied Macaw, and also Green-rumped Parrotlet.

The following day involved a full exploration of the famous Blanchisseuse Road which runs right over the top of the northern range forest. Two further Swifts were bagged here - Grey-rumped and Band-tailed. However it is for forest birds that this area is famous. Highlights were Plain Brown- and Cocoa Woodcreepers, Barred Antshrike, White-flanked Antwren, Golden-headed and White-bearded Mannakins, Piratic Flycatcher, Streaked Flycatcher, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Tropical Peewee, Euler's Flycatcher, White-throated Spadebill [a good find - very small and difficult to see flycatcher], Slaty-capped Flycatcher, White-necked Thrush, Long-billed Gnatwren, Golden-fronted Greenlet, and Collared- and Violaceous Trogons. A lot of flycatchers there - on the whole trip we saw

22 different species of this group!

Next day was the Arena forest where a star bird was a perched Plumbeous Kite, and also the third trogon of the trip, a White-tailed Trogon, plus Little Cuckoo, Rufous-tailed Jacamar [related to Bee-eaters], Boat-billed Flycatcher, Rufous-breasted Wren, Cocoa Thrush, Plain Antvireo, Yellow-rumped Cacique and perhaps best of all a Moriche Oriole. This latter is scarce and restricted to areas of, surprise surprise, Moriche Palms. The main area for these, called Waller Field [an old US air base] was out of bounds as the all-America summit starring Barak O was due in April and the old airfield was going to be used for landing the whole entourage. However Kenny knew a couple of other likely spots and turned up trumps.

On 20th a visit to the west coast [Pointe a Pierre wildfowl trust, Carli Beach, Orange Bay, and Waterloo] produced 14 wader species, mostly nearctic, plus Large-billed Tern and Yellow-billed Tern, and several heron species including Striated. We also managed to find a male Saffron Finch at Waterloo, although the main area was Carli Beach. These are scarce, and many of the native finches have been extirpated due to trapping for cage birds. The finale today was a boat trip out into the Caroni Swamp, a huge mangrove swamp where Scarlet Ibis come in to roost. A stunning spectacle. The boat trip put also produced Common Potoo

and Straight-billed Woodcreeper. A star bird of today was the Long-winged Harrier seen from the vehicle as we approached the road west - a good spot by Gareth.

The 21st called for a 3 a.m. start to drive round to the NE coast via a long and winding road, to an area called the Monte Video trace [trace = track]. A daybreak arrival was required to see the national bird, the Trinidad Piping-guan, and after some patience we were rewarded with excellent views of several birds. These are sizeable birds looking like rather clumsy turkeys crashing around in the treetops. We had to leave the area before 9 a.m. due to a rather rickety bridge over a creek being rebuilt that day, causing closer of the whole road. Needless to say on arrival back at Pax we chilled out for the rest of the day, and birded from the veranda. I mentioned the raptor ridge earlier - during our stay this produced both vultures, Zone-tailed Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk, Double-toothed Kite, White Hawk, Grey-headed Kite, and Bat Falcon. I also mentioned the hummer feeders - Copper-rumped, Rufous-breasted Hermit, White-necked Jacobin, Black-throated Mango, Tufted Coquette, Blue-chinned Sapphire, White-chested Emerald and Long-billed Starthroat. We also saw other species on the other days - Green and Little Hermits.

On 22nd we moved on to the Asa Wright centre. This is located in the next valley from Pax and is just off the Blanchisseuse Road, at higher elevation. It is within a densely forested valley and has a number of it's own trails and on-site guides. The speciality here is the Oilbird. This is the only nocturnal fruit eating bird in the world, and is so-named because the young, which grow exceedingly fat and much bigger than the adults, are rich in oils from the palm fruits which are preferred by the adults, and were taken from the nests by the original inhabitants and boiled down to make oil for cooking and lighting. They are now fully protected and the Dunstan caves at Asa Wright are the only ones where visiting is permitted. The centre is similar to Pax with a veranda and hummer feeders, and on the trails we visited the leks of Golden-headed and White-bearded Mannakins and also the amazing Bearded Bellbird whose very loud ringing call sounds just like a hammer hitting an anvil. Other new species here were Blue-headed Parrot, Blue-crowned Motmot, Channel-billed Toucan, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Chestnut Woodpecker, Lineated Woodpecker [a huge beast!], Great Antshrikes, Grey-throated Leaf-tosser [very skulky], Forest Elaenia [a flycatcher], Black-tailed Tityra, Common Black Hawk and Red-crowned Ant-tanager, and at the feeders, Purple-, Green- and Red-legged Honeycreepers.

On 25th we then took the internal flight to Tobago [20 mins] where we were met and taxied to the other end of the island, to Blue Waters Inn, where we met our guide Newton George. Anne & I had met him at the Birdfair in Rutland the previous August and booked his services. He is an ex-ranger and is very knowledgeable and good company.

Green Honeycreeper



Purple Honeycreeper



On 26th we visited various sites around the north end of the island, including the Gilpin Trace, a well known track through the high forest. The specialities here are White-tailed Sabrewing, a hummer found only on Tobago and not Trinidad and also Blue-backed Mannakin again only on Tobago. The males of the latter like all Mannakins, have an elaborate lekking dance, which we were able to see. He found a nest of the Sabrewing - what an amazing structure - a delicate basket of spiders webs and fine strands attached to a single leaf. Broad-winged Hawk was a new raptor, and other new species included Ruby Topaz Hummingbird [what a stunner], Olivaceous Woodcreeper, Grey Kingbird, White-winged Becard, Yellow-legged Thrush, Chivi Vireo, Scrub Greenlet, Black-faced Grassquit, and Red-crowned Woodpecker.

The next day we took a boat over to Little Tobago island, just a 15 minute trip. This uninhabited island has nesting Red-billed Tropicbirds, stunning in flight with their long cord-like tails, constantly harassed by Magnificent Frigatebirds, which often grab hold of the long tails and force the Tropicbirds down into the water to make them disgorge any food they may be carrying. Hence quite a significant number of Tropicbirds have broken off tails. Also nesting are many Brown Boobies, and a few pairs of Red-footed Booby. A stunner was a roosting White-tailed Nightjar right next to the path, allowing close-up photos. We were very lucky as there was a big swell the following two days which prevented transfers across to the island.

Red-billed Tropicbird



On the final day Newton took us to the south end of the island, firstly to Bon Accord sewage lagoons where we found Least Grebe and Pied-billed Grebe, 8 heron species, Masked Duck, Anhinga, Black-bellied Whistling-duck, White-cheeked Pintail and Eared Dove and a good selection of waders. A visit to the 'Hilton Grounds', part of a large hotel and luxury housing development near mangroves, gave us a very close Mangrove Cuckoo and a Masked Duck with young. We then had our picnic lunch at Grafton Bird sanctuary which produced more forest species and a new bird in the form of a Northern White-fringed Antwren [again not found on Trinidad]. Finally we visited Arnos Vale Adventure Farm, which although sounding a bit 'twee' is a must-do. Basically a private house where the owner has made a nature trail through his large natural garden and has a terrace with a huge arrays of feeders, where you sit in easy chairs with a fruit punch and watch endless streams of hummers coming to feed at arms length. Stunning. Also numerous at feeders at all three of our locations were the ubiquitous Bannanaquits, diminutive black and yellow birds with a white supercilium and curved bill that will pinch crumbs off your plate given the chance. Talking of birds scavenging, the most bizarre sight comprised Turnstones taking titbits off the tables, often whilst still occupied, at Blue Waters Inn!

There were so many other colourful species we saw, including the wonderful little Trinidad and Violaceous Euphonias and endless species of highly coloured Tanagers, and the 4 Kingfishers [Ringed, Belted, Green and American Pygmy]. And of course you can't forget the Rufous-vented Chachalacas on Tobago waking you up every morning with their harsh chachalacachachalacalaca calls!

Trip total : 228 species

All in all a great location if you want a taste of South American tropical birds, in a compact area. The islands lie just a few km off the NE coast of Venezuela.

John Wilson