



# The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



www.asawright.org

Tel: (868) 667-5162 Email: asaright@tstt.net.tt

JANUARY 2010



Harold and Lisa Wickham, one of the three judges.



Harold and Cindy.

## Our Harold Diaz Leads Photography Contest

Resident Guide Harold Diaz celebrated his success in the recently completed EOG Amateur Bird Photography Competition on December 15, 2009. Harold, a long-time lover/conservator of nature, has within recent years pursued his interest in the photography of native wildlife, especially birds regularly featured in many of the Centre's publications including this monthly newsletter. His combined interest in nature and photography has been recognised through his accomplishment of winning six out of the twelve positions in the competition.

For his entire life Harold lived within the beautiful rainforest of Aripo Village (much like that which exists at the Centre), and recently developed an interest in and talent for capturing the brilliance of many resident species of wildlife, particularly the bird life in the northern range. Most of his photos display each animal's true character, often illustrating its behaviour and the multifaceted colours.

This is the second annual competition put on by EOG Resources, a multinational oil and natural gas company with offshore natural gas investments in Trinidad and Tobago. The EOG Amateur Bird Photography Competition emphasises the company's commitment to the promotion and preservation of Trinidad and Tobago's flora and fauna, while acknowledging and rewarding the photographic talents of local enthusiasts.

All 12 award-winning photographs are images of native birds. Of these six were taken by Harold. Each of the 12 photos is now featured in the EOG Resources 2010 Calendar. It is a beautiful collection of some of Trinidad and Tobago's birds with corresponding profiles on each winning photographer.

The Board, Management and Staff of the Asa Wright Nature Centre congratulate Harold Diaz on his success and encourage him in his future pursuits in wildlife photography. He has done us proud!



**CRESTED OROPENDOLA**  
(*Psarocolius decumanus*)

The Crested Oropendola, also called the Yellow-Tailed Cornbird and Weaver Bird, is a well-known feature at the Centre and is distributed throughout valleys of the northern range. It is easily recognised by its striking yellow tail and signature courtship display in which the male bows over on a branch while shaking its bright yellow tail in the air, fanning its wings and vocalising an unmelodic song, all designed to impress the female. Both male and female birds look alike with black bodies, chestnut abdomens, blue eyes and yellow tails. The male birds, however, are much larger, ranging from 17-20 inches and have a narrow black crest; the

females are 13 inches, duller and lack the crest.

This bird is a member of the family American Orioles (Ictaridae), comprising varied groups including Cowbirds, Caciques, Grakles and Blackbirds. While each group appears dissimilar to the others, they all have the characteristic long conical bill. Many relatives share the skill of intricately weaving hanging nests, although the Oropendolas are further distinguished by their much larger nests, shaped like a long teardrop. Nesting birds are also easily recognised by their nest-building which can be seen between January and March on emergent trees, particularly

Mountain Immortelle trees. During the nesting season, inhabited trees are filled with these giant nests attached to most of the tree's branches and reminiscent of strange fruits. Nesting has started at the Centre and usually continues through to the end of April.

These large voracious omnivores regularly visit the feeders, chasing away other birds and clearing the trays of bread and fruit. Looking out from the main verandah at Asa Wright, one can see nests being constructed on the adjacent Mountain Immortelle tree, which is also now in bloom.

*Come take a look!*

**The Management & Staff of the Asa Wright Nature Centre wishes everyone a Happy & Prosperous New Year**

# Another Successful Christmas Bird Count

December 28, 2009 was very productive day, with no rain, and clear skies encountered for most areas. A total of 57 participants in seven initial groups were engaged in the field from 5.45 a.m. to 9.00 p.m.

A total of 178 species representing 5,589 individuals were recorded on the count.

The Asa Wright Nature Centre wishes to thank all participants for making the Christmas Bird Count another successful one and we look forward to your continued participation and generous assistance in future counts.

The table below gives the species count by area.

Areas	No. of Species
A – Wallerfield/ Arena	110
B – Las Lapas	79
C – Caroni Swamp/Plains	50
D – Caura	72
E – Lopinot	52
F – Asa Wright	66
G – Maracas Valley	55
H – La Laja (am only)	52
I – Aripo Livestock (Night Birding)	07

Some highlights of the count were:

- The return of the Blue Capped Tanagers (last recorded in 1984) to the CBC
- Low numbers of Cattle Egrets (104)
- A Cooi Heron in Livestock Farm
- No Gallinules in this count
- Grassland Yellow Finches seem to be doing well in Livestock Farm area
- No Piratic Flycatchers in this count
- Manakin and Honeycreeper numbers are up again for this count

Access to eTeck park remains prohibited, hence the low numbers of Red-Bellied Macaws. Somewhat low species numbers for the Asa Wright Nature Centre grounds. No p.m. session was done for La Laja.



## Simla gets a breath of *fresh* air

On December 5, 2009, the William Beebe Tropical Research Station, also called Simla\*, opened its doors to over a dozen young adults from various local academic institutions. Participants included students of Arima North Secondary, UWI, SBCS and Valsayn Teachers' College.

The exercise titled A BREATH OF FRESH AIR was aimed at increasing local awareness and interest in research at Simla. As a globally recognised field station, Simla has made significant contribution to the field of natural science over the past 60 years, while surmounting considerable challenges.

A participative approach, facilitated by manageable group size, was used for both the field research and the volunteer exercise. With limited water, volunteers met the challenge of the first exercise which involved general cleaning of the main building. Members of the FIBR (Foundations in Integrative Biological Research) Guppy Research Project of the University of California, Riverside then held the undivided attention of the volunteers as they walked them through their evolutionary studies of freshwater fish, *Poecilia reticulata* (the Trinidad guppy).

Many students admitted to having been totally unaware of Simla's existence or contribution to conservation through research. What was even more encouraging was the commitment made by participants to continue to volunteer their time

and effort for the advancement of research and the wise management of the natural environment by locals. To see where it all began, participants made their way four miles northward along the Arima-Blanchisseuse road. Their destination: Asa Wright Nature Centre's parent holding, Springhill Estate, the ideal location to strategise on the way forward.

At Asa Wright we look forward to strengthened collaboration between all supporting institutions and their anticipated success.

\*Simla in the Arima Valley was named by Dr. William Beebe after the Simla Mountains in the Himalayas, once home to this famed naturalist.

