



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



www.asawright.org

Tel: (868) 667-5162

Email: asaright@tstt.net.tt

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The Forest Sings Again



When we suffered that long dry spell, and the forests in the valley below were burning every day, and through the nights, all of the songs of the forests dried up as well.

If you wanted to hear the birds sing, or the frogs chirping or croaking, you needed to walk down to the lower end of the Bamboo Valley Trail, where it crosses the stream, to hear the forest sing, or whisper to you. Back then, a walk along the driveway was a walk in silence, as the dry heat chased every little animal down to the places where water still trickled down the valley. Even the many little musical streams which cross under the road had dried up and become silent.

But then the *Cicadas* began their “song” – that intense shrieking monotone which we claim is a call for the rains. And the rains soon followed – gently at first, just to cool the leaves in the canopies, the drops hardly reaching the crackling dry leaves underfoot.

And with this cooling, our little frogs began to move closer to the buildings and the road, and brought their songs with them. The birds too came out, to shake their feathers in the raindrops, and sing lustily from every perch. As the Hog Plum trees began to flower, you could hear the background humming of the bees high in the canopies.

And then the little streams themselves

began to flow again, and a walk along the driveway provided lovely little melodies in stereo as the notes upstream complemented the downstream beat.

And having kissed the hilltops with their cooling breath, the clouds come larger now, literally pouring over the Guanapo Ridge, and pouring sheets of rain into the valley, with a roar as loud as an overhead jet plane, hide the hills from view. This too soon passes, and the birds sing again, the forest slowly shakes itself dry, and the little streams rise in a crescendo of crashing water and chirping frogs.

The Rain Forest has returned to us.

BLUE CROWNED MOT MOT (*Momotus momota*)



A “must see” bird for visitors to the Asa Wright Nature Centre is the Blue Crowned Mot Mot. This special bird is the only native and the most widespread species of a peculiar nine-member family of Neotropical birds, well distributed throughout Central and South America. Members of this Mot Mot family are particularly known for the unique feathered racquet shapes at the end of their tails. This feature is the physiological signature of all nine species, visible among adult birds as the barbs along the lower tail naturally drop off. This tail feature can easily be used to distinguish them from other birds like Kingfishers and Todies to which they are related.

This is merely one of several peculiarities of Mot Mots which are possibly so named because of the simple two note vocalisation of our native species. These features, along with their habit of living/nesting in burrows which they carve or occupy from vacant holes left by mammals (some of which occur along banks of the aptly named “Mot Mot Trail”) add to their special characteristics.

Persons keen on seeing the Blue Crowned Mot Mot have a very good chance during visits to the Centre, especially during the early morning and late afternoon periods, while sitting on the Verandah or on forest walks where Mot Mots may be seen sitting quietly within the forest understory. On such sightings the Mot Mot may also be observed flying between its perch and skilfully plucking berry-type fruits off trees or hawking for invertebrates. On odd occasions the Blue Crowned Mot Mot has also been observed attacking other birds’ nests and even eating small vertebrates like lizards and small snakes.

Many visiting wildlife photographers are constantly on the lookout for Mot Mots which make a brilliant photograph in any light, so much so that it adorns our Trinidad and Tobago five dollar bill; a clear indication of its popularity. Want to see what all the hype is about?

COME VISIT US AT THE CENTRE!

Signs of Hope from Quarry Meetings

While no real commitments were given by the participants, there was a sense of hope emanating from the meeting, in that for the first time, many government officers had seen the destruction through the eyes of those who care about the environment.

Early in May, the Asa Wright Nature Centre hosted a meeting with quarrying interests in the valley, concerned residents and members of government agencies involved in, or impacted by, quarrying.

The meeting was an extension of meetings between the four quarry operators in Verdant Vale, the residents of the valley communities, Asa Wright and the Ministry of Energy, Mining Division. These meetings had been ongoing for almost two years and were normally hosted by National Quarries Ltd, the government-owned, largest quarry in the valley. Asa Wright and the community have been pressing for the quarry operations to be brought under "best practice" in order to reduce dust, water and noise pollution, destruction of the environment and biodiversity and meaningful restoration to played out areas.

Asa Wright Chairman Dr. Carol James had declared the Centre's frustration about the lack of any progress being made at these meetings, and had invited the Government Ministers of Energy and Housing, Planning & the



Environment to attend a meeting, to be held at the Centre. While the Ministers did not attend, several technical level government officers were present. These included officers from the Ministry of Energy, Land Use Division of the Ministry of Planning, Forestry Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, and representatives from the Environmental Management Authority.

Dr. James gave a presentation showing the degradation of the valley resulting from the dynamiting and bulldozing of the forests. All of the participants who subsequently addressed the meeting declared their



alarm at the extent of the environmental damage they had seen being done in the valley.

While no real commitments were given by the participants, there was a sense of hope emanating from the meeting, in that for the first time, many government officers had seen the destruction through the eyes of those who care about the environment. This could be the first actual step forward in having government and the quarrying industry realise that they must operate in a far more responsible manner.

The meeting will re-convene, at Spring Hill, on June 30th.

Low-Season Specials Begin

May 1st of each year is the official beginning of our low season, a period when room occupancy is below 30 per cent, with fewer guests and shorter lengths of stay. At the Centre this period extends through to October 31st. It is also a time when overnight guests benefit from reduced room rates and discounts. Discounts are up to 40 per cent for non-residents compared to the high season rates. Children are also allowed accommodation during this period with a

fixed child rate of US\$50/TT\$300 for kids ages three to six. Children younger than three are totally FREE.

Also resuming this low season, the Centre will be offering local residents special packages including "Pay for one double room and get another double room FREE" (meals not included) and "Pay for three nights get an additional night FREE." Both these Special Low Season Packages have been reactivated and all residents are invited to take

advantage.

All room rates are inclusive of all buffet meals (except where specified as not included), service charges, taxes and guided tours. For guests staying more than three nights, a complimentary guided tour to the unique Oilbird Cave is offered.

For more information on accommodation, contact asaright@tstt.net.tt or call (868) 667-4655 for reservations.