



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



www.asawright.org

Tel: (868) 667-4655 Email: asaright@tstt.net.tt

OCTOBER 2011

You feel a sense of disorientation as you enter the patio garden of Yerette, at the home of Theo and Gloria Ferguson, in Maracas St. Joseph.

The hundreds, maybe thousands, of hummingbirds which swarm around you, like jewels dancing in the sunshine, make you feel that you have walked into a swarm of bees!

The Fergusons, and Theo's magnificent bird photography, are well known to us at Spring Hill. He launched his collection – "The Experience" – at the Main House in 2009 and his work hung on the walls of "De Bird Nest" dining room for several months. They have also shared the illustrated lecture series "Hummingbirds – Fragments of the Rainbow" with our guests on many beautiful evenings.

But the wonderful experience of sharing photographs was obviously not enough for the husband and wife team. The couple have since decided to "bring

Dancing Jewels in the Sun



Male Tufted Coquette
Photo by Dr Theo Ferguson

it live" and by the judicious selection of flowering shrubbery and bird feeders, hundreds of "Fragments of the Rainbow" now visit their garden.

There are seventeen species of hummingbirds in Trinidad and Tobago. Theo has seen and photographed thirteen of these species in his garden. This is astonishing given the fact that some of these species, such as the Green-throated Mango, "do not belong" there.

After enjoying the thrill of walking among swarms of feeding hummingbirds, you are invited to view a video show of Theo's photographs of these beautiful little creatures.

The only words one can use to describe the experience is "you have visit and discover for yourself". The trip to Yerette is now included among Asa Wright's external tours. Just ask at the Front Desk.

THE GREEN HONEYCREEPER

(*Chlorophanes spiza*)

The Green Honeycreeper is common but far from ordinary. Numerous at the feeders at the Asa Wright Nature Centre and found from southern Mexico to Brazil, the Green Honeycreeper echoes the beauty of a turquoise sea. Its beauty is no surprise since it belongs to the Tanager (*Thraupidae*) family which boasts some of the most gorgeous small birds in the world.

The male Green Honeycreeper has turquoise plumage and appears to wear a black mask while the female has grass green coloured plumage. A main characteristic of this species is the sharp, slightly decurved bill. Both have yellow on the lower part of the beak, the male's beak being brighter yellow than that of the female. This bird measures 5.5 inches and makes high-pitched "chips". The song however is not distinctive. It is as though this bird doesn't



Photo by Norm Skliar

need much sound as it can rely on its dazzling feathers to garner attention from other animals. This certainly serves to attract humans.

As the name Honeycreeper suggests, this bird has a sweet tooth, er, beak. It eats fruit, sips nectar and less often, forages for insects. It particularly likes the berries of *Miconia spp.* and *Trema micrantha*. Green

Honeycreepers are forest-dwellers and are most common in humid forests at low to middle elevations. They often frequent the canopy of the forest.

This Tanager breeds from May to July and lays a clutch of two eggs. Eggs are white with a circle of brown spots at the wider end. This bird can be found in small groups mostly made of other Tanagers and Honeycreepers.

Come to the Asa Wright Nature Centre and let the Green Honeycreeper awaken your sense of wonder. –J.L. Ryan

References:

French, Richard. 1991. *A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*. Hilty, Steven L. 2003. *Birds of Venezuela*. http://neotropical.birds.cornell.edu/portal/species/overview?p_p_spp=615276



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Deforestation Linked to Landslides

The hills are alive but not with the sound of music. Sadly we refer to the fact that major landslips are already in motion around the five-mile mark of the Arima Blanchisseuse Road. For those of you who know the area well, you will be aware that these landslips are occurring along the roadway as it winds its way through the christophene farm.

We have always known that when the christophene farmer cleared the forest trees to plant the hanging vines, it was only a matter of time before the hills came sliding down. Appeals and complaints fell upon deaf ears and now the whole area has become “fluid” and is creeping across the roadway from above. What is frightening is the fact that the slippage is occurring below the road which will affect communities in Blanchisseuse,

Morne la Croix and Brasso Seco, and of course, the Asa Wright Nature Centre.

Our country does not yet accept the connection between deforestation and landslips or floods, and therefore almost anyone can denude a hillside for quarrying, buildings or farming. It seems there is no working authority in the land which can prevent this, except, maybe, public outcry. We urge our concerned citizens to speak out against all hillside deforestation and really hope we do not need to see the Arima Blanchisseuse Road closed for months to prove what all should already know.

We hope and pray for a minimum of rain for the rest of the year, in the hope that our only route to the outside remains open.



Ocelot on the Prowl?

It has been a long time since we have seen an ocelot (*Leopardus pardalis*) or “tiger cat” at Spring Hill. But before you get excited, we have not sighted one, at least, not yet. However, we did spot the footprints of what appeared to be a large ocelot along the Bamboo Valley Trail on Thursday 27th October.

Field workers had cutlashed and raked the trail, in the vicinity of the old hydro generator, at around 1pm. But a walker on the trail at about 4.30pm spotted clean paw-prints on the

trail, which means the cat passed there in the early afternoon. It had come down the eastern slope of the Bamboo Valley Trail, passed the old generator, crossed the bridge at the lower pool and started up the western slope of the trail before the tracks were lost. The ocelot walked at least one hundred metres along the trail, within a couple of hours of it being cleared.

Hopefully, it will soon be recorded as a live sighting!