



# The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE

www.asawright.org

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

AUGUST 2011

## Another Great Tree Falls

When a large tree falls in our forest, a huge void is left, and the space begins to fill with lesser growth, and it takes decades before that tree is replaced by one dominant tree that will finally push through the lesser growth and become one of the major trees in our forest.

The recent passing of Dr. Julian "Jake" Kenny has created a similar void in our environment and among the people who work for conservation and preservation of our wilderness areas. Sadly, his death comes on the heels of the recent passing of Scholasticus "Schol" Pyke and Richard french, both early board members of the Asa Wright Nature Centre.

Richard french was a founding member of the Asa Wright Nature Centre, and served as our President during 1970 and 1971. He died in May last year and his passing was recorded in a special edition of the *Bellbird*. Schol Pyke passed in March this year. He



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had served on the Centre's Board from 1972 to 1990 and as an Honorary Board Member from 1993 to 2007.

Julian Kenny was a tremendous friend of the environment of Trinidad and Tobago. As a professor of zoology at UWI, author of works on our biodiversity, noted newspaper columnist and an Independent Senator, he was an activist for the conservation of our natural environment. Strong in his convictions, he resigned as Chairman of the Environmental Management Authority six months after his appointment because he was unable to persuade government to apply their promised environmental controls on the quarrying industry.

Jake's passing, coming on the heels of the losses of Richard french and "Schol" Pyke, creates a huge void in the environmental community. But all, especially Jake, were mentors of our young, so we wait to see the next large tree which will grow to take their places.

### Common Potoo (*Nyctibius griseus*)

Atop a tree stump, amid the forest trees, under the dark sky sits the Common Potoo. The orange reflection of its eyes pierces the night as it sallies for its meal; a large insect, or a few.

During the day, as the Potoo sleeps, spotting it is a struggle. This is because of its penchant for perching on tree branches, its brown feathers with spots of grey and black, expertly camouflaging with the bark of the tree. Its call, however, usually made at night, sets it apart from other avian species. A sombre set of musical notes, descending in both scale and volume, will announce that the Potoo is near.

As would be expected by the executor of such a mournful call, this bird, locally called the Poor-me-one, is solitary. It nests in depressions in tree stubs or broken branches and lays one egg that is white with lilac spots. The bird has large eyes

and a large mouth. It does in fact resemble a nightjar except for its vertical perching posture, larger size and the absence of rictal bristles. The Common Potoo has an average wing span of ten inches.

The Nyctibiidae (Potoo) family is restricted to the Neotropics, namely Latin America, Trinidad and Tobago and the Greater Antilles. In Trinidad and Tobago the Common Potoo can be found from savannahs to swamps, from lowland forests to cocoa estates and sure enough, at the Asa Wright Nature Centre.

—J.L. Ryan

#### References:

french, Richard. 1991. *A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*.  
Hilty, Steven L. 2003. *Birds of Venezuela*.



M.K. Kavishankar (<http://myrambles.net>)

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Bernadette speaking to her group in the Mango Room, with CEO Veronica Wallace paying close attention.  
*Photo courtesy Earth Expeditions*

## EARTH EXPEDITIONS Returns to Asa Wright

Bernadette Plair is a Trinidadian biologist who is now based in Cincinnati. She is the Neo-Tropical Conservation Manager at the Center for Conservation and Research of Endangered Wildlife (CREW) at the Cincinnati Zoo. Bernadette has devoted her life to the conservation of T&T's wildlife, and organised the reintroduction of the Blue and Gold Macaw to the Nariva Swamp. She has also worked for the preservation of our Leatherback Turtles and Manatees.

Earth Expeditions is a programme of the Cincinnati

Zoo and Miami University, in partnership with Project Dragonfly, to conduct in-the-field classes for biology students. Bernadette has been bringing groups of such students to T&T for several years now, and Earth Expeditions returned in July for ten days, four of which were spent at Spring Hill. Visits were made to Nariva and Caroni swamps, Matura Bay, where they saw some of the last-arriving Leatherbacks, and of course Dunstan's Cave to see our Oilbirds.

We are grateful to Bernadette for the work



Bernadette Plair (right) with Lodge Manager Ann Sealey.

she is doing, and especially that she includes the centre for field trips, and for study sessions in the Mango Room, in her itinerary.

We look forward to the continuing visits of Earth Expeditions.



Macajuel partly camouflaged in dried branches.  
*Photos Kenneth Fournillier*

## Unusual Visitor to Spring Hill

We had not seen a large macajuel (Boa Constrictor) in the wild at the Centre for some time. Then this one appeared, on the roadway down to the Eckelberry Cottages, in early August. It seems to have taken up brief accommodation in the pile of drying leaves, and was there to change its skin, which is why its eyes appear hooded in the picture. Maybe it was attracted by the many almost tame agoutis around! It is about three metres (ten feet) long.



**Please note the Centre is closed for maintenance until  
Friday 16th September**