



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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MARCH 2012

THE CHALLENGE TO SAVE THE HILLS

All the friends of the Asa Wright Nature Centre (AWNC) are aware of the quarrying activities down the valley at Verdant Vale. The four limestone quarries there create massive scars in the forested hillsides. We continue to lobby for better operating procedures and controls on the quarries, in order to minimise their impact on the environment. In one small way we were spared having to gaze into the sores from our verandah. There is a ridge and a line of trees which kept most of the operations hidden from our view.

But that changed early in March. All of a sudden, National Quarries Company Limited (NQL), the Government-owned quarry, sent equipment over the ridge, and began bulldozing a large swathe of hillside, in full view of our verandah. We could even hear the sound of the tractors!

Chairman Dr. Judith Gobin immediately sent a letter to the Minister of Planning and Development, Dr. Bhoë Tawarie, asking who, if anyone, had given NQL permission to expand their operations over the ridge. Others immediately wrote the media, and sent copies to relevant government ministers. All of these letters were posted on Facebook, and a massive outcry was raised against the



*Guardians of Mother Earth – AWNC CEO Veronica Simon-Wallace, Chairman Dr. Judith Gobin, Former Chairman Dr. Carol James, (in front of mural painted by AWNC's Community Outreach Officer Kenneth Fournillier
Photo by Kenneth Fournillier*

expanded quarrying.

The reaction from the Government was immediate, and surprising, but warmly welcomed. The Minister of Energy and Energy Affairs, Senator Kevin Ramnarine called immediately to ask if he could visit on Friday 9th March to see the problem. Chairman Gobin and former Chair Dr. Carol James both came up to Spring Hill to meet the Minister and his entourage, which included officials of NQL. The Senator observed the situation from the verandah, and listened to the concerns of Asa Wright. He also heard the arguments from NQL for the expansion. Other government ministers, including Housing and the Environment

Minister Dr. Roodal Moonilal, Works and Infrastructure Minister Jack Warner, and Dr Bhoë Tawarie also expressed their support for Asa Wright's position.

AWNC held a media conference in the verandah on Monday 12th March. Members of the media saw the destruction of the forest on the mountainside, and learned of the threats to biodiversity, future water supplies and the possibility of guests not wanting to visit in the future.

The media carried the story and our concerns through the week which followed.

On Tuesday 13th March, Dr. Gobin was a guest on CNC3 TV's Morning programme, where she outlined AWNC's concerns to the nation. Later that day the Government announced that NQL had been instructed to cease the expansion, return to their original area, and to begin a re-planting exercise to replace the trees felled. But more than this. They announced that the "control" of quarrying nationwide would revert to the Environmental Management Authority (EMA), from where it had been moved some four years earlier.

This meant that the overview of all quarrying operations would be conducted by the EMA, in the Ministry of the Environment, and not the Ministry of Energy and Energy Affairs. This move has received the support of all environmental groups.



Dr. Carol James, Veronica Simon-Wallace, Minister of Energy Senator Kevin Ramnarine, Ag. PS Mr. Richard Oliver, Dr. Judith Gobin, Ag. Director of Minerals Mr. Monty Beharry. Photo by Atkin Isaac



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DR. GOBIN IN MAJOR ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY CHANGE

Shortly after the Government announced a freeze on NQL's expansion and the proposed re-planting of trees, AWNC was invited by the Minister of Housing and the Environment, Dr. Roodal Moonilal, to attend a private "round table" discussion on quarrying and the environment. This was followed by a public signing of a document restoring quarry controls to the Environmental Management Authority (EMA).

Both events were held at the Hyatt Regency Hotel on Monday 19th March. The round table discussion was hosted by Dr. Moonilal and Energy Minister Kevin Ramnarine. Other participants included the EMA, Council of Presidents' of the Environment (COPE), Trini Eco Warriors, Forestry Division, and quarrying interests, as well as Dr. Judith Gobin for AWNC.

Each group was given a hearing by the Ministers, and most spoke of the need to have better controls on quarrying, and



Front row--Senator Kevin Ramnarine, Minister of Housing & Environment Dr. Roodal Moonilal, Chairman of EMA Kelvin Ramnath. Back row: Dr. Judith Gobin, Chairman NQL Mr. Mitra Ramkhelawan, EMA CEO Dr. Joth Singh, Head Legal Unit Ministry H&E Mrs Angela Renaud-Lewis.

the need to minimise quarrying of the Northern Range. While the quarrying interests supported their activities, Dr. Gobin was firm in her statements about the potential damage done to our environment by quarrying activities and urged stronger controls.

The "round table" then moved into another room at the Hyatt to meet the

media and to witness the formal signing of the document to restore quarrying controls to the EMA. Dr. Gobin spoke at this event, and expressed the deepest gratitude of the AWNC and environmentalists for the recent decisions of the Government, and the overwhelming support received on this issue.

The AWNC anticipates urgent implementation of these landmark decisions by government to stem the unacceptable rate of degradation witnessed around the country from quarrying.

WHITE-NECKED THRUSH

(Turdus albicollis)

The White-necked Thrush is seldom seen in its mountain forest habitat. It ensconces itself in the nooks and crannies of the forest while still being clearly heard. It can also be likened to a blues singer for it whistles, a sad but melodious tune. Its song is one of the first to be heard on an early morning in our rainforest. The Thrush often calls from the undergrowth which it frequents.

Olive-brown feathers on the upperparts of the White-necked Thrush contrast with light grey feathers underneath it. This bird has a brown and white streaked upper throat and a clear white lower throat. The



Photo by Kenneth Fournillier

light grey colour of the belly fades to white at the bird's posterior. The White-necked Thrush measures eight inches and is found in Central and South America, in areas east of the Andes.

On a quiet walk through Springhill Estate the White-necked Thrush may be seen hopping along our trails and even perched on our hand rails. However, it hardly allows you get close to it. This Thrush eats fruit as well as invertebrates

from the ground. Its breeding season peaks between March and June.

Amid the rainforest, tracking down the White-necked Thrush can be both challenging and rewarding especially when one gets a peek of the bird, camouflaged among the foliage.

— J.L. Ryan

References:

- Hilty, Steven L. *Birds of Venezuela*. Princeton University Press. 2003.
- French, Richard. *Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*. Cornell University Press. 1991



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NEW SIGHTINGS: PECCARIES IN THE STREAM



Photos by Stephen Broadbridge

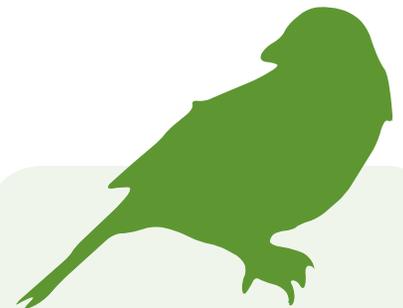
Recent visitors would have noticed, as you come down the driveway, a newly cleared area, through which the Arima River flows. This is being cleared to open the area for planting some big trees to create a high canopy over the stream. But it also brought some interesting “visitors”. One mid-morning in late March, gardener Ranbarran Bharath went to check the

trees he had planted, and met two collared peccaries (*Pecari tajacu*) in the stream! Known locally as Quenk, these two did not appear concerned at human presence, and walked slowly off through the bamboo.

Naturally we are all delighted at the increasing number of animal species being sighted at Spring Hill over the past few months.

OUR NEW LODGE MANAGER

Asa Wright welcomes a new Lodge Manager to Spring Hill! But we will tell you all about Janine AQUI, who came aboard just two weeks ago, in our April Bellbird.



WHAT'S THAT BIRD?

Have you seen a bird, or an animal, or a plant that you could not recognise, or were uncertain about? Well, send us your photograph, along with location, and your “guess”, and we will try to identify the species for you, and publish your question and our response here!

Email your question and pic to:

asawrightconsedu@gmail.com.



Dr Judith Gobin presents a bag of Asa Wright's finest coffee beans to Minister of Energy Senator Kevin Ramnarine during his official visit to the Centre in March. Photo by Atkin Isaac