



# The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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June 2014



## PLANTING TREES AS ENGINEERS

By Peter O'Connor

On your drive up to Asa Wright, you traverse a section of the road damaged and narrowed by landslips occurring below and above the road. All of these landslips occur along one portion of the road: the portion that runs through the christophene vines. The lesson to be learned is that when the trees are removed—for “development”, farming or quarrying—the hills will slip away. Trees support the hillsides by removing water from the soil and by their roots holding the hillsides together.

But even without man’s accelerating effect, our hillsides are slowly but constantly eroding and settling into the valleys and plains below. We see this at Spring Hill where our driveway runs alongside the Arima River for a couple of hundred yards, small cracks appear in the newly paved driveway. We needed a low cost means to support the riverbank below the driveway, and elected to use buttress-root forest trees to provide this support. The trees selected were Silk

Cotton, Cajuca, Crappo, Angelin and Olliviere, plus a mix of flowering and fruit trees to attract wildlife.

The first trees were planted in June with the help of our two ECIAF interns Samantha Chadee and Jimmy Ramlogan and supervised by our Rambarran Bharath. The trees were placed at the base of the embankment below the driveway, but far enough from the middle of the watercourse so as not to interrupt the river’s flow.

When these trees are grown—and be patient please, this is a long-term project—they should slow the settlement of the driveway.

But they will do something else. They will create a new, high-level canopy over the river, and the existing Balisier and other shrubbery will give way to a clear view downstream from the bridge, recreating what it may have looked like one hundred years ago

Our “Trees as Engineers” should perform their functional duty, as well as create an aesthetic and sustainable habitat for our wildlife.

You can come and check the results around 2044. Mark that in your diary!



*Mr. Bharath, Samantha and Jimmy planting trees.*

*Photos by Peter O'Connor*



# Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl

*(Glaucidium brasilianum)*

By Johanne Ryan

Owls have been the inspiration of many superstitious tales – those large eyes may spout fear in the heart of another man or beast. But this little owl, the Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl, looks harmless; one may even describe it as cute. However adorable it may appear to be, its hooting call has made it known as the 'Jumbie Bird'. In local parlance, a Jumbie is a spirit or ghost. The owl's call signals an impending death.

On the other hand, much to the delight of birders, this call is a useful tool for bird watching. Its sound can sometimes summon smaller birds out of their forest caches. On hearing its voice, the birds will join forces to the mob the owl. And what a distinctive call this bird has. It generally makes a series of short hoots of the same note. This note varies in pitch from D to F.

As with all owls, this one is carnivorous. Richard French writes that, in Trinidad, there have just been a few records of this owl taking small birds. The birds here seem to prefer insects and lizards. However, captive birds are known to feast on raw meat.

A whitish owl with brown streaks, this Pygmy-Owl is common in Trinidad where it can be found in forested areas, semi-open country and even suburban or urban areas in which there are trees. While it is active during both night and day, it is primarily nocturnal. As a member of the Strigidae family, this owl has a round head. It also lacks ear tufts. The 'Jumbie Bird' is only 15 cm, about the size of someone's hand.

Ferruginous Pygmy-Owls inhabit a range from south U.S.A. through Latin America to central Argentina. The subspecies *Glaucidium brasilianum phalaenoides*, however, is restricted to Trinidad. In Trinidad, breeding has been more



frequently recorded from March to April. The Pygmy-Owl usually nests in a tree cavity about 5 to 7 m above ground.

It is quite possible that you may have noticed this tiny creature in your neighbourhood. If not, listen for its hoot to let you know it's there!

*Photo by Ashley Grove*

*To find out more about Ashley Grove you can visit the website*

[www.experiencenature.co.uk](http://www.experiencenature.co.uk)

*References:*

*French, Richard. A Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago. Cornell University Press. 2012.*



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JUNE • PAGE 3

June 2014

## More on Our Interns

In June, Samantha Chadee and Jimmy Ramlogan, participated in their Field Training Programme at the Asa Wright Nature Centre. This component was part of the Diploma in Forestry at The Eastern Caribbean Institute of Agriculture and Forestry (ECIAF) of the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT).

For two weeks, our ECIAF interns were part of the day-to-day activities of the Centre. In addition to the tree-planting exercise, they were accompanied by our Naturalist Guides to learn guiding and interpretation. They did bird identification as well as other garden work and maintenance such as cutting new perches for the birds to allow them to perch closer to the verandah.

They also became acquainted with our Valley Schools Outreach Programme, participating in two sessions. The interns even got a night experience in while here.

Jimmy recounts that he gained many insights on the history of AWNC, culture and animals (e.g. birds). He was also grateful for the fine treatment that he received from the polite and understanding staff, as well as the opportunity to work in what he describes as a 'place of paradise in the hills'.

We were glad to host Samantha and Jimmy at Springhill and thank them for choosing Asa Wright for their internship. We wish them all the best in their future endeavours!

### YOUNG ENVIRONMENTALIST OF THE MONTH

If you think your child has done something helpful to preserve the environment, please feel free to share it with us. Either write a short story, or send a few pictures to [dinetienne44@gmail.com](mailto:dinetienne44@gmail.com)

He/she may be selected as our Young Environmentalist for the month! Once your child is featured in our monthly newsletter, he/she and two adults will be given a complimentary day visit to Asa Wright Nature Center, which includes viewing birds/animals on the verandah, a nature tour and use of the clear-water pool. Ages 5-16.

