



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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March 2015



The North Carolina State University group. Photo courtesy Beth Wright

NCSU Students Volunteer at the Centre

By Kimberly Chu Foon

In past Newsletters we've highlighted many volunteers who have come and gone at our Centre. This month marked the first time that we collaborated with Peacework, a Non-Profit organisation established in 1989 to foster creative collaboration in various countries alongside academic institutions, corporations, government agencies, civil society organisations, and community leaders. The Asa Wright Nature Centre (AWNC) was paired with a group of fourteen students

from North Carolina State University (NCSU) who were all part of the Goodnight Scholars Programme which aims to develop its scholars into leaders within the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and/or educational fields.

After much planning, the volunteers arrived in early March with a full list of activities ahead. We organised them into two teams alongside members of our maintenance staff Mr. Winston Rojas and Mr. Alan Rodriguez, both of whom the volunteers described as superheroes because they felt as if they could do

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Volunteers with gear in hand, build the nesting boxes for our Centre. Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon



The Step Builders! These were added to the Jacaranda Trail to allow for easier access and to prevent further erosion. Photo courtesy North Carolina State University



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AWNC partners with Peacework

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anything. On the first day, the group had, what seemed as an impossible task of transferring massive planks from the Main House to the Dunston's Oilbird Cave. Without any hesitation they mustered their strength to hoist the planks up and down towards the cave. It was in that moment that we knew we had a great team on our hands and we were positive that they could successfully complete any task we threw at them.

Over the four days the volunteers were able to complete many activities on our site. A brand new Dunston Cave platform was built for the viewing of the Oilbirds. Our trails also received an upgrade with the installation of new benches, safety railings on the Adventure trail, cleaning of trail signage, the creation of steps on the Jacaranda trail and the clearing of drainage on the Discovery trail. As part of our goal to create new habitat for some of our larger bird species, we also had the volunteers test their skills in carpentry and assist us in building 10 large nesting boxes. These will be placed on trees along the driveway in hopes to attract any species looking for a home. As education is



Let's paint some benches. Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon

also an important aspect of their work, the NCSU group developed and participated in activities for two of our visiting local school groups.

Towards the end of their stay, the volunteers ventured north to the nearby community of Brasso Seco where they participated in what would best be described as a very delicious activity. Chocolate tasting was the programme for the day and it was nothing short of yummy. Having tasted the chocolate bars myself, I can say with certainty that the Brasso Seco community has a fantastic product on their hands. The volunteers could not get enough, so much so that they ordered more to take back home.

They left us with a generous donation of a little more than US\$2,000.00 which covered all of the materials needed for their projects. It was sad to see them leave but here's to hoping that their visit can be a yearly one. Thanks go out to Beth Wright (Peacework), members of our maintenance, guides and conservation/education departments for all of the efforts put into this project.



The Dunston Cave Platform under construction. Photo courtesy North Carolina State University





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Common Green Iguana

(*Iguana iguana*)

By Johanne Ryan

You may pass a tree and not notice the Common Green Iguana sitting among the leaves. Its cryptic colouration has made it invisible – to you and other predators. This lizard also prefers to hang out in trees near water. Should a predator attack, it can dive underneath and use its expert swimming skills to escape.

But the Common Green Iguana is not always green. The largest males may be tan, gold or grey and breeding males range from bright orange to gold. The only Iguana found in Trinidad and Tobago, it can be identified by its blunt snout, dorsal crest and large pendulous dewlap. Males are bigger, have larger heads and longer spines on the vertebral crest. And as can be seen on the underside of each thigh, males have enlarged femoral pores.



A Common Green Iguana that was seen near the verandah recently.
Photo by Ann Sealey

The Common Green Iguana can be found in Central America, Southern Brazil and Paraguay. Here the reptile inhabits a variety of areas, forests and even urban gardens or parks, and are often found high in trees.

The Green Iguana is mainly herbivorous but juveniles may eat insects. Basking in the sun helps get their gut to the right temperature in order to aid digestion. The lizards themselves are on the menu for raptors, snakes, cats and even humans.

Sometimes referred to simply as a 'guana', the iguana mates at the beginning of the dry season when windy weather causes display perches to be exposed. At this time, males are more visible. Females build a burrow in which to lay their eggs.

Iguana iguana, the largest lizard in T&T, has special ecological roles. It is a seed disperser and like other reptiles, can be an indicator of environmental change.

References:

Murphy, John C. *Amphibians and Reptiles of Trinidad and Tobago*. 1997. Krieger Publishing Company.

Gingell, F. 2005. "Iguana iguana" (Online), *Animal Diversity Web*. Accessed March 24, 2015 at http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Iguana_iguana/

The Online Guide to the Animals of Trinidad and Tobago. http://sta.uwi.edu/fst/lifesciences/documents/Iguana_iguana.pdf

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

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 Centre, which includes viewing birds/animals on the verandah, a nature tour and use of the clearwater pool. Ages 5-16.





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Deep Forest Trekking

By Peter O'Connor

Over the Morne Bleu ridge above Asa Wright, there is a panorama of rolling forested hills stretching to the Caribbean Sea. To the east are forests encompassing the Paria and the Madamas watersheds – two rivers which flow out of the Northern Range down to the sea. The tiny village of Brasso Seco, and some isolated homes, sit in the Paria Valley, but the Madamas Valley is almost uninhabited – by humans.

These two valleys provide exciting, and sometimes testing, opportunities for hiking and camping. The forests, rivers, deep pools and beautiful waterfalls provide a true wilderness setting within reach of Asa Wright. While camping there is a special wilderness experience, day hikes can be almost as awesome.

I have been hiking and camping in these forests for forty years, first along the beautiful coastline, where the rivers meet the sea, and latterly, deep “inside”, in the almost sepulchral settings of huge trees and totally enclosed canopies. You can also do day hikes to beautiful waterfalls and pools in the rivers. And whether you spend one day or four in these settings, you come back out tested but exhilarated at all you have seen and experienced. A guide is recommended, and Carl Fitzjames of the Paria Brasso Seco Tourism Action Committee is the person to contact. Whether you plan on hiking or camping you need to know that these are quite testing experiences, and a reasonable level of fitness is required.

Early in March, believing that it was the dry season, five of us headed into the Mora Forests of the Paria Valley for four days of camping. There was no goal to be achieved, no special bird or beast we sought, it was just to lose ourselves metaphorically, for a while. But



'Camp Log' in a spot of sunlight.
Photo by Bunty O'Connor



▲ *Are we having fun yet?'*
Photo by Bunty O'Connor

◀ *Double River Waterfall a two hour hike each way.*
Photo by Peter O'Connor

the dry season suddenly disappeared, and we spent all of our stay in the rain, day and night.

We selected a campsite deep in the towering Mora, with one huge, blackened fallen trunk separating our “kitchen” from our hammocks. This trunk was our table, kitchen counter and bar. Although the weather was bleak, we were constantly serenaded by bellbirds, parrots, toucan and a variety of other songbirds. From this “Camp Log”, we trekked over the ridge into the Madamas watershed exploring tributaries which fed that river, returning to camp, where ever-resourceful Carl showed his ability to keep our fire going, and pot bubbling.

We departed on the fourth day, avoiding the steep ridges by walking in water down “Cabo Grande”. From the Paria River we set off on the three-hour walk along the Paria Brasso Seco Road – a trail through an awesomely beautiful forest – arriving at Brasso Seco just before nightfall – physically weary but triumphant.