



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



www.asawright.org Tel: (868) 667-4655 Email: asawright@tstt.net.tt

November 2015

Peter O'Connor – a Pillar of Asa Wright

By Johanne Ryan

Many may be familiar with Peter O'Connor as a writer in one of our local newspapers. But to guests and staff, he is a friend, dinnertime storyteller and has worked hard as our Projects Advisor since 2008. Peter has done a wide range of work here including, reforestation at Aripo, coffee and cocoa rehabilitation, general maintenance, and the "revival" of the Jonnie Fisk Project. He is also an avid hiker, and often takes an evening stroll on the trails, keeping his eye open for wildlife, maybe an Ocelot? We cannot forget his work on our newsletter! He was the head of the Bellbird team – writing, editing and gathering stories of the latest happenings at Asa Wright!

We at the Asa Wright Nature Centre would like to thank Peter O'Connor for his tireless service and we wish him all the best! We will all miss him and we hope he can pop in now and then to say hello.



Peter opens his gift Photo by Peg Abbot



Peter and some of our Board Members at the party AWNC held for him Photo by Ann Sealey

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 of 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.





The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



NOVEMBER • PAGE 2

November 2015



Beaming with Strength



Proud old beams

Photo by Johanne Ryan

By Peter O'Connor

Earlier this year, we strengthened the old concrete columns in the Richard French Natural History Museum. We needed to remove the ceiling in the room in order to get a full picture of what was hidden there, holding up the Old House.

All of the flooring joists (timbers which support the wooden floor) we exposed were axe-cut, "unfinished" lumber, with the axe scars still visible after 107 years! And the wood was untouched by termites or any form of damage, other than the "battle scars" of the axes used to form them.

But the real surprise was the two main beams upon which the floor joists rested. Two full logs, spanning about 18 feet across the middle of the room, had been hidden from sight for years. These were not squared-off timber beams; they

were two lengths of tree trunk which had been hoisted atop the columns all those years ago.

Each being slightly different, special on-site work was needed to create the new supports for these beams. This was done by Steel Structures Limited under the advice of Engineer, Darren Sirju of KS&P Ltd. We sincerely thank Tom Ali of Steel Structures and Darren Sirju for contributing their time and expertise to us as we resolved the original problem with the old columns.

And of course, when we installed the new ceiling into the room, we did it in such a way that our two rediscovered beams would be visible to all! We believe that there are no other such "tree-trunk" beams supporting a building in Trinidad and Tobago. We have not yet identified what trees these were but hope to tell you this in our next edition.

Unusual bird sightings

By Martyn Kenefick

At the Centre, Gray-throated Leaf-tossers are regularly being seen and heard along the entrance road. Also watched intermittently all month is a male Crimson-crested Woodpecker, the first to have been recorded on the estate. Other highlights found at the Centre during the month were a Yellow-legged Thrush seen along Discovery trail on 7th and an adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle soaring across the valley on the 11th.

Looking now at our external tours, a Rufous Crab-Hawk was found in coastal mangrove near Bush Bush and a Lesser Elaenia inside Nariva swamp were highlights of Dave's East Coast tour on November 9th. The following day, Mahase's dawn trip to Grande Riviere produced a scarce migrant Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Finally, on the 19th a group found the pair of Brown-throated Parakeets at their recent nest site in the Aripo Savannah.

Elsewhere in Trinidad during November, a Black and White Warbler favoured a patch of mangrove close to Carli Bay on the 7th; another Yellow-billed Cuckoo was seen to fly in off of the sea at Brickfields the following day.

Away from the coast, a Variegated Flycatcher was the highlight of a morning spent in the Aripo Agriculture Research Station on November 10th. Whilst in the Northern Range, an adult male Summer Tanager was found along Las Lapas trace on November 11th and a single adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle and a Black Hawk-Eagle were separately seen soaring over the higher reaches of the Blanchisseuse Road.

Over in Tobago, one of the Wilson's Phalaropes, first found back at the end of September, remains at Bon Accord sewage ponds at least until November 22nd and the following day, three Ring-necked Ducks appeared on the lakes within the Lowlands complex.





The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



NOVEMBER • PAGE 3

November 2015

Charlotteville Bioblitz 2015

By Mike G. Rutherford

Two years ago the second T&T Bioblitz was held at the Asa Wright Nature Centre, this year however the bioblitzers went a little further afield and conducted the first ever Tobago Bioblitz. The event was based in Charlotteville up in the north-east of Tobago and the Environmental Research Institute Charlotteville (ERIC) very generously acted as hosts. From the basecamp at the ERIC building over 120 participants started at noon on Saturday 24th October to survey for every living thing they could find. Teams headed out in boats to dive and to view the seabirds along the coast, they headed out on foot to climb Pigeon Peak and Flagstaff Hill to study the forest life and also out in trucks to survey the roadsides and streams.

The Sunday morning brought very heavy rain with thunder and lightning which put off the public from taking part in the organised walks and snorkeling but this cleared by around 10am and more and more people gathered at the basecamp to see the displays of plants and animals collected during the surveying. At noon the event finished and at 12:30 the final total was announced – 367 plants (including 23 algae), 30 fungus, 252 vertebrates (including 17 mammals, 75 birds, 27 reptiles, 13 amphibians and 120 fish), 319 invertebrates (including 32 crustaceans, 10 echinoderms, 53 corals, 4 sponges, 109 insects, 12 arachnids and 12 myriapods) and 4 others (bacteria) for a grand total of 972 species! This was the highest count yet for a T&T Bioblitz and after



The Bioblitzers Photo by E. Rutherford



Banded Coral Shrimp
Photo by Mike Rutherford

the event the number kept rising as specimens and photos were analysed more closely and it is possible that the count for the final report may well reach over 1000.

The highlights included several new species recorded in Tobago for the

first time. A Geoffroy's Hairy-legged Bat (*Anoura geoffroyi*) was caught in a mist net in Charlotteville, a Tiger Anole (*Anolis tigrinus*) was found on the trail to Pigeon Peak and a very rare and endangered Cerulean Warbler (*Dendroica cerulea*) was sighted on top of Flagstaff Hill. The diving team had the fun of passing through a small pod of dolphins when they were heading back to base and a Longsnout Seahorse (*Hippocampus reidi*) was one of the many amazing fish encountered during their dives. Camera traps picked up several animals including the nocturnal Crab-eating Raccoons (*Procyon cancrivorus*) and people also found the frog named after the village - the Charlotteville Litter Frog (*Pristimantis charlottevillensis*), and the newly discovered millipede *Pandirodesmus rutherfordi*, which

Continued on next page



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



NOVEMBER • PAGE 4

November 2015

From previous page



Red-crowned Woodpecker
Photo by Lawrence James

was first found in Charlotteville in 2012 and only named earlier this year.

The participants seemed to have a great time and at the end as usual everyone was keen to know where the next Bioblitz might take place and it was announced we would be heading to the dirtiest, toughest place yet – Port of Spain!

The event was organised by the University of the West Indies Zoology Museum, the Department of Life Sciences and the Trinidad & Tobago Field Naturalists' Club with help from the T&T Eco Divers Club and Trinibats and sponsorship by First Citizens and Atlantic.

Board Visit to Arena Reservoir



The Lake at Arena Photos by Peter O'Connor

By Peter O'Connor

Each year, following the AGM of Asa Wright's Board of Directors, our Directors are taken on a field trip to one of our country's many and amazing natural parks or settings. This year, we chose the Caroni Arena Dam situated in the Arena Forest in Central Trinidad. With the kind permission of the Water and Sewerage Authority's Public Education Centre staff, we organised our visit for Sunday 15th November.

This reservoir is the country's largest dam, spreading over some 1,700 acres. Although it is generally closed to the public, the grounds are beautifully maintained, with lawns rolling down from the surrounding forest to the water's edge. There are picnic areas built into the landscape and, especially for us, an interesting array of bird life for all to enjoy.

We enjoyed a beautiful day - fine weather, good food and excellent company between the forest and the deep green lake!



How Birders Look to Passersby – What do we see?



Webspinners

By Johanne Ryan

Oh, what a web they weave! Walking through the forest, did you notice a silk web on a tree trunk? Or another on a rock face? Hiding beneath those webs is the tiny webspinner. Webspinners have the unique adaptation of special glands in the front tarsi, or feet, allowing them to weave those silk 'homes' you may see. No other group of insects has silk-producing glands in the legs. Groups of webspinners rarely leave these silk galleries in their lifetime. Instead, they live in groups and expand their colony. Beneath the silk walls, females lay their eggs.

Webspinners can get about as long as the diameter of a Trinidad and Tobago 10 cent coin. Some do not even grow to be that size. The name of the order - Embiidina or Embioptera - originates from the Greek word 'embio' which means to have life. And they are a lively bunch, known to run backwards when disturbed. They feed on lichens and algae, an easy food source when you live on a tree trunk.

Females are wingless but live longer than the males. The winged males spend most of their life searching for a mate and die soon after they mature. After mating, females may lay in an established silken gallery or go off to start a new colony.

Embiids inhabit a variety of ecosystems including semi-arid regions. However, the greatest diversity of Embiids belongs to the tropics and subtropics.



A female, Antipaluria urichi, in Trinidad. This species has been filmed at the Nature Centre for a BBC Attenborough film on Life in the Undergrowth.

Photo by Clive Bowley

References:

<http://www.ento.csiro.au/education/insects/embioptera.html>

<http://entomology.osu.edu/bugdoc/Shetlar/462/462InsectOrders/Orders19.htm>

Busse et al (2015). The spinning apparatus of webspinners – functional-morphology, morphometrics and spinning behavior. Scientific Reports.

Edgerly, J (1994). Is Group Living and Antipredator Defense in a Facultatively Communal Webspinner (Embiidina: Clothodidae)? Journal of Insect Behaviour. 7 (2). 135-147.