



# The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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January 2016

## Unusual Sightings

By Martyn Kenefick

At the Centre, highlights included a female Summer Tanager along the Discovery trail on December 28th and, even more exciting, an immature Chestnut-sided Warbler found in trees at the top car park on December 29th, only the second one to be found here in the last 20 years. Two Spectacled Owls were heard close to the house, probably in the herb garden on the night of January 9th and three Blue-headed Parrots perched up to the west of the Main House on January 14th. An adult Black Hawk-Eagle put in several appearances soaring over the valley and adding even more colour, our Immortelle trees are now in full bloom and have enticed the first Red-legged Honeycreepers of the season.

The end of 2015 was extremely profitable for our external tours with a pair of Brown-throated Parakeets being found at Demerara Road on the 23rd during Roodal's and Charran's tour. Both an Ornate Hawk-Eagle and Blackpoll Warblers were the highlights of Mahase's tour in Brasso Seco on December 28th whilst Mukesh's group found a Mottled Owl on La Laja on the 30th. New Year's Day saw an Olive-striped Flycatcher, an uncommon and localised resident of higher elevation forest, found on Roodal's tour of the Blanchisseuse Road whilst Mahase's tours were a great success with a White-tailed Hawk



*The sub-adult, male Eurasian Wigeon seen in Tobago* Photo by Sataish Rampersad

over Nariva on December 30th, 3 Gray-necked Wood-Rails at Orange Valley and two Black-whiskered Vireos on the Blanchisseuse Road on December 31st. Throughout the period, the adult Rufous Crab-Hawk continued to please, showing from the Manzanilla-Mayaro Road.

Elsewhere in Trinidad, the first of the Dickcissels have begun to show with one at Penal on December 27th. On New Year's Eve a group of eight American Flamingos flew over a shallow lagoon inside Caroni Swamp. A survey of the late afternoon seabird roost at Brickfield produced an unprecedented number of Franklin's Gulls, an adult and five 1st winter birds. This gathering is unprecedented bearing in mind that only 16 birds have been cumulatively documented here in the last 20 years! Better yet, a flock of 18 Glossy Ibis were found close to Debe on January 9th. This is the largest ever documented group for T&T. A hike up El Tucuche on January 10th produced not only an Ornate Hawk-Eagle but also two Yellow-legged Thrush and, even better, single Blue-capped Tanager and Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush. On 12th January, two rather unseasonal Nacunda Nighthawks were found close to Brickfield. Traditionally, January is the month when Dickcissel numbers start to

build, although the magnificent sight of at least 17,000 birds leaving their roost along Rahamut trace early on the 17th was beyond expectations.

Again for extreme rarities, Bon Accord in Tobago stole the show with a drake Eurasian Wigeon (potentially the 1st for Trinidad and Tobago but subject to Rare Birds Committee assessment), three American Wigeons, and single female Green-winged Teal, whilst the American Coots and Glossy Ibis reported last month lingered on. Not content with superb waterbirds, three Cliff Swallows and a Bank Swallow hawked insects over the water's edge – and all that was on January 2nd. Intensive watching at this site in subsequent days added both Little Egret and Pied-billed Grebe to the list of noteworthy species. At the other end of the island, a Striped Owl perched up on utility wires close to Parlatuvier on the 16th and at least one other was found in trees in the L'Anse Fourmi area around the same time. Whilst resident in Tobago, this is still an extremely difficult bird to find. Finally, a Prothonotary Warbler was a particularly photogenic subject, seen from the mangrove boardwalk at Lowlands on the 22nd.



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## A Young Environmentalist



Ishaaq and his collection Photo courtesy S. Soobrattee

By Johanne Ryan

Many environmentally conscious adults do everything they can to preserve the environment – recycle, plant trees, refrain from littering. However, it is always heartening to see a young child do what he can to care for the environment. It shows adults that the future is in good hands. Six-year-old Ishaaq Soobrattee is a Second

Year student of the San Fernando T.M.L. Primary School who has a passion for the environment. He eagerly participates in the recycling drive at his home. He is always ready to collect and deliver plastic bottles to the collection point at the Naparima Girls' High School, where his mother works. We commend Ishaaq for his enthusiasm and wish him all the best in the future.

### YOUNG ENVIRONMENTALIST OF THE MONTH

If you think your child, aged 5-16, 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 [asawrightconsedu@gmail.com](mailto:asawrightconsedu@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 Centre, which includes viewing birds/animals on the verandah, a nature tour and use of the clear water pool.





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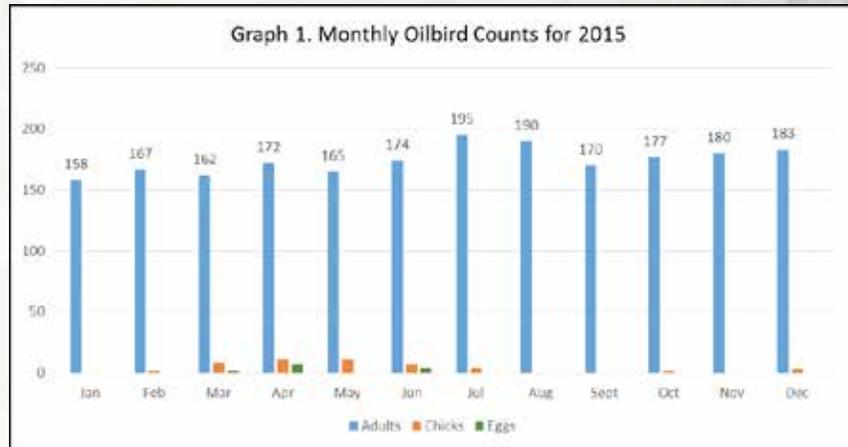
## Oilbird Data Collection at the Centre

By Kimberly Chu Foon

The Dunston Cave is one of the highlights at the Centre. The cave (which is actually a gorge) houses over one hundred Oilbirds which nest on ledges running along the walls of the gorge. These birds are quite unique and are the only fruit eating nocturnal birds capable of flight. Their importance has initiated a conservation effort at the Centre which has been ongoing for many years. One major part of that effort is the monitoring of the species to ensure that their population numbers remain stable.

Since 1969, counts have been done on a yearly basis but in 2003 efforts were intensified to conduct monthly counts. These counts (done by our Naturalist Guides), still continue to this day and have thus produced over 10 years' worth of valuable data. Graph 1 shows the results of counts done for the year 2015. As you can see, data is not only obtained for the adult birds but also for the chicks and eggs. Fluctuations in the adult populations can be due to the fact that Oilbirds may at times spend their day outside of the Cave.

The overall data for this year has shown relatively high numbers and a stable population that remains between 150 to 200 birds. Counts in the very early years were often under 50 birds so these current numbers are a good sign that our efforts have been productive.



The Oilbirds at Asa Wright

Photo by Harold Diaz



## Green Hermit (*Phaethornis guy*)

By Johanne Ryan

On our La Laja leg of the Christmas Bird Count 2015, led by AWNC Guide, Mukesh Ramdass, a call from the undergrowth revealed the Green Hermit. We were delighted to witness an intriguing display of its typical behaviour in the lek. The hummingbird perched on a twig, and bobbed its tail while making a loud 'waatch' with its red lower mandible in clear view. Individuals are said to chase each other in leks and so said – two others were seen chasing this male. Male Green Hermits gather in leks to sing daily, with their song perches located within metres of each other. So several males may reside in an area that is just a quarter of an acre.

Apart from the loud call, the Green Hermit normally makes a sharp squeak. It is Trinidad's largest hummingbird, coming in at 16 cm long. Common in hill forest, this 'hummer' feeds on plant nectar, often of understory species, and small insects. It is regularly seen at Asa Wright – feeding at Torch Ginger (*Etilingera elatior*) flowers and sometimes at our feeders.

This fast flyer usually breeds between May and October. Last June, we were fortunate to have a Green Hermit nesting right near the reception area. Its cone-shaped nest, which is usually lined with plant down, hung seemingly precariously from the end of a leaf. The male may help to defend the nests.

If you want to distinguish the males from the females, watch out for the longer white tail tip and more curved bill on females. While in general, the Green Hermit has green upperparts and grey underparts, females are slightly duller than males. And the female also has distinct, buffy postocular, malar and throat stripes.

On your next visit to Asa Wright look out for the Green Hermit, it just may be out for your viewing!



A Green Hermit feeding on a Torch Ginger flower Photo by Harold Diaz



The Green Hermit nest seen at AWNC last year Photo by Ann Sealey

### References:

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

Kenefick, M et al. *Field Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago*. Yale University Press. 2008