



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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May 2016



Mike Rutherford, curator of the U.W.I. Zoology Museum, who helped organise our museum. Photo by Johanne Ryan

Upgraded Richard French Museum Launched

By Kimberly Chu Foon

When you walk into AWNC's Richard French Museum you may notice that a few things have changed. Located in a small room at the base of the main house, the museum has always been a place where visitors can learn more about the Centre and the animals and plants found there. Over the last few months, we decided to give our museum an upgrade to include themes and ideas that would make a visitor's experience even more memorable. After all, according to Renzo Piano, "a museum is a place where one should lose one's head!"

The Richard French Museum now houses new specimen and 10 interesting themes highlighted by posters which provide information on the different topics. "Richard French" and "Asa Wright" are each themes which delve into the individual's history and association with the Centre. "Night life in the sky" and "Night life on the ground" give visitors

the opportunity to view the nocturnal creatures they observe less frequently, up close. For those who've wondered how animals protect themselves, the "Animal Armour" section has some great examples of their features and how they are used in the wild. The elaborate housing designs of some species are also showcased in "Animal Architecture". Other fun themes include "Skulls and Beaks", "Butterflies", "Mini Beasts" and "Seed Dispersal".

The various sections have been created to appeal to both adults and children and there is something for everyone. So the next time you are at the Centre, make sure that you spend some time in the Museum. You never know what you'll find!

Special thanks go out to the UWI Zoology Museum for loaning several of their specimens for display and also to the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme (GEF SGP) for providing the funding needed to create the themed posters.



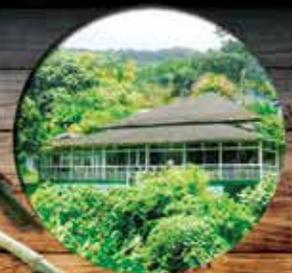
The 'Skulls and Beaks' theme features a range of specimens from the large pelican to the tiny hummingbird

Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon



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Unusual Sightings

By Martyn Kenefick

May started extremely well at Springhill when during an Oilbird trail hike, Caleb was able to point out a Tayra (Hunting Tree Dog) to his customers on the 4th. The middle of the month became even more exciting. On the 13th, Barry and Caleb found a bird that they couldn't immediately identify, feeding on a close wild tobacco bush. Subsequent photographs suggest that this may well be an immature Baltimore Oriole and we are awaiting consideration by the national Rare Birds Committee. If proven, this would be just the second documented sighting in the last 21 years. The following day was the bird Global Big Day. During the day, we recorded at least 74 species at the Centre. One special moment mid-morning was when an adult Ornate Hawk-Eagle was persistently harried by a Plumbeous Kite while a White Hawk nonchalantly circled above them. Shortly thereafter, a five-foot Boa Constrictor entertained balcony guests whilst eyeing up a far too wary Agouti.

Our external tours provided the usual crop of unusual sightings. Dave and Mukesh led tours to Caroni swamp on April 26th and found not only a shy Mangrove Cuckoo but established that the three American Flamingos reported last month had been joined by a further five.

AWNC guests who extended their tour to include a short stay at Grande Riviere, found six obliging Pawi together with the first reported Brown Violetear of the season and a migratory White-collared Swift all on April 29th.



Egret-Heron hybrid Photo by Jerome Foster

Earlier copies of this magazine have already commented on the presence of rare Franklin's Gulls amongst our large wintering roost of the very similar Laughing Gulls on the west coast tidal mudflats. Most have usually left by the end of February, however on April 24th one in almost full alternate plumage was still present, and of course, much easier to identify.

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A Limpkin Photo by Nigel Lallsingh

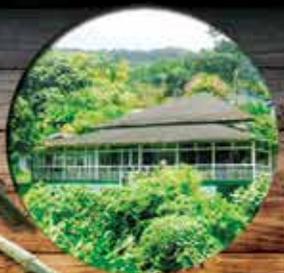


The probable Baltimore Oriole seen at AWNC Photo by Jon Uran



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Unusual Sightings (continued)

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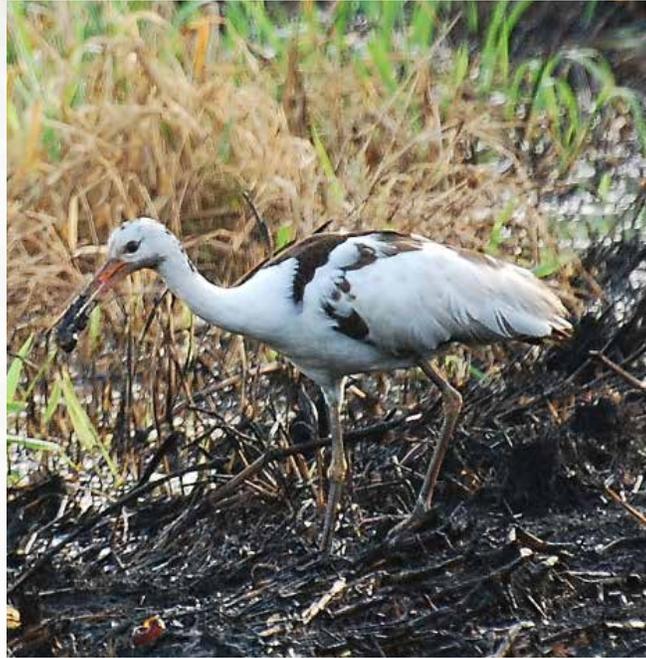
Elsewhere, a Crane Hawk was photographed flying over the south-west settlement of Woodland Village on April 27th. This species first occurred in Trinidad as recently as 2000 and has since clearly established itself on the island. Hopefully before long we will be able to confirm it as a breeding resident. Equally pleasing to the eye, was an adult Black Hawk-Eagle seen over Chatham on May 4th.

Migratory ducks from mainland South America begin to arrive in Trinidad during early May and so it was not a surprise for three White-cheeked Pintails to be found close to the Caroni flyover on May 7th. Whilst this species is resident in the south-west Tobago freshwater marshes, it is rare to find them "out of season" in Trinidad.

Over in the sister isle, our breeding seabird colonies seem to be thriving. A visit during the 18th to 19th May found good flocks of feeding Roseate Terns both at Plymouth and Speyside and all three "tropical terns" (Bridled, Sooty and Brown Noddy) all present on Little Tobago where at least one fledgling Audubon's Shearwater was still faithful to its burrow. The three Glossy Ibis reported in earlier bulletins are now all together at Bon Accord.

Finally, a pair of Striped Owls were carefully watched one night on a country lane in the north of the island. This is the rarest of Tobago resident birds and thus, highly vulnerable to disturbance as it is very likely that they are breeding nearby. Use of the torchlight was kept to an absolute minimum and we have decided not to publish the location.

Sometimes, common birds can appear far from normal, as does the partially albino Limpkin photographed in south-west Trinidad. Even stranger, was this apparent



The partially albino Limpkin Photo by Nigel Lallsingh



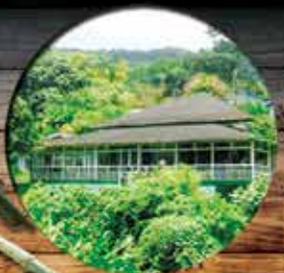
Could this be a Snowy Egret-Tricolored Heron hybrid? Photo by Jerome Foster

hybrid heron/egret found on Caroni rice project. The most likely identities of parenthood are Snowy Egret and Tricolored Heron, but who knows.....



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Young Environmentalist of the Month

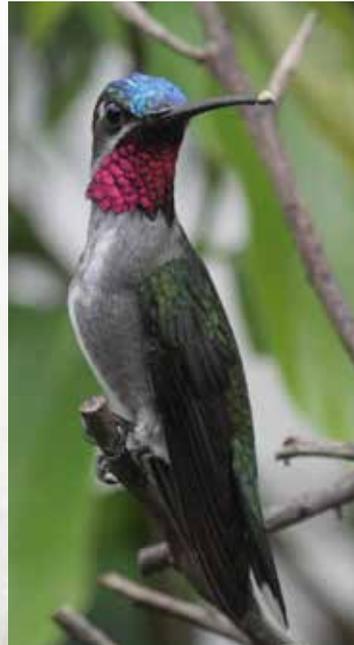
By Andre and Maria Reyes

Our 13-year-old son, Raimundo Reyes, has been creating photo journals, drawings, paintings and sculptures of hummingbirds these past two and a half years with great passion and enthusiasm. His visits to the Asa Wright Nature Centre, Yurette, Pax Guest House and also to Costa Rica last August, have inspired his ever-growing production of hummingbird artwork. His most recent visit to the AWNC was with his Form One Holy Cross College classmates near the end of the last school term.

The pictures in this article feature some of his favourite pieces. The source of several of these works come from his own hummingbird haven which he has been nurturing the last year or so in his home garden, which he calls Mizpah. It's a name his late grandfather, Eugene Reyes, used to address the old Reyes Family home in Eugene Lane, La Canoa. Raimundo loves hummingbirds and looks forward especially to every opportunity he gets to visit AWNC with us.



Raimundo posing inside the St Phillip Roman Catholic Church, in the beautiful town of Zarcero, Costa Rica. Photo courtesy Andre and Maria Reyes



Some of Raimundo's artwork



Raimundo's hummingbird sculptures





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Don Eckelberry Scholarship Award Winner – Tiffany Miller Russell

Story by Kimberly Chu Foon

Paper sculpture is quite unique in the world of art. It involves the shaping and combining of different types of paper to create an interesting image of the subject. This medium has been mastered by Tiffany Miller Russell, the Don Eckelberry Scholarship Award winner of 2015, whose interest in the technique was first inspired by the image on a jigsaw puzzle. Her work in portraying nature and wildlife has been well-recognised throughout and has been awarded by several institutions. She is a member of the Society of Animal Artists and the Guild of Natural Science Illustrators. In April, Tiffany visited the Asa Wright Nature Centre as part of her scholarship award and it was here that she was able to tell her story about her experience and journey as an artist. Below are the highlights of an interview conducted with Tiffany.

When and how did you become interested in art?

I was interested in drawing at an early age but was a bit up in the air about pursuing science or art. I attended a week-long programme during college and met a sculptor, Gary Staab, who has done a lot of scientific illustrations and work on creating models of prehistoric animals. This



Tiffany works on a sketch in the field Photo by Steve Russell



A sketch of an Oilbird done by Tiffany while at the Centre's Dunston Cave Photography by Mel Schockner

was the first time that I realised I could have a career that combined both art and science.

What achievement are you most proud of?

Definitely winning the Don Eckelberry Scholarship Award. No question at all. It's a fantastic award. It is challenging to get and it is an honour to win. It's an amazing opportunity to be here at Asa Wright.

What inspires you to do a particular piece of work?

I have a lot of different inspirations from a lot of different places. For example, my husband likes frogs and he bought me a book on frogs and so I decided to do a frog piece. That piece was a breakthrough piece for me. Some pieces are inspired by concepts or processes such as pollination or even a particular piece of paper. I'm inspired by subject matter (the animals) and being able to represent them in a unique way. I particularly like to do things that are underrepresented.

What is your favourite piece and why?

There's a lot of different times I can think of a piece and say that's my favourite but then think of another and change my mind. I have a lot of reasons to love many of the pieces that I've done.

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Don Eckelberry Scholarship Award Winner – Tiffany Miller Russell (continued)

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Is there a particular class of animals that you prefer to work on?

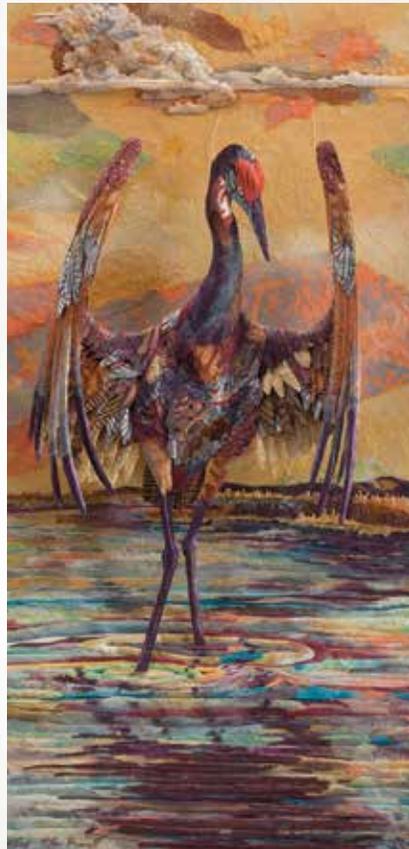
I'm really interested in prehistoric life. I think mammals and reptiles are really interesting. I almost hate to say that I do have a speciality but I'd say that birds are a favourite because they are really great to do in paper sculpture because of all the feathers. I try to spread the love though. What interests me most is evolution and the relationships of different forms of life to their close and distant relatives. I also have a strong interest in orchids and a number of different plants.

Do you do research on your animals before you attempt to sculpt them?

Yes. I do a lot of research and get very nerdy with the science and I research whatever I can on them. In terms of visual research, I've worked on some animals that I've never seen and I do go to the zoo on a regular basis and practice drawing animals there. I also do a lot of online referencing. First I'll make my own thumbnail sketches and do an initial drawing as far as I can take it before going to references. Then I'll do a Google image search and download about 50 photos of the animal in different positions. So I pay attention to for example, where a wing is going to, be, how it moves and how it turns. Hummingbirds and Ravens have been some of my favourite movements to study. From there, I'd look at the most interesting movements and watch videos of them in slow motion. In my sketch book, I would fill up about five pages of sketches and by the time I'm done, I can feel the animals in my bones and in my body and then I can come up with the final drawing.

Do you see yourself exploring with any other media in the future?

Yes, I do. I keep saying constantly that I want to learn how



*A paper sculpture of a crane completed by Tiffany Miller Russell
Photography by Mel Schockner*

to oil paint but I haven't done it yet. Paper can be quite time consuming and takes a steady hand. It can also be quite physically taxing. There are some things that cannot be said with paper sculpture and the message can get lost but that's the same for any media really. So you have to keep context in mind.

What has been your greatest challenge?

Myself. The personal growth and journey that every artist has to take. Understanding the business aspect of it. Getting the discipline as a self-employed person to ensure that I keep to a schedule and have that self-discipline to create my own goals and realising the steps I have to take to reach those. Understanding that I have limitations and understanding that it's okay not to be perfect. I need to ensure that I'm not too hard on myself. That's definitely my biggest challenge and something that I'm working on.

What is your dream project?

This is my dream project. I dream big. For my trip here, I want to create a project that would be valuable to the people who made it possible. One that could come back and be of value to AWNC and the Society of Animal Artists, Don Eckelberry's family and eco-tourists visiting Trinidad.

When someone looks at your art what do you hope they get out of it?

A sense of wonder, a sense of amazement for the world and an understanding of how amazing life is.

Do you think anything more can be done to inspire young people to do art?

Exposure. The more you are exposed to something the more you grow to love it and the more you'll want to explore it.



Chestnut Woodpecker (*Celeus elegans*)

By Johanne Ryan

The Chestnut Woodpecker is one of six resident woodpeckers found in Trinidad and Tobago. It is fairly common in Trinidad, though not as widespread throughout the island as the Lineated Woodpecker. While it is crested, like our Lineated Woodpecker, there are many differences between the two.

The Chestnut Woodpecker gets its names from the chestnut plumage which covers its body. Its crest is yellowish-brown and it has a yellow rump. At 11 inches, it is also smaller than the Lineated Woodpecker which measures 13 inches. And rather than a musical call, the Chestnut Woodpecker makes a sound akin to scratches on wood. Look out for the red malar stripe on the male. Females lack that 'moustache'.

The Chestnut Woodpecker, like all in the woodpecker or Picidae family, possesses unique adaptations to fit their lifestyle of climbing and boring trees. Woodpeckers' stiff tail feathers support them when climbing trees. They have thick skulls and a brain surrounded by absorbent tissue, to protect the brain from any damage caused by constant head drumming. They have zygodactyl feet, two toes point forward and two point backward, all the better to grip securely to tree trunks.

In Trinidad, some call woodpeckers, carpenter birds and this chestnut carpenter bird has an omnivorous diet. It feeds on insects that live inside the trunk but also eats fruit, including that of the Bois Canoe or Cecropia. In the Arima Valley, drumming has been recorded from Nov – Feb and in Trinidad breeding has been recorded in April and May. The woodpecker lays a clutch of three white eggs.

The Chestnut Woodpecker can be seen at AWNC and was recently spotted in late April on the property. Come visit us and you, too, might be lucky enough to get a sighting.



A male Chestnut Woodpecker

Photo by Wendell SJ Reyes

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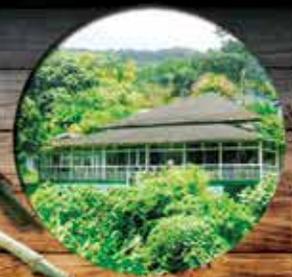
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The Global Big Day

By Martyn Kenefick

Organised both by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society as a citizen science event, birders from around the world were asked to unite on May 14th to answer a single question "how many birds can be found by a global team in a single day?" What transpired was the biggest day of birding the world has ever seen. In 145 countries around the world, more than 15,900 birdwatchers

recorded no less than 6,263 species of birds.

The Trinidad birding community certainly played its part. During the day, no less than 36 birders (including some Caligo visiting customers) managed to record a very creditable 170 species throughout the island, placing our efforts 40th out of 145, by far the highest total of any islands in the Caribbean. Other results included Cuba in 88th place with 53 species;

Jamaica 99th with 41; and Barbados in 105th place recording 38 species.

The event will surely be repeated next year and we hope to increase our own participation both in Trinidad and, hopefully, in Tobago. (Whilst birders in Venezuela counted 654 species, no one found a White-tailed Sabrewing ... and the Paria peninsula is the only place in the world, other than Tobago, where it occurs!)"

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. 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.

