



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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June 2016

Audubon

By Christine Toppin-Allahar

Nowadays we associate the name "Audubon" with the American organisation of the same name – a world leader in nature conservation, education and advocacy, especially with respect to birds – many members of which have served on the AWC's Board. That organisation takes its name from John James Audubon, the pioneering ornithologist and painter, whose great work *The Birds of America* (1827-1839), depicting birds in their natural habitats, remains a masterpiece. But few of us perhaps realise that Audubon was actually a French Creole, formerly called Jean Jacques Audubon, who was born in the Caribbean on April 26, 1786, at Les Cayes in Haiti (then the French colony of Saint Domingue).

Audubon was the child of a plantation owner born to a French servant who died shortly after his birth. Audubon's father, who had served in the French navy helping the Americans during their revolution against Britain, sold off some of his land in Saint Domingue and bought a farm in Pennsylvania, which eventually became Audubon's first home in America. In 1791, when Audubon was seven years old, his father arranged for Jean Jacques and his half-sister Muguet to be brought from the Caribbean to France where they were both legally adopted by their natural father and his wife. Audubon spent the next 10 years in France before he moved to America in 1803, to avoid conscription into the French forces during the Napoleonic wars.



A portrait of a young John James Audubon by John Syme

Source: commons.wikimedia.org PD-old-auto-1923

Today, Haiti has become synonymous with catastrophic environmental degradation; but Christopher Columbus, the first European to lay eyes on Haiti, described it in its natural state as a marvelous country, fertile and beautiful, with large rivers, beautiful mountains, magnificent trees of different kinds which seemed to reach the sky, bearing many kinds of fruit and flowers, and spoke of hearing birds singing everywhere he went. So it should not be surprising that Audubon attributed his love of nature and, in particular, his desire to master the art of painting birds, to his early childhood in Haiti.

In the introduction to his *Ornithological Biography*, he says, "When I had hardly yet learned to walk ... the productions of nature that lay spread all around were constantly pointed out to me. They soon became my playmates; and before my ideas were sufficiently formed to enable me to estimate the difference between the azure tints of the sky and the emerald hue of the bright foliage, I felt that intimacy with them, not consisting of friendship

merely, but bordering on frenzy, must accompany my steps through life; and now, more than ever, I am persuaded of the power of those early impressions. They laid such a hold on me that, when removed from [nature] I experienced none of those pleasures most congenial to my mind."

He explains that, as a child in the Caribbean under his father's tutelage, he observed the behaviour of birds, their habitats, differences in their eggs, and changes in their plumage, and grew up wishing to possess all that he saw. But he came to realise that, "The moment a bird was dead, however beautiful it had been when in life, the pleasure from possession of it became blunted." So he resolved to capture the beauty of birds by trying to copy them by means of drawing. It took him many years to master this art, but we can be thankful since cameras had not yet been invented and we might have been deprived of all of Audubon's splendid works!

Sources:

1. John James Audubon, *Ornithological Biography* (Vol.1)
2. Richard Rhodes, *John James Audubon: The Making of An American* (2006)
3. Christopher Columbus & J.M. Cohen: *The Four Voyages: Being His Own Log Book, Letters and Dispatches with Connecting Narratives* (1992)





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T&T Birding Scene



A Glossy Ibis seen in Tobago Photo by Stephen Jay Photography

By Martyn Kenefick

We are now in a period traditionally considered to be "the doldrums of rare bird sightings". Almost all northbound migrants should be on their breeding territory whilst visitors from the south are much scarcer in number. The end of May also heralded the change in the seasons with increasing precipitation rejuvenating our marshlands.

Despite the perceived "low season," interesting birds were still to be found at Springhill as we added three more to the list of species found on the estate. Two of these, Sooty and Blue-black Grassquits, were, in all honesty, just a matter of time before being found. However, the third, an austral wandering Small-billed Elaenia on June 4th was much rarer. Many of our small flycatchers can seem confusingly similar in appearance and up to 2006, this species had only been found on three previous occasions. However, increased confidence

in observers has resulted in documented records in most years since. Interestingly, another one was found on Dave's tour to Nariva the following day.

The change in weather has possibly contributed to a more regular presence of Short-tailed Nighthawks feeding on flying insects at dusk and seen from the balcony. A minimum of five were seen on June 4th. Earlier in the day several Swallow-tailed Kites glided over.

For our overseas visitors, there is always the concern about international flight delays which are totally outwith anyone's control. So it was on June 10th, when a group from Texas eventually flew into Piarco around midnight. But there is that saying "every cloud has a silver lining". Shortly before turning into our driveway, in the wee hours of the night, Mahase turned his headlights onto a confiding perched Spectacled Owl which sat there for all to enjoy.

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T&T Birding Scene (continued)

From previous page

Our external tours are still regularly finding both Crested Caracara and adult Rufous Crab-Hawk on the east coast, together with nesting Brown-throated Parakeets in the Aripo Savannah.

In south-west Trinidad, on May 22nd, three Yellow-breasted Crakes were seen, surprisingly right out in the open in canalside vegetation close to Rahamut trace, Debe. In central Trinidad, a Short-eared Owl was reported on both the 21st and 22nd of May on the Caroni Rice Project. Such a rare occurrence is of course subject to submission to and assessment by the National Rare Birds Committee. If accepted, it will be just the 6th ever found here. On the rice project, both Southern Lapwing and Black-necked Stilts are busy breeding. However, in early June, a party of 14 White-rumped Sandpipers were found. This species probably has the longest migration route of all shorebirds passing through Trinidad, flying from the tip of South America right up to the high arctic tundra where ice may still cover their breeding grounds. A shorter journey was made by a flock of eight White-faced Whistling Ducks found there on May 30th having probably come with the rains up from Venezuela.

As a nature organisation, we cannot condone the release of invasive species and condemn the illicit trade in exotic non-native birds into our islands. Nevertheless, several are now regularly found here. One of these, the Tricolored Munia, a native of the Indian sub-continent, has been present in and confined to the wet agricultural lands of south-west Trinidad for nearly 10 years. Their range is now expanding and during late May were found on the eastern edge of the Caroni Swamp. Similarly, we have, for a number of years, known of the presence of Red-and-Green Macaws that have no doubt escaped from illegal transshipment and become feral groups in both our south and northern coasts. Whilst they occur naturally as close as Guyana and eastern Venezuela, they are sedentary in their habits and there have never been any documented sightings of wild birds here. During mid-June, several have now spread into the



A Red-and-Green Macaw

Photo by Stephen Jay Photography

Aripo Savannah.

Over in Tobago, at least two of the long-staying Glossy Ibis are still feeding at Bon Accord and have been joined by an impressive flock of at least 50 Black Skimmers. For the last 13 years, this latter species has taken up "summer residence" in south-west Tobago with numbers present from May-September. Roseate Terns look to be having a very successful breeding season. On a rocky outcrop, near Buccoo, a minimum of 250 birds were seen on June 17th including a number of well-grown chicks. Scaly-naped Pigeons are slowly establishing themselves on the main island. Several were seen during mid-June on Flagstaff Hill and also flying towards L'Anse Fourmi. This species was first recorded in Tobago as recently as 2005, and most subsequent sightings have historically been restricted to Little Tobago island and Speyside. How long before we find the first in Trinidad?

In view of my impending absence from Trinidad during much of July, the next bulletin will be in August when, hopefully, southbound migration will be in full swing.



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Green Leaf Award for Service and Wildlife Conservation



Wildlife conservation awardees (left to right) Asa Wright Nature Centre, El Socorro Centre for Wildlife Conservation, Mike Rutherford, Nature Seekers, North West Veterinary Clinic and T&T Field Naturalists' Club stand with the EMA's Managing Director (Ag.) Ms. Gayatri Badri Maharaj
Photo courtesy The Environmental Management Authority

By June De Gale – Rampersad
World Environment Day is held each year on June 5th. It is the United Nations' most important day for encouraging worldwide awareness and action for the protection of our environment. Since it began in 1974, it has grown to become a global platform for public outreach that is widely celebrated in over 100 countries. This year, in our efforts to engage the general community for World Environment Day, the Asa Wright Nature Centre participated in two exhibitions and hosted a school tree-planting exercise – activities which are also highlighted this issue of the Bellbird.

The Environmental Management

Authority (EMA) recently hosted its award ceremony in commemoration of World Environment Day 2016. The Asa Wright Nature Centre was a Green Leaf Awardee and we are extremely honoured to be recognised for our efforts in sustainability and as an environmental steward. It was very uplifting to hear that the relevant ministries are keen on aligning themselves to work to maintain a balance with our wildlife and respect the planet. We need to educate ourselves in order to protect them.

The delicate issue of environmentalists and hunters was duly noted and achievements over the years, like the Environmentally Sensitive Species Rules(2001), the National Restoration, Carbon

Sequestration, Wildlife and Livelihoods project(2010) and Turtle Symposiums held in 2012 and 2014, were highlighted.

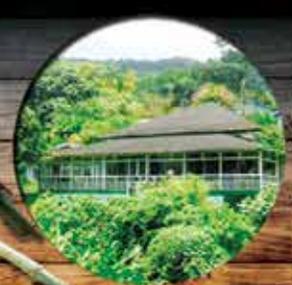
In 2015, the EMA (Green Leaf Award) challenged both primary and secondary schools. This challenge was a means to engage and sensitise young minds, to ultimately help them reduce litter both on and off the school compound. A school project which involved tree planting, monitoring and maintenance was necessary. A scrapbook, contributions to EMA's Enviro newsletter and a recyclables collection was mandatory.

Thank you to the EMA for this prestigious award and a hearty congratulations to all other awardees.



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Tree Planting at Springhill for World Environment Day



Pupils walk the trail Photo by Michelle Soodeen Photography



Getting ready to plant Photo by Michelle Soodeen Photography



Getting their hands 'dirty' Photo by Michelle Soodeen Photography

By Johanne Ryan

A tree your parents or grandparents planted may yield bountiful fruit decades later for you to enjoy. But a tree cut down decades ago, has stripped life from the earth.

Trees are as important today as they were hundreds of years ago. The benefits of trees cannot be denied. They give us oxygen, provide us with food, give us shelter and are habitats for animals. We get tasty chocolate from cocoa trees and our pick-me-up morning drink, coffee, from coffee plants. And there are so many more things that trees provide. Deforestation has been a plight of the modern world and one way to combat this is to plant trees.

This year, in commemoration of World Environment Day, pupils of the Atwell's Educational Institute embarked on a tree-planting exercise at Springhill. With the help of ECIAF interns and AWNC staff, the group of students planted fruit trees on our estate. We thank them for coming and can now reflect on this verse.

*"Shade for a man
And shelter for animals,
Planted in your name,
May you be the same for those around you,
Every year the same."*

Nancy J. Cavanaugh



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AWNC celebrates World Environment Day at Educational Display Events

By Kimberly Chu Foon

World Environment Day (WED) has been celebrated on June 5th across the globe since 1974 and has become an excellent platform for public awareness and outreach. "Go Wild for Life" was this year's theme and focused on the illegal trade of wildlife. The event was widely celebrated by over 100 countries including Trinidad and Tobago.

Two events this year included Atlantic LNG's Biodiversity Display held in Egypt Village, Point Fortin and the Ministry of Planning and Development's WED Information Expo held at the University of Trinidad and Tobago's (UTT) Point Lisas campus. The Asa Wright Nature Centre was given the opportunity to exhibit our interactive booth display at both events. Butterfly, bird, beetle and skull specimens were all part of the Centre's exhibition which attracted children and adults alike. "Spin the Wheel", "Identify the Animal" and "Identify the Sound" were some of the game activities at the booth which challenged participants to think about and answer a wide range of questions on wildlife and the environment.

Atlantic LNG's event was held over a three-day period and saw over 2,500 school children who were all given the opportunity to expand their inquisitive minds. Other booths included the El Socorro Wildlife Rehabilitation Centre which had birds, an ocelot and other animals on display, Turtle Village Trust and the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalist Club. The display at UTT was visited by a number of schools which also had the opportunity to learn about the university's renewable energy initiatives such as the solar house and electric bus. Both events presented a great opportunity for the public to learn about the environment and all that it has to offer.



At right: AWNC guide Tonya Lee Phillip at the Ministry of Planning and Development's WED Info Expo at UTT, Point Lisas Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon



AWNC guide Jessie Pitt interacts with pupils at Atlantic LNG's Biodiversity Display Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon



Red-legged Honeycreeper (*Cyanerpes cyaneus*)



A male Red-legged Honeycreeper Photo by Ann Sealey

By Johanne Ryan

From afar, the Red-legged Honeycreeper can look like its 'cousin' the Purple Honeycreeper or Turquoise Tanager. All three, members of the Thraupidae family, are similar in size and have some colours in common. However on a close-up view of the Red-legged Honeycreeper, its differences stand out. Its red legs are one of its most distinguishing features. Its turquoise crown is also quite the showstopper. Its violet-blue plumage creates a stark contrast to a background of green leaves. Its black bill, mantle, wings and tail are prominent as well. These features however, only apply to the adult male Red-legged Honeycreeper. It is important to know that females and juveniles differ greatly in appearance. Females and juveniles are generally green with gentle streaking on the front. Females have reddish brown legs while juvenile males have dusky brown legs.

The Red-legged Honeycreeper is fairly common in forests in both Trinidad and Tobago. It can also be seen on the Bocas Islands, where it inhabits deciduous forest. The honeycreeper also resides in Central America, northern South America and Cuba. When searching for it, its silhouette and colour are easier features to notice than its call, which is usually a high-pitched 'tsip'. At Asa Wright, the Red-legged Honeycreeper can sometimes be seen feeding on the berries of Wild Tobacco trees. Since there are quite a few Wild Tobacco trees growing near the verandah, the honeycreeper can even be viewed while lounging there. The "Red-legged Grampo", as we also call it, prefers small fruits to nectar. It also includes insects in its diet. A birdwatching fact about this honeycreeper – it is attracted by the call of Ferruginous Pygmy-Owl.

See if you can spot Red-legged Honeycreeper this month!



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Looking for a place to visit on a field trip?

Asa Wright host camps from **9:30 a.m. - 2:30 pm.**
Tour, museum, recycling craft session or games.
Email: asawrightconsedu@gmail.com
or call **667-4655** for more information.

Dates for the camp visits
July 11th - 29th
August 9th-19th

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.

