



# The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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September 2016

## The Makings of the First Certified Interpretive Guide Trainers in the Caribbean

By Kimberly Chu Foon

Learning how to become a skilled naturalist interpreter is fulfilling but learning how to teach others to become effective interpreters can be even more rewarding. Last year, AWNC hosted the Certified Interpretive Guide (CIG) training workshop for our naturalist guides and Conservation/Education staff. The event was sponsored by a US Embassy grant and functioned as a great opportunity to enhance skill sets and improve interpretive programmes at the Centre.

This year, a similar funding opportunity from the US Embassy presented itself and we were able to enrol several participants in the National Association for Interpretation's (NAI) Certified Interpretive Trainer's (CIT) training course. Once certified in this course, participants are able to conduct CIG workshops themselves. There were six participants in total, all of whom attended the CIG. The course covered a review of the CIG content, grading and training presentations/segments and was a wonderful opportunity to reconnect with our previous trainer, Fran McReynolds.

The CIT was of course, no easy task! It was definitely a challenge for all involved but like all challenges it is worth it in the end. Although certification requires additional work after the conclusion of the workshop, once these are completed, the six participants



CIT Trainer, Fran McReynolds  
Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon



CIT participant, Caleb Walker, gives his final presentation  
Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon



CIT participants wave goodbye at the end of the workshop  
Photo by Fran McReynolds

will not only become the first local CIG trainers, but the first in the entire Caribbean region. This is a huge achievement for those involved and will open the door for interpreters throughout the islands to become officially certified here in Trinidad and Tobago.



Participants hard at work on their Literature Review  
Photo by Fran McReynolds



# Birding Tobago

By Jason Radix

Long recognised as a birdwatching hotspot, the island of Tobago is well known as an avian oasis, rich in neo-tropical species evident and abundant throughout the island. Popular with many experienced North American and European “birders” who rank the island as a prime “birding” destination, rich in biodiversity, it is definitely deserving of this reputation and worth a visit.

Usually packaged together with the larger southern sister island of Trinidad for holiday visitors, the twin island country is described by experts as being the most densely populated in the world for birds; having in excess of 470 species documented within the combined area of under 2,000 square miles.

On its own though, Tobago has an impressive species density of over 220 species within its approximate 180-square-mile boundary. Of these, 22 species are not found in Trinidad including the resident and prolific Rufous-Vented Chachalaca, locally known as the Cocrico, the island’s national bird; and favourites like the White-tailed Sabrewing Hummingbird and Blue-backed Manakin. Along with others like the Trinidad Motmot, Magnificent Frigatebird, Brown Pelican and Laughing Gull which are more reliably seen in Tobago compared to Trinidad, the island provides an advantage of observing several species.

Birdwatching continues to be a popular outdoor activity on the island, as birders are regularly seen equipped with binoculars, scope(s) and cameras perched at the edge of a rural road, hiking along a forest trail or overlooking the coasts all in an effort to add a “lifer” (a new species) to their bird life list. This



The Rufous-vented Chachalaca or Cocrico  
Photo by Mukesh Ramdass

is possible not only due to the high density and diversity of birds, but also as a result of the ease of access to an abundance of natural and man-made birding sites across the island. Sites like the Main Ridge Reserve, Little Tobago (Bird of Paradise) Island, Tobago Plantation, Grafton Estate, Bon Accord Sewage Ponds, the Adventure Farm and several other sites in between, provide great opportunities to enjoy birding adventures.

Visitors eager to experience bird watching in Tobago have several bird-tour options and birders are

encouraged to consider any or all of the tours available. This year-round activity offers the chance to see more of the island, its culture, wildlife and especially its birds. Tobago is awaiting you!

*Jason Radix is the owner of Eureka Natural History Tours, Tobago and a former Senior Guide at Asa Wright Nature Centre. Find out more about Eureka Natural History Tours at [www.naturetobago.com](http://www.naturetobago.com)*



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The Trinidad and Tobago booth display

Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon

## The 2016 International UK Bird Fair Experience

By Kimberly Chu Foon

Some of the best memories can come from the smallest of things. The UK Bird Fair is far from small and in fact, I couldn't even begin to explain the grandness of it all but it was truly one of my most memorable experiences. I remember walking through the damp tufts of grass toward the large marquee where the Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) booth was located and seeing the long queue of visitors anticipating their entry and eagerly looking forward to what the day would bring. You could feel the excitement in the air and I just knew that this was the event of the year for many of them. People often say that excitement is transferable and although I was already excited to begin with, this raised the bar. That was my first great memory of the British Bird Fair.

The Trinidad and Tobago booth was an impressive one. It's a difficult task to capture the essence of a country in an area only several feet wide but the vibe created by the T&T booth design did just that.



Conservation Officer, Kimberly Chu Foon, chats with a couple interested in visiting AWNC

Photo by Caleb Walker

The wooden deck and stands gave it an almost rustic appearance while the colourful sunglasses, bags and umbrellas rounded out the tropical island experience. Then, of course, there were the rum shots which after being put out, a suspiciously large crowd appeared. These components added to the fun of it all but the highlight was definitely

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## The 2016 International UK Bird Fair Experience (continued)

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the birds. Some of our most colourful, like the Scarlet Ibis and Trinidad Motmot, were depicted in large photos across the walls.

The Asa Wright Nature Centre has been participating in the UK Bird Fair for many years now, and its status as an important bird habitat and hotspot, not only of local importance but one that has gained international recognition, is often reinforced at events like these. Upon approaching the booth, visitors would instantly recognise the Centre and in many cases, our Naturalist Guide, Caleb Walker and myself. We would then be treated to some of the most entertaining tales about their experiences in Trinidad and at the Centre including seeing the Oilbird for the first time, venturing down our Adventure Trail and witnessing the spectacular flight of the Scarlet Ibis. Add this to the list of my great memories.

The UK Bird Fair is the largest of them all. It encompasses the whole spectrum of the birdwatching industry whilst supporting global bird conservation. If you can think of a popular birding location, or birding equipment or anything bird related, chances are you would probably find it at the Bird fair. There is just so much to see! When walking around the Bird fair, always remember to carry your breadcrumbs because finding your way back can be a challenge. With the numerous marquees and lecture tents, the setup of the event is almost like a maze with a pleasant surprise at every corner. I don't think I have ever attended an event where there were so many people from all over the world in one place. I met a Honduran guide who talked about her fascinating bird research, a St. Lucian guide who elaborated on his country's endemic birds and a Costa Rican guide who convinced me to visit his nature



*The Trinidad and Tobago 2016 Bird Fair Team*

*Photo courtesy Kimberly Chu Foon*



*Naturalist Guide, Caleb Walker, interacts with booth visitors*

*Photo by Kimberly Chu Foon*

reserve whenever I managed to get over there. That was another great memory.

On the final day of the three-day event, I was given the opportunity to present my lecture on "Discover a birding paradise in Trinidad and Tobago." It was nice to share all the different highlights of birding in T&T and to see some familiar faces that I met the days before. That was the icing on the cake where my

Bird fair memories are concerned. All in all, the Bird fair presents itself as wonderful opportunity and experience all done for an extremely worthy cause. It is a place where you can learn, meet new people and share your knowledge. Now I understand the appeal of it all, and why crowds of people travel to the small town of Rutland every year, the same time of year, for that one very important birding event.



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## The T&T Birding Scene

By Martyn Kenefick

The period mid-August to mid-September coincides with our annual refurbishment and redecoration tasks at the Centre. Whilst there are no customers at this time, staff still keeps their eyes and ears open. It also coincided with the large Jambou tree in front of the balcony being laden with fruit, attracting not only an impressive count of 10 Channel-billed Toucans but also a male Bearded Bellbird between September 10th and 13th. At this time, most male Bellbirds go into moult, stop calling and can become harder to see, although one heard calling on 22nd September was obviously re-establishing its territory. Also of interest, were a group of 10 Fork-tailed Flycatchers perched high on bare branches early on the 13th. By the end of the month, most, if not all, will have returned south to the mainland.

A visit to Chacachacare on August 25th produced most, if not all, of those scarce Trinidad residents that favour the dry scrub forest of the north west including Blue-tailed Emerald, Mouse-coloured Tyrannulet, Fuscous and Northern Scrub Flycatchers. Also seen were a juvenile Yellow-bellied Seedeater and White-fringed Antwrens. The latter is a common Tobago resident but its Trinidad distribution is restricted to the Bocas Islands.

Certain seabirds are more frequently encountered during their southbound migration past our shores. Point Galeota on the southeast coast saw a Gull-billed Tern on August 20th and two Black Terns on the 31st. Over on the west coast, Least Terns were regularly seen at Brickfields from August 24th and a Cayenne Tern was briefly present at Freeman's Bay on September 5th.

Potentially the most exciting occurrence of the review period, was on September 18th when an immature sandpiper, showing many characteristics of the Curlew Sandpiper, was photographed at Brickfields. It was present until the 21st and is attracting intense attention from the Rare Birds Committee.

The viewable southbound shorebird migration is still a trickle rather than a flood. This may be partly due to late harvesting of preferred rice fields. However, four adult American Golden Plovers put in an early appearance at Freeman's Bay on September 5th and by mid-month, a number of small groups of both Pectoral and Stilt Sandpipers were to be found across the island.



*Little Egret*

*Photo by Kamal Mahabir*



*A possible Curlew Sandpiper*

*Photo by Nigel Lallsingh*

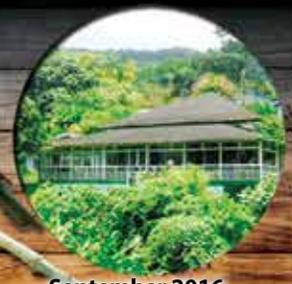
Southbound passerine passage produced our first American Redstart on September 10th and our first returning Yellow Warblers on the 16th. Barn Swallow numbers built up during the review period and included an immature Bank Swallow at Rahamut trace on September 17th.

Few austral wanderers were encountered in the last few weeks. A group of five White-collared Swifts flew over Princes Town on August 23rd and the only reported Small-billed Elaenia of the year to date was found at Galeota on the 30th. As for those who come to Trinidad to breed, it seems to have been an excellent breeding season for Collared Plovers with good numbers of juveniles at a number of locations.



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## Forest Elaenia (*Myiopagis gaimardii*)

By Johanne Ryan

The Forest Elaenia is one of 38 Tyrant Flycatchers recorded in Trinidad. The flycatchers in T&T range from resident to migrant and the Forest Elaenia falls into the resident category. These birds are fairly common in our primary and secondary forests and swamp edges, where they usually 'hang out' at the treetops. The Forest Elaenia can also be found in Central and South America – starting from Panama going south to Bolivia and Brazil.

Trinidad has a uniquely Trinidadian subspecies, *Myiopagis gaimardii trinitatis*, which is found nowhere else in the world. This endemic subspecies is a bit larger and duller than its continental 'cousins'. If you wanted to paint a Forest Elaenia, this is what it would look like – it would have a grey crown with a pale, partly hidden, crown patch. It would sport olive green plumage on the upperparts and rump. You must include the light streaking on the upper breast. And the bird would have yellowish wing bars, a whitish-grey throat and pale yellow underparts. And don't forget its horizontal posture. These features combine to make a small, fairly nondescript bird, that can be easily missed among the foliage.

But what the eye may not discern, the ear certainly will. 'Pit-sweet,' it sings, to announce its presence. That is its most common call. At Asa Wright, you may spot this elaenia in our Trema trees,



A view of the Forest Elaenia from the back

Photo by Michelle Rochford



A front view of the Forest Elaenia

Photo by Barry Ramdass

feasting on the berries. It follows an omnivorous diet, also including insects in its meals.

In Trinidad, breeding has been recorded in February and September. The Forest Elaenia lays a clutch of two pale cream eggs. See if you spot it on your next birding outing!

### References:

French, R. (2012). A Guide to the Bird of Trinidad and Tobago. New York: Cornell University Press.

Kenefick, M. (2007). Field Guide to the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago. New Haven: Yale University Press.

## YOUNG ENVIRONMENTALIST OF THE MONTH

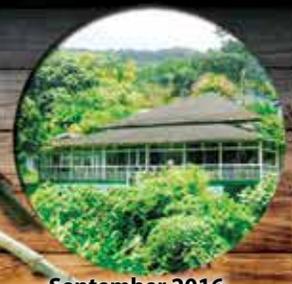
If you think your child, aged 5-16, has done something helpful to preserve the environment, please feel free to share it with us. Either write a short story or send a few pictures to [asawrightconsedu@gmail.com](mailto:asawrightconsedu@gmail.com). He/she may be selected as our Young Environmentalist 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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## Young Wildlife Artists Showcase Their Talent at the TTFNC Environmental Art Competition

Story and photos by  
Kimberly Chu Foon

Art is a language spoken by all people. It plays a fundamental role in childhood education and helps to enhance learning abilities and overall performances in schools. It is thus always a pleasure to see initiatives which encourage young people to delve into the world of art and make use of their natural talents. The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalist Club's Environmental Art Competition was one such initiative that was presented to both primary and secondary schools across the country.

The competition invited young artists to showcase their skills using three different themes: 1. My Favourite native species" (for ages 5 to 8), 2. "A habitat I think is important in Trinidad and Tobago" (for ages 9 to 12) and 3. "Nature is most admired in the smallest things" (for ages 13 to 16). We found the level of participation astounding and submissions reflected enthusiasm for the project. There were a total of 323 submissions from 42 schools across Trinidad and Tobago with good geographical representation that covered many different areas.

When I was asked to represent the Asa Wright Nature Centre as a judge for the competition, I was quite honoured and looked forward to becoming a part of the venture. I did not however, anticipate how difficult the task would be! The quality of the submissions were beyond our expectations and

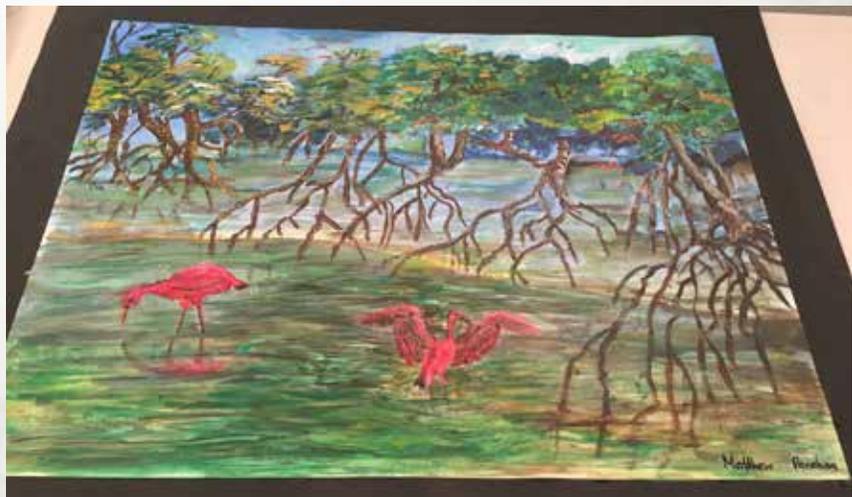
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*"Nurturing the Future" by Sarah Danielle Panchoo, Naparima Girls' High School, San Fernando  
1st Prize Winner for "Nature is most admired in the smallest things"*



*"Trinidad Motmot on Cocoa Tree" by Sanari Mohammed, Trinidad Muslim League Primary, St. Joseph  
1st Prize Winner for "My favourite native species"*



*"Scarlets' Home" by Matthew Abiel Panchoo, Avocat Vedic Primary  
1st Prize Winner for "A habitat I think is important"*



## Young Wildlife Artists Showcase their Talent at the TTFNC Environmental Art Competition (continued)

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showcased the exceptional talents of our young artists. Many of the pieces highlighted the student's creativity and ability to think outside the box. There were some very interesting and unique interpretations of the three themes given that broadened our views on what the topic could represent.

We found that in the habitat category, depictions of the Buccoo Reef and Caroni Swamp were dominant indicating that these ecosystems are highly valued by our youth which is a great indicator that they will strive to protect and conserve them in the future. For the favourite native species category, there were many depictions of birds including our two endemics, the Trinidad Piping Guan and the Trinidad Motmot, as well as our national birds the Scarlet Ibis and Cocrico.

Coming out of the art competition, I think we got so much more than just physical pieces of art but also a deeper understanding of the depth of creativity of our youth and an insight into the minds of these young and budding wildlife artists. It is safe to say that Trinidad and Tobago has some fantastic up-and-coming talent to look forward to in the future.



*"The Endangered Pawi" by Onika Chase, Rosec Primary, Tunapuna*



*"Ocean Reef" by Mary Grace Blanc, Dunross Preparatory, POS*



*"The Iguana" by Mohammad Mohideen Mallam, Trinidad Muslim League Primary, St. Joseph*



*"Blossoms and Blooms" by Kenia Joseph, St. Joseph's Convent, St. Joseph*