



The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



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July 2017

A Week of Activities with Edward Rooks and Janice Edgerly-Rooks

By Johanne Ryan

Our year-long 50th Anniversary Celebrations continued in June, when we hosted another set of our Celebrity Birders. Edward Rooks and his wife, Dr. Janice Edgerly-Rooks, came all the way from California, to share with our guests and visitors their passion for the natural world.

Edward is an award-winning wildlife artist and naturalist whose work has appeared in biological journals, nature magazines, booklets, newsletters and calendars. He has led nature tours to various destinations, including Antarctica, but hails from our own twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Janice is a Biology Professor at Santa Clara University (CA) with extensive knowledge on the evolution, behaviour and ecology of insects.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Rooks have strong connections to AWNC. Edward worked as a Nature Guide and the Assistant Manager at AWNC in the 1980s. He attests that Asa Wright has "played a large role in inspiring and forging my career and interest in wildlife art and eco-tourism". Janice has done research at Springhill and Simla, our research station. An episode of David Attenborough's "Life in the Undergrowth" entitled, "The Silk Spinners", which was filmed at AWNC, featured Webspinners that were the focus of her studies. Edward and Janice met at Simla.

During their week here, Janice presented interesting talks on animals and their behaviour. She shared with us the amazing habits of Leaf-cutter ants,



(L-R) Edward and Janice on the verandah
Photo by Johanne Ryan



Edward paints a Green Hermit feeding its chicks
Photo by Johanne Ryan

known as Bachacs, here in T&T. She told us all about bird behaviour and the research that David and Barbara Snow carried out at Manakin leks right here at Springhill. We learned about her research on Webspinners, the highlight of which was the beautiful music that was translated from the way Webspinners spin their silk tunnels. Edward led several art workshops and showcased his art pieces featuring local wildlife and folklore. He also did a presentation on T&T's butterflies. Members of the public had the opportunity to enjoy some of these talks and workshops. The Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists Club, the National Trust of Trinidad and Tobago, the University of the West Indies, the Environmental Management Authority and the Trinidad and Tobago Orchid Society were among the represented organisations. We were delighted to also have students of all ages participate in the art workshops. A bonus during some art sessions was viewing our resident Green Hermit swoop into our living room to feed its chicks. A great moment to bring bird sketching to life!

AWNC would like to thank Edward and Janice for coming and Caligo Ventures for making this week happen. We would like to thank Janice for her donation of literature on Leaf-cutter Ants and Webspinners, to AWNC. We enjoyed welcoming you both back to AWNC. As for the workshop and talks, we will let our participants' comments speak for themselves.

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A drawing of the Trinidad Motmot that student, Jo-Marie Westmaas, did after attending the first of the art workshops

"Dr. Edgerly-Rooks gave a very interesting lecture on tropical bird behaviour with a passion for the subject that was contagious. I was left both enlightened and curious for more information on bird behaviour. I will certainly be reading more on the topic.

The bird-drawing workshops by Mr. Rooks were very enjoyable and informative. He expertly broke down bird anatomy and gave excellent direction when we were drawing – so much so that I drew one using the techniques he taught us after the first workshop – something I have shied away from doing in the past."

– Jo-Marie Westmaas, Student



*Learning bird-drawing techniques
Photo by Randell Duberry*



*The group who came to hear Edward's lecture on the butterflies of T&T
Photo by Johanne Ryan*

"Thank you for the opportunity to participate in two of the art workshops. They were quite beneficial to me as I seek to develop my artistic talent. Mr Rooks, his patience and guidance were just great and he was also a charming host. It was my first visit to Asa Wright Nature Centre and I found it to be refreshing indeed."

– Dennis de la Rosa

"Thank you for organising the workshops, it was such an enjoyable morning for me and it felt like a real privilege. I thought Edward Rooks' teaching was excellent, giving us guidance, insight and inspiration all in one fell swoop, what a treat!"

– Francoise Brindle



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T&T Birding Scene: A Rare Sighting in the Lowlands

By Martyn Kenefick

This period is traditionally a great time for wandering species from the south. In the Arima Valley, early July produced flying flocks of literally hundreds, if not thousands, of huge White-collared Swifts streaming north up past Asa Wright.

In the lowlands, the focus of attention was on the rare, yet confiding, Double-striped Thick-Knee, a crepuscular shorebird. The first bird was found on one of Dave's tours into Wallerfield on July 6th. The second, first found on July 10th in a field of long grass near Trincity, remained for nearly two weeks. There are also unconfirmed reports of two birds in the Lowlands area of Tobago. Such sightings reflect the national trend. Of the 15 birds found in the last 20 years, all but three were found during July-August.

Another austral visitor synonymous with this time of year is the Nacunda Nighthawk. First reports are of approximately 15 birds found feeding on night-time flying insects drawn into the lights of the Piarco Airport car park at the end of June. Three birds have also been found in a more traditional feeding area close to Woodland settlement, south of San Fernando.

The gulf stream lies many miles off-shore and therefore migrating seabirds are not a common sight in our coastal waters. However, communication with fellow birdwatchers along the Antilles island chain confirms that large Shearwaters



Double-striped Thick-Knee
Photo by Beverly Jardine

pass by our shores during this time of year. A reliable yet undocumented report of a Great Shearwater, seen offshore Tobago on June 15th, fits into this pattern. All the more convincing is that the four previous documented sightings of this rare seabird have all occurred between June 13th – July 3rd.

Many species have now been documented expanding their known range beyond mainland South America and establishing populations in Trinidad. Much rarer, however, is a range expansion from our north. An exception to that rule is the Scaly-naped Pigeon. This is a common resident throughout the Lesser Antilles but has only reached north-east Tobago in the last 12 years. These birds have now firmly established themselves on Little Tobago island with at least 30 birds seen, and probably many more, on July 19th.



Action at the Nest Boxes

Hoot, hoot! Take a peep at these two juvenile Ferruginous Pymgy-Owls that were photographed along our driveway in early June.

Photo by Mason Flint



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T&T's New Species is up to Bat

By Johanne Ryan

Trinidad and Tobago can now declare that it has an endemic mammal. The newly described species is a bat named for the charismatic naturalist and television writer, producer and host, Sir David Attenborough. Restricted to the island of Tobago, the bat is called *Myotis attenboroughi*, or Sir David Attenborough's *Myotis*.

This bat is tiny and weighs an average of 4.1 grams (Moratelli et al., 2017). That is just about the same weight as one die. Our little creature joins the three other species of *Myotis* found in T&T. Two of those, the Riparian *Myotis* (*Myotis riparius*) and the Hairy-legged *Myotis* (*Myotis keaysi*) have been recorded right here at Springhill Estate.

The genus *Myotis*, originated in Asia and contains over 110 species that are distributed in both the old and new world (Moratelli et al., 2017). *Myotis* is part of the largest family of bats in the world – Vespertilionidae, also called Plain-nosed Bats. Like most Plain-nosed Bats, Sir David Attenborough's *Myotis*, feeds on insects, providing benefits to people by eating plant pests as well as insects that can spread disease to humans.



Myotis attenboroughi

Photo by Geoffrey Gomes

References:

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Evening Bats. Version 01 January 1997 (under construction). <http://tolweb.org/Vespertilionidae/16140/1997.01.01> in The Tree of Life Web Project, <http://tolweb.org/>

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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 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. Ages 5-16.

