My Internship in the Tropics

By Nicholas Munves

From June to August 2018, I interned at Asa Wright Nature Centre. My work here was the culmination of a lifelong interest in tropical biology. Growing up, I was fascinated by the natural world, and my interest gravitated to the heart of global biodiversity: the rainforest. Living in New York City, however, I could only experience it through books, wildlife documentaries, and visits to zoos and museums. Still, I retained my interest in biology, and eventually chose to study it at Haverford College. In the spring of my junior year, I finally got to see the rainforest up close. As part of a botany class, I travelled to Trinidad and Tobago. In a whirlwind tour, we visited more than a dozen sites, the most memorable being Asa Wright Nature Centre. There, I was captivated by the dazzling biodiversity no book or film could ever capture. I found the diversity of plant life to be especially striking, and the two days we spent there were not nearly enough to see it all. In the fall of my senior year, Haverford partnered with Asa Wright to offer a summer internship to qualified students. I jumped at the opportunity to return, and in early June, I did. I immediately got to work on the many projects my supervisor, Conservation Officer Johanne Ryan, assigned me. Topping the list was a self-guided tour of the driveway. I realised this project allowed me to introduce guests to plant ecology, a subject that fascinated me in college. I walked along the driveway and looked for plants with unusual adaptations to their environments. I gathered information on these plants and created a guide. We also brought in a mapping team to create a precise map of the driveway and the plants that grew along it. I hope that my work will help guests see the forest in a new light. I also assisted with one of Asa Wright’s most ambitious projects: bringing the critically endangered Trinidad piping guan to the property. My contribution was to find out which plants the guan liked to eat, and to look for those plants along the trails. By meticulously searching the trails with Asa Wright staff and visiting interns, I was able to catalogue more than 350 plants belonging to 10 species along the trails. During my time at Asa Wright, I got to see some incredible creatures: the prehistoric leatherback turtle and the bizarre velvet worm rank among my favourites. My best memories are of the friends I made at the Centre. Every member of the staff was incredibly warm and friendly and did their utmost to make me feel at home. I will miss them dearly as I return to New York and take the first steps of my post-college career.
T&T Birding Scene

July: The Birding Crossroads

By Martyn Kenefick

During July, we find species hitting our shores from two different directions. There will be both post-breeding wanderers from mainland South America and the first migrating shorebirds from the north. We have now built up sufficient data to predict the likely occurrence of some of these austral visitors, especially the Small-billed Elaenia. The first was found at Springhill on 4th July and there followed sightings of up to seven birds feeding along the boundaries of the Caroni Rice Project during the month and a further two birds in Carlisen Field. A similar pattern occurs with Dark-billed Cuckoos. The first two were again close to Caroni Rice Project on 12th July and a third near Charle ville on the 19th. A few days later, on 22nd July the first Nacunda Nighthawks were photographed, again at Caroni.

Of much rarer fare, an adult Jabiru put in a brief appearance near Fishing Pond on 6th July and, bizarrely, and for the second year running, a ludicrously tame Double-striped Thick-knee posed for photographers for more than a week at Queen's Park Savannah, Port of Spain.

Ducks are often a feature arriving in July. The first documented Fulvous Whistling-ducks of the season were found on Caroni Rice Project on the 12th and a pair of White-faced Whistling-ducks were photographed in a flooded field south of Aranguez on the 24th.

Finally, the first returning shorebirds of the autumn began to trickle through, the most notable being Stilt Sandpipers still in alternate plumage on the 12th. Meanwhile, good numbers of Lesser Yellowlegs and early Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers had arrived by the month's end.
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.

On 16th July, Asa Wright hosted Japanese volunteers for the second time. Yuta Kagaya, Yuko Mizokami and Hideyo Miromoto Craigwell of Island Buddy Limited did some trail maintenance on our Discovery Trail. We would like to thank them for coming and do hope that more people can visit Asa Wright through Island Buddy Limited.

ABOVE: Yuta, Yoko and Hideyo clear the trail.
Photo by Johanne Ryan
Trail Mapping

By Johanne Ryan

On 7th July, the Geographic Information Systems Society of Trinidad and Tobago (GISSTT) teamed up with the American Association of Petroleum Geologists (AAPG) Young Professionals T&T Chapter to map our trails. The volunteers were divided into four groups each guided by Asa Wright team leaders. Each group took on a different set of trails and together, the groups trekked more than two and a half miles of nature trails. The equipment used was provided by GISSTT. Participants used GPS devices and the ArcGIS Collectors mobile app. Everyone was able to enjoy the outdoors, while learning a bit too. We look forward to the next step of the exercise – creating the maps!