



# The Bellbird Newsletter

THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE



reservations@asawright.org Tel: (868) 667-4655

November 2019

## Bioblitz 2019: Tabaquite

By Stephanie Warren-Gittens

The 8th annual Bioblitz held by the Trinidad & Tobago field Naturalists' Club on November 2nd & 3rd 2019, took us to Tabaquite in central Trinidad. Bioblitz has become a staple and anticipated event for naturalists eager to get out there to find species, meet with old friends, make new connections and just be part of the energy that emanates from the Bioblitz community. As usual, all participants gathered early Saturday morning (and some, even from Friday evening), at basecamp, which this year was the Tabaquite Secondary School; its grounds providing a picturesque setting for camping.

After a quick briefing on the area and precautions to take for this year's event, Bioblitzers met with their respective group leaders for further briefing on the survey plan of action for the weekend. Bioblitzers split up into several groups based on their area of interest: Mammals, Plants, Aquatic, Invertebrates, Fungi and the Herpetologists (Amphibians and Reptiles). Some participants joined multiple groups for the opportunity to learn about different types of animals. For some, this was their first Bioblitz, and the whole event was a learning experience. At noon on Saturday, Bioblitzers were off to start the intense 24 hours of surveying. The sun was hot, and spirits were high as Bioblitzers surveyed the area that afternoon. While groups returned to basecamp as the sun set, others were just gearing up to begin night surveys for nocturnal organisms.

As the sun arose on Sunday morning, the birders were already out in the field, others prepared for the final stretch of surveys and activities were well underway in preparation for the public display which would take place at basecamp's main hall. Tabaquite residents and the wider national community were invited to see several displays that showcased what we found in Tabaquite. There were displays from groups such as the Asa Wright Nature Centre, the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club, Serpentarium, The Food & Agriculture Organisation, Central Pathfinders Club, Mushrooms of Trinidad and Tobago, the Shorebird Monitoring Programme, the Marine Group, the mammal group; and shells from Ivan Hinkson. iCare materials, provided by the EMA, were also distributed.

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*Aquatic group members at one of the survey sites  
Photo by Alan Chan*



*The public displays at basecamp  
Photo by Stephanie Warren-Gittens*



*Dan Jaggernaut of the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club  
interacting with visitors  
Photo by Stephanie Warren-Gittens*



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Surveying concluded at noon on Sunday, then groups were given one hour to collate their findings for the announcement of species found. The climax of the weekend occurred at 1:00 p.m., when it was revealed that a total of 681 species were found as follows:

### Vertebrates

- Mammals – 12
- Birds – 124
- Fish – 12
- Reptiles – 30
- Amphibians – 17

### Invertebrates

- Crustaceans – 2
- Arachnids – 12
- Butterflies & Moths- 41
- Dragonflies – 15
- Other insects- 58

Fungi – 30

Plants - 328

These numbers are expected to increase, as submitted photos and those on the iNaturalist app are perused for any organisms not included in the original species list. Some highlights of species for the area were sightings of an ocelot through camera traps, Red Howler Monkey and a Tayra, in daylight, in the middle of the road! The Bioblitz Committee would like to thank the Life Sciences Department of the University of the West Indies for providing equipment for surveys, the principal of the Tabaquite Secondary School for allowing us to use the school, Bermudez for sponsoring snacks, display groups such as Asa Wright Nature Centre for their continued involvement, visitors and all participants for another successful Bioblitz. Stay tuned to the TT Bioblitz Facebook page for photos and updates and see you all at Bioblitz 2020!



*Machete Savane (Chironius carinatus)*  
Photo by Shane Manchouck



*Red Howler Monkey (Alouatta macconnelli)*  
Photo by Mark Hulme



*Small-headed Treefrog (Dendropsophus microcephalus)*  
Photo by Vaughn Xavier Jameer



*Royal Palm (Roystonea regia)*  
Photo by Nandani Bridglal



*Mapepire Balsain (Bothrops atrox)*  
Photo by Zak Ali



*Golden-crowned Warbler (Basileuterus culicivorus)*  
Photo by Jerome Foster



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## T&T Birding Scene

# November: Ducks arriving

By Martyn Kenefick

November begins the arrival of international birdwatchers to T&T and, in turn, the month when unusual wildfowl turn up on the southbound migration from continental North America...and almost always occur on the wetlands in south-west Tobago. Mid-month saw not only four Ring-necked Ducks which are, in themselves pretty rare with just eight sightings this century arrive at Bon Accord but also a female Northern Pintail which, if accepted by the Rare Birds Committee will constitute just the fourth ever, and the first in fifteen years.

Elsewhere on the sister isle, both Blackpoll Warblers and Yellow-billed Cuckoos have been seen at various locations; up to six lingering Black Skimmers were still present at Tobago Plantations; five Prothonotary Warblers were in the mangrove edge at Bon Accord and a Glossy Ibis was seen on several dates at Canaan sewage ponds.

Birdwatching at Springhill, as with everywhere in the forest, can be quiet one day and leaping with birds the next. One bright morning at the end of the month, thirty minutes spent watching and hearing a sunny corner of the driveway produced no less than thirty-four species coming into a fruiting miconia tree. These included numbers of both Bay-headed and Turquoise Tanagers; Green Honeycreepers and a male Blue Dacnis; a splendid male Tropical Parula; both Collared and Green-backed Trogons and a couple of species we don't see every day



Northern Pintail  
Photo by Nigel Lallsingh



Ring-necked Duck  
Photo by Matt Kelly



Prothonotary Warbler  
Photo by Matt Kelly

like Streaked Xenops, White-shouldered Tanager ...amazing what a bit of sunshine does during the wet season. Throughout the month, our now "resident" Brown Violetear has been performing in front of the balcony and we are delighted to confirm that almost all of our Oilbirds have returned to Dunston cave ..... fingers crossed that everything now returns to normal.

In the Northern Range, our external tours have found at least one Trinidad Piping Guan above the property on the Blanchisseuse Road; the first Bay-breasted Warbler of the

season and several Yellow-legged Thrushes whilst on our east coast day, a couple of tours have managed to find Azure Gallinule along the western perimeter road inside Kernaham Settlement, Nariva.

Elsewhere, the first returning Ruby Topaz hummingbirds arrived on cue and another Green-throated Mango was seen in Lopinot Valley to our west. How long will it be before we can add this species to our hummingbird list at Asa Wright?





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## Photo Tips

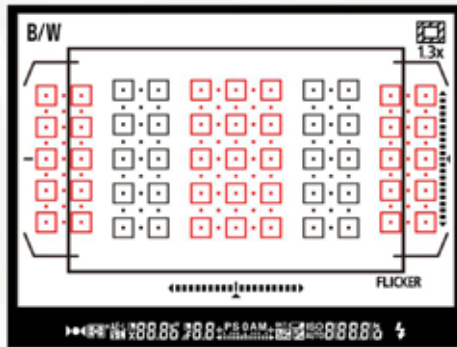
# Focus on Focus

By Hugh Simmons

In last month's "Photo Tips" I recommended not using Auto mode to gain more control over your photography and to increase the percentage of keepers. This month I will go into more detail about the focus options you now have.

With most DSLR cameras and advanced bridge cameras there are two controls for focus: focus mode and AF Area. AF Area options include single point and, depending on camera model, some multipoint options, 3D tracking and Auto. The vast majority of your general photography and stationary bird photography will be best served with single point focus. The other options may come into play for flight photography.

For years, we only had the center focus point and many photographers got used to putting the centre point on the eye of their subject, holding the shutter halfway down to lock focus and then recomposing before taking the shot. Now cameras have many focus point options in viewfinder (see illustration). One camera I have has 273! However, many focus points your camera has, you can move the active focus point around so that your focus point is where you want the eye of your subject in the final composition. This means that you can shoot and refocus repeatedly without having to recompose each time. One caveat is that often the centre point or the points around the centre are the most sensitive and therefore the fastest to acquire focus. If focus seems slow when using an off-centre point,



Focus points on a Nikon D500



AF-ON button on Canon



AF-ON button on Nikon

especially in low light consult your camera manual to see which points are the best to use. You may find that just using the center point in low light is best.

There is one major drawback to the focus and recompose method. When you hold the shutter button halfway down, you lock focus. You can then recompose and push the shutter button down all the way to take the photo. But if you lift your finger too far off the shutter button the camera will reacquire focus and since you have recomposed you are now focusing on a bush in the background. So now you have to put the focus point back on the eye, hold the shutter halfway down... lather, rinse, repeat.

But there is a solution that has been adopted by nearly every photographer I know. It is called Back Button Focus. On all but the most basic DSLRs and many bridge cameras there is a button on the back that is right under where your thumb falls as you hold the camera. It will likely be labeled AF-ON and pressing it will cause your camera to focus. Now go into your menus and turn off the ability of the shutter button to focus. In Nikon it is under AF Activation in the menus. This decouples focus from firing the shutter. Now you can put the focus point on the eye of your subject, tap the Back Button to focus, recompose and fire away without the camera refocusing.

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This is now where we talk about the other focus control that I mentioned at the start, Focus Mode. The options are Single and Continuous. Set to Single, the camera will focus once when you press the focus button even if you hold down the button. This is fine for stationary subjects. Set to Continuous, the camera will

refocus continuously as long as the focus button is pressed. This should be used for moving / flying subjects. What is life altering in fast-paced bird photography is that if you use Back Button Focus you can leave your camera on Continuous all the time. If you have a stationary subject, you just tap the Back Button once to acquire focus. But if your subject starts moving, you can hold

your thumb on the back button and you will be focusing continuously.

Back Button Focus takes a little bit of getting used to but becomes intuitive faster than you might think. As always, practice with new techniques and new gear before going on an important trip.



**Interested in spending a week improving your photography in a location rich with photo ops? Watch out for our photography symposium at the Asa Wright Nature Centre next fall.**

*Hugh Simmons is a freelance photographer, birder and conservationist. He is a patient teacher who enjoys sharing his experience with others to improve their photography.*

## The AWNC-Haverford College Connection

By Stephanie Zukerman, International Program Manager for the Haverford College Center for Peace and Global Citizenship, and Jonathan Wilson, Associate Professor of Environmental Studies



*Haverford students at AWNC with Naturalist Guide, Barry Ramdass (4th from left)  
Photo courtesy Stephanie Zukerman*

For the past two years, Haverford College, located just outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the U.S., has been sending a student to do a summer-long internship at Asa Wright. The internship is the result of a collaboration between two Centres at Haverford, the Center for Peace and Global Citizenship (CPGC) and the Koshland Integrative Natural Science Center (KINSC). The internship is a symbiotic partnership between Asa Wright and Haverford. It provides an opportunity for an Environmental Studies or Biology major to

contribute their skills and knowledge towards conservation and education projects at AWNC, assisting the Conservation Officer, Johanne Ryan. In exchange, the intern has the opportunity to live in a new cultural context while learning about botany, conservation, and ecotourism in a unique and beautiful setting that is different from their home, and is mentored by Asa Wright's knowledgeable staff.

Haverford Environmental Studies students encounter three pillars of environmentally informed, community-engaged work at Asa Wright: conservation, tourism, and education, which are common areas of strong interest to many of our students. The internship at AWNC provides

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a priceless opportunity to expand their knowledge, share what they have learned in their classes, and to experience a tropical ecosystem firsthand.

The partnership between Haverford and AWC was initiated in 2017 during a Haverford College field study to Trinidad and Tobago, which included three days and two nights at Asa Wright. The field study has now become an annual trip that will continue in 2020. The students participating in this field study are enrolled in a class called Economic Botany. The course is a multidisciplinary approach to the coevolution and co-domestication of plants and humans. Students study plant evolution, physiology, biochemistry, and growth and their consequent effects on human society. Through a competitive application process, 10 students from the class are selected to participate in the field study, where they examine facets of plants and people in Trinidad and Tobago. Through conversations with locals; lectures from academics, naturalists, and various professionals; and hikes through rainforests on both islands, students learn about the social, historical, and economic frameworks that Trinidadian and Tobagonian agriculture and labour are embedded within. At Asa Wright, field study participants visit a coffee grove, go on hikes, and learn about various environmentally themed topics from members of AWC's Board.

The field study has influenced and impacted our students' lives and understanding of the world in many ways. One trip alum is applying for



*Senior Guide, Caleb Walker, interacts with Haverford students  
Photo courtesy Stephanie Zukerman*



*Nick Munves who interned at AWC in 2018  
Photo courtesy Stephanie Zukerman*



*James Fitzmeyer Dougherty who interned at AWC in 2019.  
Photo by Johanne Ryan*

a Watson Fellowship to do citrus plant pathology around the world after meeting with the plant pathologists at University of the West Indies' Cocoa Research Centre. Another returned to Asa Wright as the first Haverford summer intern, where he created a map of the flora and fauna along the driveway. And these are only two of many examples.

The Haverford College community is excited to see how much this collaboration with Asa Wright has blossomed, and we look forward to it continuing to be a mutually beneficial partnership for years to come.

## 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.

