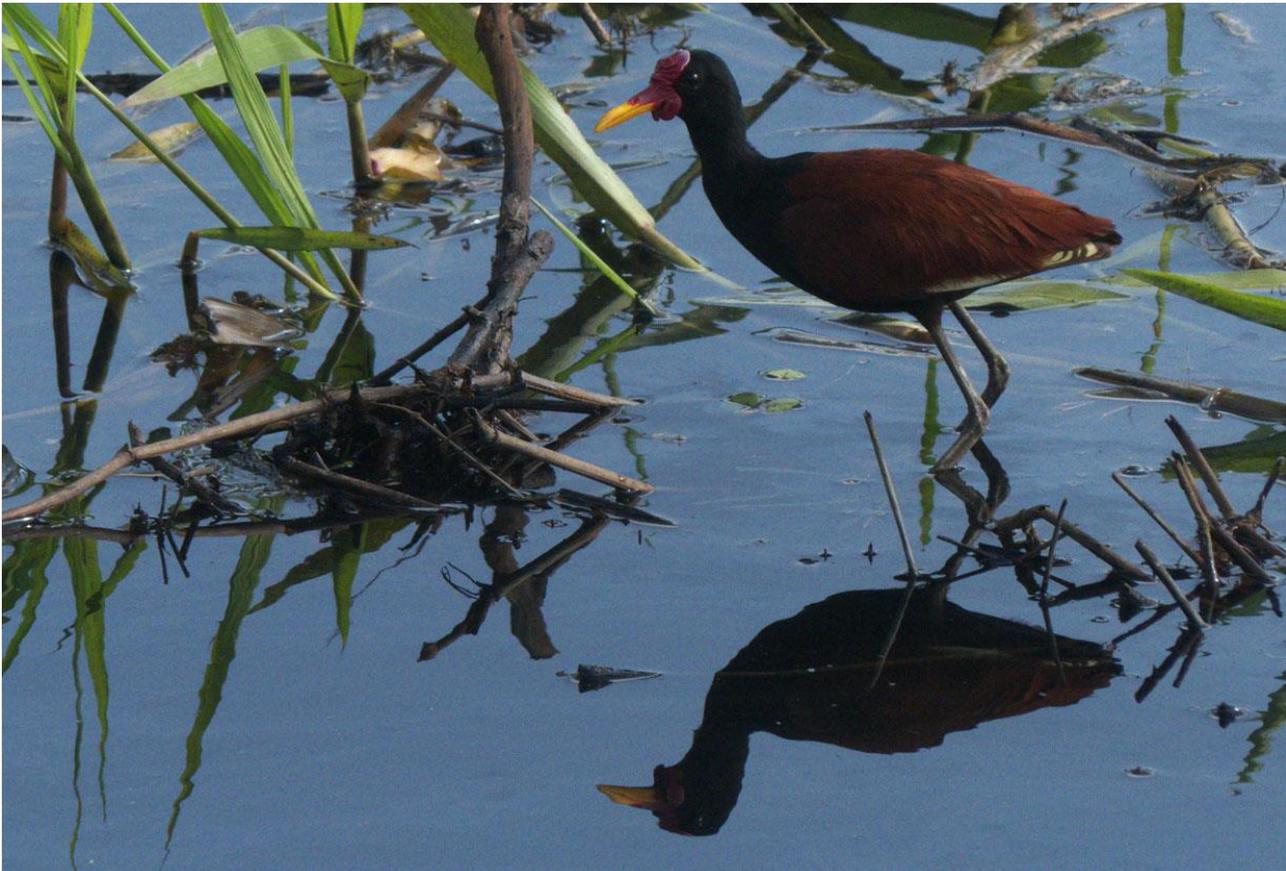




BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 8/2015

## TRINIDAD, JULY-AUGUST 2015

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**Fig. 1. Wattled Jacanas** are widespread at the wetlands of Trinidad, such as along Kernaham Rd.

In 2015, 30<sup>th</sup> July to 4<sup>th</sup> August (4.5 days of birding), I visited the Caribbean island of Trinidad, in Trinidad and Tobago. The visit was a part of a private birding RTW tour, with arrival from Tobago and departure to Florida. In terms of birdlife, the island nation is a connecting link between the Lesser Antilles and the mainland of South America, and has a pretty long list of recorded species. That does not mean that the local birdlife was completely charted. On the contrary, there clearly are many gaps in knowledge, for example in regard to migratory birds.

For me, the following 24 target species were the reason to visit the island: **Trinidad Piping Guan, Stripe-backed Bittern, Scarlet Ibis, Rufous Crab Hawk, Grey-breasted Crake, Yellow-breasted Crake, Azure Gallinule, Lilac-tailed Parrotlet, Oilbird, Chapman's Swift, White-chested Emerald, Tufted Coquette, Guianan Trogon, Chestnut Woodpecker, Black-crested Antshrike, White-bellied Antbird, Silvered Antbird, Short-tailed Pygmy Tyrant, Pied Water Tyrant, Golden-headed Manakin, Masked Cardinal, Yellow-hooded Blackbird, Yellow Oriole and Trinidad Euphonia.**

I had limited time and certain priorities, and therefore did not expect to see all the listed species. A total of 20 species were nevertheless located. In the end I missed **Stripe-backed Bittern**, **Rufous Crab Hawk**, **Grey-breasted Crake** and **Azure Gallinule**. Each of these species is either rare or so difficult to spot that more time would have been needed to look for them.

For a guidebook, I would recommend purchasing a copy of the Birds of Trinidad and Tobago, by Martyn Kenefick, Robin Restall and Floyd Hayes. The Helm Field Guides book may not be completely up-to-date anymore, but it works well as a field guide and also has descriptions of the main birding sites in both Trinidad and Tobago. Even more importantly, it has the endemic species. For the majority of the visitors, a stay in Trinidad is not their first one in the Neotropics and they are already familiar with species widespread in the region. Sound recordings are available at Xeno Canto, in the Internet, the best source of such materials.

The following notes have been made to help other independent birders and groups of birders to plan and organize their visit in the island. In reference to the available sources in the Internet, there was a need to provide up-to-date information to reduce dependency on local middle-men, whose help comes with an increasingly high price tag and does not necessarily accommodate proper bird observation activities (e.g. ASA Wright Lodge).

In regard to weather, I only experienced few short showers of rain. Otherwise, the weather was hot and sunny. July is one of the best times to go, in case one desires to avoid hurricanes and enjoy stable weather conditions.

All in all, almost 200 bird species were recorded in Trinidad. Out of them, some of the most common ones will not as a rule be repeatedly mentioned in the following text. These include **Black and Turkey Vultures**, **Eared Doves**, **Ruddy Ground Doves**, **Feral Rock Doves**, **Grey and Tropical Kingbirds**, **Blue-grey** and **Palm Tanagers**, **Bananaquits**, **Carib Grackles** and **Shiny Cowbirds**. On the other hand, all the rare and endemic species will be there, if I have seen or heard them.



**Fig. 2.** Another Caribbean Airlines ATR shuttle arrives from Tobago. A visit to Trinidad is best combined with Tobago, the more accommodating of the two islands.

## TIMETABLE

My individual program was as follows. As the list of sites show, I did most of the traditional birding locations of Trinidad, the most notable exception being the Mt. St. Benedict/Pax Guesthouse area.

**30<sup>th</sup> July:** Arrival, check in at Cannons of Trinidad and Tobago, and a visit to a supermarket, Arima.

**31<sup>st</sup> July:** ASA Wright, Blanchisseuse Road, Caroni Swamp.

**1<sup>st</sup> Aug:** Kernaham Rd, Nariva Swamp, lower Blanchisseuse Road.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Aug:** Grande Riviere, Galera Point, lower Blanchisseuse Road.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Aug:** (ASA Wright), Blanchisseuse Road, Aripo Livestock Station, Caroni Swamp.

**4<sup>th</sup> Aug:** Aripo Livestock Station, Caroni Rice Fields. Departure to Miami.



**Fig. 3.** A female **White-headed Marshbird**, another common inhabitant of Trinidadian wetlands.

## CAR RENTAL

My choices for car rental were a local branch of Alamo and a Nissan Wingroad van, a good car but a poor place to store baggage as the bags could not be concealed. I do not really understand why rental agencies rent cars without trunks for tourists. Nevertheless, Alamo had a counter at the Piarco International Airport and provided high quality, professional service. The cars were available on spot and were also returned at the airport, in front of the arrivals (inner lane). The rate for four-and-half days was USD 312 (€278), including regular CDW, taxes and fees, and with unlimited kilometers. In addition, I also paid TTD 60 (€8) to get a punctured tire fixed, in a tire shop in Arima. Alamo was happy with their work.

While in Tobago, some locals told that I would probably die in Trinidad, a place of crime, mayhem and death. In there, if one had a car crash, people would steal one's belongings and leave one to die in the wreck. Well, even though the crime statistics are there and such incidents have occurred, and some of the police apparently are corrupt, I do not believe that the situation is any

worse than in most US cities, for example. According to the Alamo people, only the eastern suburbs of Port-of-Spain, on the hills which hold no interest in terms of birding, need to be avoided. Otherwise, normal vigilance should be enough.

Nevertheless, having a flat tire in Trinidad is a stressful situation, if this happens in a remote location. It would be all too easy for somebody to stop, put a bullet in one's brain, and empty the car. On the 3rd of August, my right front tire was deliberately punctured in Arima (by somebody envious of a 'rich tourist'?), by sticking something sharp through the side wall of the tire, and it went flat in the Morne Bleu section of the Blanchisseuse Road.

First, I slowly moved the car 100 meters to a good spot, both in terms of tire change and visibility. There were not many cars driving on the road in the middle of morning. Each time I heard that one approached, I stopped loosening the bolts and pretended to be birding. At the time I had to employ a car jack, I could not hide anymore. Four cars stopped, fortunately only to offer help, which I declined, as I was already about to finish the job. Later that day, the puncture was fixed in Arima. The operation took 15 minutes.



**Fig. 4.** My Alamo Nissan Wingroad van at ASA Wright parking lot, early in the morning.

Overall, driving was not difficult in Trinidad. In the beginning of the Blanchisseuse Rd, one had to be careful with the many lorries (major gravel mining projects; see Google Earth). On the Churchill Roosevelt Hwy, overtaking and overspeeding was bit wild at times. On the Grande Riviere road, some sections had quite a few potholes. At night and early morning, one had to be careful not to hit the many drunkards, and the few broken bottles on the road. The majority of the roads were,

however, fine or reasonably good, and the behavior of other drivers predictably self-serving, as a rule. I had printed a number of Google maps and the prints were quite adequate for orientation. One does not need a local guide to locate the birding sites in Trinidad.



**Fig. 5.** Traffic as usual, on the Churchill Roosevelt Highway, with its informative road signs.

## **ACCOMMODATION AND FOOD**

Finding an affordable but well-located and secure room is not necessarily an easy task in Trinidad. After a long search, I focused on the town of Arima, which had a locational advantage of being in the center of Northern Trinidad, in a position which allowed a variety of day trips to the main birding sites. The driving times (one way) were as follows: To Blanchisseuse Rd/ASA Wright (30 min), Caroni Swamp/Rice Fields (1 h to 1 h 15 min), Nariva Swamp (1 h 15 min), Kernaham Road (1 h 30 min), Aripo Livestock Station (10 min), Galera Point (2 h) and Grande Riviere (2 h 10 min). The times depend on traffic and road works, too, early mornings being the best time. I did not follow the speed limits to the letter, but nevertheless drove slower than the average locals.

My accommodation was at Cannons of Trinidad and Tobago, Arima unit (Calle Tumpuna 20B). The company has self-catering flats at three towns in Trinidad, aimed mainly for conference groups. The Arima unit was in the same building with a shop which rented generators and other such machinery. The staff was there in the weekdays, but not in the weekends. I had a three bedroom flat for six persons, with three toilets, two showers, a kitchen and a living room. It was a budget deal charged according to the number of people, in my case (one person) USD 250 (€223) for five nights (USD 50/€45 per night).

There was a relatively secure parking space inside a security gate, right by my first floor kitchen window. The gate was, however, out of order, and therefore remained open all the time

(practical). The entrance veranda was gated with a separate lock and all the windows (tinted to prevent visibility) had iron bars on them. There were no problems with security during my stay.

The bed at the master bedroom was huge and comfortable, air conditioning effective and everything in the kitchen worked well. There were, however, three irritating problems with the accommodation, the third one of serious nature. First of all, as a result of poor construction, the water on the floor of my shower did not drain properly but seeped through to wall, eventually forming a large pool right in front the bedroom entrance. Second, I once accidentally locked the bedroom door and there was no key for it. With a help of a lady who stayed in the neighboring flat, we contacted a man in a street-side grill. He had a mobile phone and was able to alert the proprietor. The latter man had, however, left the town for the weekend. Somebody else would arrive, he told me. Well, they arrived, two days later. Fortunately, after five hours of searching and experimenting, I had discovered a way to break in! A piece of metal forced the lock open.

The third problem considered the weekend nights in Trinidadian towns. Drunks and incredibly loud music performances rule the night. On my second night in Arima, I had just hit the bed, completely exhausted, and was contemplating on a 04.00 wake up, when the gates of hell opened outside. At Flavors Bar, 100 meters away, they had an eight hour long 'breakfast party', with some live music. There are numerous local artists around, and they give ear-shattering street concerts during the day, too. As the first wall of sound, like a stadium concert in one's bedroom, hit the building, car alarms could be heard all along the street. One of the recurring sound effects, every 20 seconds throughout the night, was a lorry blowing its horns at full force, amplified by ten times.

At 04.30, when I passed the bar on my way to Nariva Swamp, after a sleepless night, I could see a total of four young blokes around a table, none of them drinking. Empty water bottles danced on the floor of the Wingroad as sound blasts hit them, the bottles reaching the side windows at the closest point... The next night, everything was repeated till 03.15... In other words, they stopped ten minutes before I started my night drive to Grande Riviere... It was, after all, a Sunday morning. Fortunately, I had been able to sleep four hours in another room. As a result of these two nights, I was pretty tired during the latter part of my stay in Trinidad. I can still hear a **Goldcrest**, though, thanks to silicone ear plugs which saved my hearing.

For the location and room rate, the parking space and the comfort of the flat, I could recommend the Cannons of Trinidad and Tobago in Arima as a great base for birding in Trinidad. Because of its neighbor, the Flavors Bar, I would not recommend staying there on weekends. It could be a wise move to stay a few days in Arima and two nights in the northeast, from where Grande Riviere, Galera Point and Nariva Swamp (on return journey) could be visited with ease. ASA Wright, on the other hand, is only for people who light their campfires with large nomination notes. USD 180 per night for a (not so good) room, plus a need to attend meals at fixed times... It is a summer camp.

In regard to food, Arima had many choices. I cooked some of the meals by myself, and also bought some warm take-away meals (such as grilled chicken, pastries etc.) at a close-by supermarket. Rodney's Supermarket, a short drive towards the center of Arima, on Calle Tumpuna, was relatively well stocked and had a bakery, too. Angostura bitter, perhaps the best known

Trinidadian export product, was very cheap there, if compared to European prices. Some of younger females of the staff were, however, rather flirtatious towards a potential 'sugar daddy', delaying my shopping a bit with their antics. Overall, a single European male would not remain single for long in Trinidad, if one was looking for company.

## **BIRDS AND SITES**

### **Blanchisseuse Rd**

North of the city of Arima, the Blanchisseuse Rd crisscrosses the mountains of the Northern Range. It is best approached on the Arima By-Pass (east of the city, beware the odd deep potholes). The Prince Street takes more time even if one does not get lost on the one-way alleys. The by-pass soon becomes the Blanchisseuse Rd, well before reaching the forest proper and, soon afterwards, a left hand junction to the ASA Wright Lodge. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, I drove the road up to the highest point, Morne Bleu (large transmitter tower on the left, above 600 m level), and down the hill to a junction, where I turned left, down to Ortinola and Lopinot, after which a U-turn was made for a return drive.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> August, I made short late afternoon/sunset trips to the lower part of the road, next to the **Oilbird** cave, at the forest's edge. On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, I went to Morne Bleu, before returning to Arima, in order to visit the Aripo Livestock Station. The traffic on the road was light, with the exception of early mornings (ASA Wright staff goes to work at 07.00) and sunset, when long convoys of private cars descended from the mountains. The road was being improved but the roadworks were not a problem. Along the Blanchisseuse Rd, there are numerous places where it is possible to park one's cars without disturbing the other users of the road. Frequent stops can be recommended, as there are many birds in the forest.

To my relief, first a pair ('displaying') and then a single **Trinidad Euphonia** were readily seen in roadside grass while driving up, in the first morning. There clearly was some particularly tasty food source there, which kept the birds in sight despite passing cars. Three species of trogons (**Guianan**, **Collared** and **Green-backed**) were regularly heard in the forest but difficult to see. In the end, I stopped in one bend and played my **Guianan Trogon** recording. In few moments, a total of five birds had gathered to stare me at nearby trees!

A male **Chestnut-bellied Seed-finch** was seen standing on a garden fence at the second gravel mine junction (start of the Blanchisseuse Rd). One of last missing target species was the **White-chested Emerald**, which was finally seen on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, about 2 km uphill from there, characteristically on top of a large bush. A **White-bellied Antbird** was calling in the forest few hundred meters inside the main forest.

At Morne Bleu, there is a great viewpoint for birds of prey and tanagers, by the main road. The hawks and eagles included, in addition to the abundant vultures, a splendid **Swallow-tailed Kite** (always a pleasure to observe!), a **Long-winged Harrier** (!), a **Great Black Hawk** and a **Short-tailed Hawk**. In the low trees and bushes, I saw **Hepatic**, **Bay-headed**, **Turquoise** and **Speckled Tanagers**,

**Sooty Grassquits, Green and Red-legged Honeycreepers, Blue Dacnises and a Violaceous Euphonia.**

As will be explained below, **Oilbirds** may be recorded at the lower part of the Blanchisseuse Rd, even though several visits may be required, to hear and perhaps also to see one. A **Common Pauraque** and a **Common Potoo** were heard while waiting for them. **Black Myotis** are common over the open farmland at sunset.

Other birds along the Blanchisseuse road included **Little Tinamous, Scaled Pigeons, Grey-fronted Doves, Orange-winged Parrots, a Blue-headed Parrot, Band-rumped, Grey-rumped and Short-tailed Swifts, Rufous-breasted and Green** (one of them visited my car!) **Hermits, Tufted Coquettes, Blue-chinned Sapphires, Copper-rumped Hummingbirds, a Black-throated Mango, White-necked Jacobins, Stripe-breasted Spinetails, a Plain-brown and a Cocoa Woodcreeper, Barred Antshrikes, a Forest Elaenia, Streaked Flycatchers, White-bearded Manakins, Southern Rough-winged Swallows, Rufous-breasted Wrens, an Orange-billed Nightingale-thrush, Cocoa, Spectacled and White-necked Thrushes, Black-faced Ant-thrushes** (heard only), **Golden-fronted Greenlets, Bay-headed, White-lined and Silver-beaked Tanagers, Blue-black Grassquits, a Red-breasted Blackbird, Yellow Orioles and Crested Oropendolas.**



**Fig. 6.** An immature male **White-necked Jacobin**, widespread but not numerous in Trinidad.

### **ASA Wright Lodge**

Twenty kilometers north of Arima and Eastern Main Rd, first north on the Arima By-Pass and then forward on Blanchisseuse Rd, there is a signposted junction to ASA Wright Lodge, a money-making

tourist trap, with a well-marketed green-wash image of ‘non-profit’ conservation and birdwatching, and ‘inexpensive’ services.

Never in my decades of globetrotting have I seen a site supposedly protected for birds so hostile towards birding there. To start with, there is no access to the nature trails. One may only enter them in a group of tourists, the majority of whom do not know how to bird in a tropical forest, and with a lodge guide who tells one what to look at, lecturing on topics new to laymen but of little interest for seasoned birders. All this is collectively done after 10.00, when the morning activity of birds has ceased, and all the tourists have had their restaurant breakfast, during the hot and dull hours of the day. No wonder that the Internet reports of ASA Wright birding list so few bird species. I saw more in an hour after sunrise, standing by my car at their parking lot.

ASA Wright used to be something else and also perhaps the easiest place in the world to see **Oilbirds**. Today, this is history. As explained by their receptionist, I should have stayed three nights in their rooms, or paid the USD 540 at the reception, to gain a right to access the cave, with a guide! Even then, one could not choose a date but had to wait few days for a group visit. That must be the highest price tag in the world to see a ‘garden bird’ (the cave is close by), and a kind of world record in greedy bird tourism services, too. Their business anthem must be borrowed from Donald Trump’s Apprentice: ‘Money, money, mooney...mooney!’



**Fig. 7.** The entrance of the ASA Wright Lodge, as seen by my eyes, after a visit there.

The **Oilbirds** can be heard and perhaps also seen from the public Blanchisseuse Rd, around sunset when they leave the cave in their search for ripe fruit. I scored on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August. One may either scan the sky and listen at the cleared slope just before entering the forest, about 500 meters before the ASA Wright junction, or look towards the cave (it is below the buildings, in Arima direction) between the forest's edge and the junction. The road is narrow but there is just enough space to park and view the valley below, through some openings between large trees.

Otherwise, I visited ASA Wright twice. On the 30<sup>th</sup> July, I drove in (as slowly as possible) at 06.00, to wait for the reception to open, to be able to ask about day visit rules (visiting hours 09.00 – 17.00) and arrangements, including a visit to the Oilbird Cave. I met a security guard and did the waiting at their parking lot, which had good views to edge habitats, flowering bushes, canopies of large trees and the sky above forested valleys and slopes. After a negative response at 07.30, I stayed for another 30 minutes, confused by the regulations and prices, before driving the access road out, with few stops when something interesting was spotted along it. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, I did almost the same program, meeting another security guard, but stayed only till 06.45, running out of patience. There are mosquitoes, bring repellent.

I do not know what has gone wrong with ASA Wright. The staff appeared to be stressed and not happy at all with their workplace. I saw strained faces and arguments between the staff members, and no smiles at all, even though the people seemed to do their best to behave well towards their US and Japanese customers. Fortunately, it is not necessary at all to stay in this place, or employ their guides to visit other sites in Trinidad. All the species within their premises may be seen along the Blanchisseuse Rd and at the other sites of Trinidad, even though the **Oilbird** and **Trinidad Motmot** may be harder to spot. There are other caves for the former, but they involve longer walks in mountain forests. One motmot was seen along the ASA Wright access road, not far from the Blanchisseuse Rd.

Other birds along the access road, some visible from the Blanchisseuse Rd, too, included: a **Common Black Hawk**, a **White-tipped** and **Grey-fronted Doves**, a party of **Lilac-tailed Parrotlets**, and a **Golden-headed Manakin**.

At the parking lot, the following species were seen: an **Ornate Hawk Eagle** (soaring over the forest in the west), **Scaled Pigeons**, **White-collared**, **Chestnut-collared**, **Band-rumped**, **Grey-rumped**, at least six **Chapman's** (great views in the morning light, flying low) and **Short-tailed Swifts**, **Rufous-breasted**, **Little** and **Green Hermits**, **Tufted Coquettes**, a **White-chested Emerald**, **Copper-rumped Hummingbirds**, **Blue-chinned Sapphires**, **Black-throated Mangos**, a **Chestnut Woodpecker** (flew in and landed in the canopy of a nearby large tree), a **Streaked Xenops**, **Barred Antshrikes**, a *miserabilis* **Short-tailed Pygmy-tyrant** (funny sight when flying between trees), a **Piratic Flycatcher** (with a nest in a bush), **Streaked Flycatchers**, a **Great Kiskadee**, a **White-bearded Manakin**, a **House Wren**, **White-lined Swallow** and **Silver-beaked Tanagers**, **Purple Honeycreepers**, **Red-crowned Ant Tanagers**, **Yellow Orioles**, **Crested Oropendolas** and **Violaceous Euphonias**.

Habituated **Red-rumped Agoutis** were common around the buildings.

## Caroni Swamp/Rice fields

I visited the site twice, on the 31<sup>st</sup> July, between 14.00 and 17.30, and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, between 15.00 and 17.45. They close the gated Information Centre area, at the end of the access road, at 18.00. On the first visit, the security guard almost did not let me in, because he thought that my scope was a movie camera, for which one needs a ministry permit! After a long argument, he let me pass. Afterwards, it took a while to find a spot where I could sit in a shadow and nevertheless have a good view of the area, which may appear rather closed in the beginning. All the benches were either in direct sunlight or without a view. There were plenty of mosquitoes and I was happy to have repellent with me.

My preferred route to Caroni Swamp was: To the Churchill Roosevelt Hwy, towards Port-of-Spain with a stop at the Piarco Airport access road (gas station and a good bakery with pizzas), again to the west on the highway, to the left at the Caroni/Southern Main Rd junction, past the Trantrill Rd (to the left) and to the right at a large (La Paille) roundabout, forward past a site for cremation, to the right across a bridge over Uriah Butler Hwy, veering left at the end of the bridge and entering the Caroni Swamp access road on the right. The driving time was about 60 to 75 minutes one way, depending on traffic.

There is a good wet field at a 90 degree curve to the left, on the Caroni Savannah Rd, between La Paille roundabout and Uriah Butler Hwy. There is plenty of space for parking there and a short (20 meter) walk to the field, on a track across a low embankment closed by a cable. Be sure to make it clear to other drivers on the busy road that you are going to turn off road at the 90 degree curve. The field had a **Pinnated Bittern** and dozens of **Yellow-headed Blackbirds**. At the eastern end of the bridge across the Uriah Butler Hwy, there were some interesting reed-fringed ponds on the left, visible from the bridge, but I dared not to park there, because of the traffic. There are more good wetlands to the south (see satellite images), but how to access them?

In the end, I never joined a boat trip to the swamp. It was not expensive, but on the 31<sup>st</sup> July, I had decided to postpone the treat to a later stage of the stay (as a treat), when two groups in small boats asked me to join them at the Information Centre. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> Aug, I would have been ready to go, but for some reason there were no boats departing from the Information Centre jetty. I should have made a reservation. I went to the other jetty, at the start of the entrance road, but they only had big boats, crowded by some 35 passengers on each of them, mostly large Hindu families with many small children. These boats are too wide for the narrow channels and scare everything away. Overall, I decided a mass tourism style 'bus sightseeing tour' like that was not really worth my while.

On the first visit, a total of 50 **Scarlet Ibises** were seen flying over the centre. What a wonderful species! On the second visit, not a single one was seen! Either join a boat trip or be prepared for more than a single visit! At least two **Mangrove Rails** were calling in the mangroves, once together with a **Rufous-necked Wood-Rail**. A **Yellow-breasted Crake** joined the chorus at a grassy edge of the mangrove area. At a small 'rubbish pool', at the start of the access road, a **Spotted** and a **Solitary Sandpiper**, and a **Wattled Jacana** were observed.

**Green-throated Mangos** are regularly seen at the information centre; I saw a total of three males, all of them initially noticed by their peculiar, tapping calls. **Black-crested Antshrikes** were common and noisy, but difficult to see in the afternoon. The first **Masked Cardinal** was feeding on a piece of bread given to it, on a fence by the gate, and nine more were seen flying around the place during the two visits. A few **Yellow Orioles** were also recorded around the information centre.



**Fig. 8.** My first ever **Masked Cardinal**, feasting on bread at Caroni Swamp Information Centre.



**Fig. 9.** One of the more sustainable and knowledgeable tour operators at Caroni Swamp.

Other birds around the Caroni Swamp Information Centre (mostly flying over) and Caroni rice fields included a few **Black-bellied Whistling Ducks**, **Yellow-crowned Night Herons**, **Tricolored**

**Hérons, Western Cattle, Snow, Great and Little Blue Egrets, Ospreys, White Hawks, Yellow-headed Caracaras, Orange-winged Parrots, Green-rumped Parrotlets (many), a Striped Cuckoo, Fork-tailed Palm Swifts, a Great Kiskadee, Fork-tailed Flycatchers (many flying high over to south), Blue-and-white Swallows, Grey-breasted (many) and Caribbean (two) Martins, Southern Rough-winged Swallows, a Masked Yellowthroat, Blue-black Grassquits and Saffron Finches.**

### Nariva Swamp

The Nariva Swamp is a large area and one needs to decide which parts to focus on. On the way to the swamp, be careful at Sangre Grande where the route can be confusing. Going south at night, I drove through the centre, and had no problems. Returning north, I tried the by-pass and got completely lost, for 30 minutes. Roadside bananas were TTD 12 (€1.60, USD 1.8) for 2 kilos, slightly less than in Europe, but of better quality and grown in a garden. On my way back from Nariva Swamp to Arima, roadside birds included a **Crane Hawk**, a recent (?) addition to the local avifauna, and a **Yellow-headed Caracara**.

On the Manzanilla Mayaro Rd, at the Nariva Swamp, I contemplated on visiting the swamp by a boat. A two hour trip on a Nariva River side stream would have been TTD 300 (€41, USD 46), starting at a field station just past the well-known Ramsar sign, by a canal. A talk with the boatmen did, however, discourage me. **Azure Gallinules** were hardly ever seen on these tours. I would have a better chance at the Kernaham Settlement.



**Fig. 10.** The Ramsar sign site, **Silvered Antbirds** on the right. Boat tours start by the buildings.

Just before the above-mentioned Ramsar sign, driving south, there is space to park. I could hear **Silvered Antbirds** calling in the bushes between the road and a canal, about 15 meters off the

highway. What is more, I could see a path in tall grass. Looks like a bird guide stake-out for the species, I thought. Groups of birders must have used that path before... In I went, and found out that the path did indeed end before the canal, in a **Silvered Antbird** territory. After a short play of a Xeno Canto recording, a skulking antbird appeared, a bit too close for my binoculars, and repeated this a few times. Three males responded to the recording, on both sides of the canal. Be sensitive with these birds and do not play your tape too loud or too long. Waking up their curiosity is enough. Two **Red-bellied Macaws** passed by, too.

Another interesting site was the 'seaside lagoon', actually Nariva River estuary, soon after one crossed a bridge across it (check the abandoned transmitter station on the right, too, for **Red-rumped Woodpeckers**). At the estuary, migratory shorebirds included a party of 12 **Spotted Sandpipers**, two **Semipalmated Sandpipers** and four **Semipalmated Plovers**. As a sign of limited local observations, a supposedly rare visitor was located on the beach: an adult **Baird's Sandpiper** in breeding plumage. Contrary to the information in *Birds of Trinidad and Tobago* (Kenefick et al), it is not only a grassland specialist on migration but may also be seen on sandy beaches, prospecting on dry seaweed and gravel some distance away from water, as this individual did. Moreover, there was a **Brown Pelican**, a **Green Heron**, a **Large-billed Tern** and a surprising party of no less than 18 **Little Egrets**. What on earth did they do there?!

### Kernaham Road

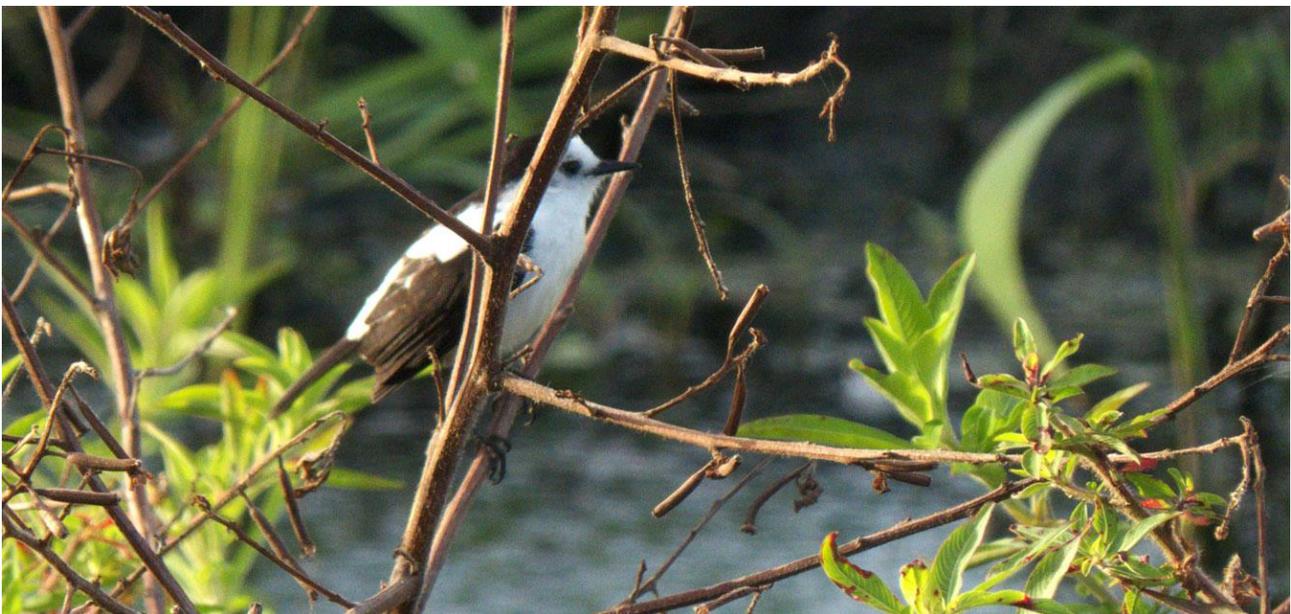
Most of my time at Nariwa Swamp was spent at Kernaham Settlement, on Kernaham Rd (turn right about 6 km (a rough estimate) south of the field station). At this site, it is possible to enter a network of narrow tarmac roads surrounded by marshes and small ponds, a predominantly open area with some houses and small gardens, including some rather nice lotus gardens! At one point, I entered a gravel track on an embankment and followed it as far south as possible, before making a rather challenging U-turn. I went to the Kernaham area first after sunrise (the best birding) and again after scoring with the **Silvered Antbirds**.



**Fig. 11.** The Kernaham Rd is well signposted along the Manzanilla Mayaro Rd.

At the Kernaham area, a good variety of wetland species were seen. A **Pinnated Bittern** was fishing at a rice field between houses, early in the morning. **Striated Herons** were common and there was also one **Green Heron**. **Wattled Jacanas** appeared to occupy every roadside pond and channel. **Pied Water-tyrants** and **White-headed Marsh-tyrants** were also common, with a few nests right next to the main road. Four **Yellow-hooded Blackbirds** and twelve **Yellow Orioles** were observed in and around the marshlands.

Other species at the site included **Black-bellied Whistling Ducks**, **Tricolored Herons**, **Western Cattle**, **Great, Little Blue** and **Snowy Egrets**, a **Pearl Kite**, **Savanna Hawks**, **Southern Lapwings**, **Plain-breasted Ground Doves**, **Orange-winged Amazons**, many **Smooth-billed Anis**, **Ringed Kingfishers**, **Yellow-chinned Spinetails**, a **Yellow-bellied Elaenia**, a **Sulphury Flycatcher**, **Great Kiskadees**, **Fork-tailed Flycatchers**, **White-winged Swallows**, **Southern Rough-winged Swallows**, many **Grey-breasted Martins**, **House Wrens**, **Silver-beaked Tanagers**, **Bicolored Conebills**, **Blue-black Grassquits**, **Greyish Saltators**, a **Crested Oropendola** and **Red-breasted Blackbirds**.



**Fig. 12.** Several pairs of **Pied Water-Tyrants** had their nests right by the Kernaham Rd.

### **Aripo Livestock Station**

An easy place to visit and move around in peace, the Aripo Livestock Station is an attractive site to visit in-between the more diverse and demanding forests and wetlands of Trinidad. The station is readily located 2.2 km east of the Arima By-Pass junction, towards Valencia, on the northern side of the Eastern Main Road (large meadows, signposted). I went to the Aripo Livestock Station twice, first in the early afternoon and second early in the morning, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of August.

I did, however, miss the main pond (turn left after passing the first buildings), which was spotted only afterwards, in satellite images. There is a good reason for this. I had not originally planned to visit the station at all and therefore made no preparations for it. Only towards the end of the visit, when chances to see additional target species were close to zero, I went there to add species on my world year list. 2015 was after all, my 11<sup>th</sup> year with more than 1.000 species in the year list.

The men at the gate were welcoming and readily gave a permit to access the site. I drove past the main buildings, veered right towards the cattle (**Water Buffalos**) feeding station, veered left there and crossed the meadows to a small hill, where I made a U-turn at a four-track junction. On the second visit, a similar route was followed, very slowly and windows open. It was important to look around to give space to the staff cars on the track, and more importantly, to let the buffaloes to be hearded between their fenced grazing areas and the feeding station. The massive animals did not exactly invite close proximity, even though I have seen small kids in control of them in Asia.



**Fig. 13.** Watching birds? Or my cows? MMOOHH! Come in, and we will see who is the boss here!

Some of the birds at the site were not recorded anywhere else in Trinidad: a **Double-toothed Kite**, a **South American Snipe**, an adult **Least Sandpiper** in breeding plumage, many **Grassland Yellow Finches** (the only site in Trinidad?) and **Ruddy-breasted Seedeaters** (saw only three individuals). **Black** and **Turkey Vultures** roost on the hillsides and can be abundant in the morning. A soaring party of 500+ **Black Vultures** was an impressive sight.

More common species included: A **Striated Heron**, **Little Blue Herons**, **Savanna Hawks**, a **Purple Gallinule**, **Wattled Jacanas**, **Southern Lapwings**, **Solitary Sandpipers**, a **Plain-breasted Ground Dove**, many **Feral Rock Doves**, **Orange-winged Amazons**, **Green-rumped Parrotlets**, **Smooth-billed Anis**, a **Fork-tailed Palm Swift**, **Blue-and-white Swallows**, **White-winged Swallows**, **Southern Rough-winged Swallows**, **Grey-breasted Martins**, **Yellow-throated Spinetails**, **Yellow-bellied Elaenias**, **Boat-billed Flycatchers**, **Fork-tailed Flycatchers**, **Pied Water-tyrants**, **White-headed Marsh-tyrants**, **House Wrens**, a **Masked Yellowthroat**, **Blue-black Grassquits**, **Yellow Orioles** and **Red-breasted Blackbirds**.



**Fig. 14.** A **Red-breasted Blackbird** has just taken off, at Aripo Livestock Station.

### **Galera Point**

A side-kick of a Grande Riviere trip, the Galera Point is located at the northeastern corner of Trinidad. From there, it is possible to identify individual houses at the Crown Point of Tobago, which appears to be surprisingly close. The access is straightforward. At the Toco Main Rd, one enters a Y-junction, left to Toco, Paria and Grande Riviere, and right to Galera Point Lighthouse. It is about 5 km to the lighthouse, on the Galera Rd, along which a **Yellow-rumped Cacique** and **Fork-tailed Flycatchers** were seen. Check Google Maps.

In the end of the access road, park your vehicle at the car park and enter the lighthouse area on foot. There are picnic tables at the point, where it is possible to sit down and scan the sea and rocks with a scope, for resident and migrating seabirds. The views are limited by trees, but adequate. Prepare to hear some stupid questions and comments, as many local tourists visit the site, and some of them have it difficult to accept that it is possible to leave one's house in a group of less than 15 people. One obnoxious brat claimed that I was peeping on people with my scope!

I went to Galera Point on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August, during the hot mid-day hours, after visiting Grande Riviere. Fortunately, the trees provided some shade and there was a cool sea breeze. No **Lilac-tailed Parrotlets** could be seen at that time of the day, even though the lighthouse has a reputation of being one of the best sites for them. Instead, fair numbers of seabirds were seen in the 45 minutes I spent at the lighthouse: 4 **Brown Pelicans**, 4 **Magnificent Frigatebirds**, a **Red-footed Booby** ('white-tailed' morph), a **Laughing Gull**, 5 *eurygnatha* **Sandwich Terns**, 10 **Roseate Terns**, about 150 **Common Terns** and 40 **Brown Noddies**.

The observed birds also included a **Long-billed Curlew** migrating south past the Galera Point, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August. The record itself was not surprising, the time being within the autumn migration season for the species, a prime time for vagrancy. The fact that the curlew has only been recorded once, in Tobago, and not in Trinidad, indicates that migratory birds are probably not regularly observed in Trinidad. Well, I did not see any other birders during the five days there. It

would probably be rather easy to add species on the national list, if keen birders other than bird guides (who stay on the beaten track, in season) would exist in sufficient numbers.



**Fig. 15.** Galera Point, with its picnic tables and shelters, and a view to the sea.

### **Grande Riviere/Monte Video Track**

One morning was spent in the partly cleared, partly forested Monte Video Track area, south of the Grande Riviere village. At this site, it is important to arrive early, because the morning ends pretty soon and the valleys become rather hot. I was delayed a bit (see below), arriving at 06.00 and leaving at 09.45.

Locating the Monte Video Track was not quite as easy as I had anticipated. There are several parallel tracks to Monte Video, along the coastal Paria Main Rd. Some distance beyond Sans Souci, there was a sign to Monte Video to the left, a 4x4 track. Later on, I arrived in the village of Monte Video, with a large sign, and mistakenly turned left towards a hill, which appeared to fit the Internet descriptions, about 20 minutes before sunrise. Fortunately, an old gentleman arrived and a short discussion with him revealed that I had not yet reached the correct area. I therefore continued to the village of Grande Riviere (beyond a narrow bridge), missing the third and correct Monte Video junction at first, because the muck-covered street sign was not visible from that direction.

Only after returning to the village, I saw the small sign, and turned south and uphill, to discover that a building had been constructed at the site pointed out by Birds of Trinidad and Tobago, and the hilltop was fenced. Fortunately, the situation improved after passing the hillcrest. On my return drive, I had planned to take a photograph of the junction for this report, but had to cancel

the project, because in that photo would have been about 20 young villagers, men and women, all suffering from a hang-over after the weekend, and some of them drinking alcohol to ease their pains in the 'morning after'. Alcoholism must be a major social problem in Trinidad...



**Fig. 16.** This is The Sign to Monte Video Track! Not easy to spot if one drives east to west.

Well, in the morning I drove across the occupied hill and descended on a partly cleared valley (see Google Maps), with some dead trees attractive to large woodpeckers (both **Lineated** and **Red-crested Woodpeckers** were seen on them), and a large number of taller trees higher up on the slopes. In the canopy of one of them, hiding on a vertical branch, a lone **Trinidad Piping Guan** was scoped soon after arrival, to be silently celebrated after the long drive there!



**Fig. 17.** Degraded forest habitat at Monte Video Track, south of the Grande Riviere village.

At the bottom of the valley, I turned right at a Y-junction (it was gravel straight onwards, and possibly muddy), on a one-lane tarmac track across a narrow forested ridge and into more area which was being cleared for small scale agriculture. It seems that the protection of **Piping Guan** habitat has not developed well there, in the last stronghold of the endemic and critically endangered species? I ended the drive before a bush farmer's house, in one of the few spots where off road parking was possible. Going back, I stayed on the same route, making a number of long stops to scan the surroundings.

The site was definitely worth a visit. In addition to the star species, the guan, I saw or heard the following goodies: a **Brown Violet-ear**, three calling **White-bellied Antbirds**, out of which one promptly came to my recording, being there in the open for some 15 minutes, and a calling **Scaled Antpitta** (no time to look for views). Such a pity that there was not enough light for sharp **White-bellied Antbird** photos. It was a close call, but the bird preferred to stay in the shadows, and to avoid the sunny spots at the forest's edge.

The more widespread species, some of them my only records in Trinidad, included: **Brown Pelicans**, **Magnificent Frigatebirds**, a family of three **Plumbeous Kites**, a **Grey-lined Hawk**, **Scaled** and **Pale-vented Pigeons**, **Orange-winged Amazons**, **Smooth-billed Anis**, **White-collared** and **Grey-rumped Swifts**, **Rufous-breasted** and **Green Hermits**, **Black-throated Mangos**, **White-necked Jacobins**, a **Blue-chinned Sapphire**, **Copper-rumped Hummingbirds**, a **Green-backed Trogon**, a **Channel-billed Toucan**, **Cocoa Woodcreepers**, **Barred Antshrikes**, **Ochre-bellied Flycatchers**, a **Bran-colored Flycatcher**, **Great Kiskadees**, a **Boat-billed Flycatcher**, **White-bearded Manakins**, a **Rufous-browed Peppershrike**, **Spectacled Thrushes**, a **Cocoa Thrush**, **White-lined Swallow** and **Silver-beaked Tanagers**, a **Blue Dacnis**, **Red-legged** and **Green Honeycreepers**, a **Red-crowned Ant Tanager**, about 200 **Crested Oropendolas** (!), **Yellow-rumped Caciques** and **Yellow Orioles**. Hummingbirds were particularly common and easy to observe, in their 'wild state'.



**Fig. 18.** The inquisitive **White-breasted Antbird**, in the shadows of the Monte Video Track bush.



**Fig. 19.** Another child of the dark forest undergrowth; **Rufous-breasted Hermits** are common along the Monte Video Track.

#### **AT THE END OF THE DAY**

In regard to bird observations, the visit was a good one. My trip would, however, probably have been even more productive, if I had prepared myself better. I was on a long private RTW bird tour, East Tibet – Flores – East Java – Bohol – Palawan – Japan – California – Missouri – Barbados – Grenada – St. Vincent – St. Lucia – Tobago – Trinidad, and ran out of time towards the end of preparations. Information on Trinidad was difficult to gather and there simply was not enough time to dig deeper.

Moreover, the available trip reports focused on limited operations on the beaten track, many of them involving a stay at ASA Wright, with a consequently very limited view of Trinidad. As many of the visiting birdwatchers had mainly followed the local guides, their information did not include much on field arrangements. Furthermore, their information on ASA Wright was outdated, giving an impression that it was possible to bird the trails as a day visitor, not mention to visit the **Oilbirds** on reasonable terms.

Google satellite images should also have been studied more to reveal some details of the Caroni and Nariva areas, and Aripo Livestock Station, for example. Having done that, I would probably have scored one or two additional target species, and a number of missing year list species. Also, most of Trinidad was not studied or visited at all, even though that would be a good idea if there was more time to explore, ten to fourteen days. In my case, the limited time dictated a beaten track approach, albeit with somewhat alternative activities and less common extensions such as visiting the Kernaham and Monte Video Track areas.

In regard to car rental I was quite happy with Alamo. The problem with reasonably priced, comfortable accommodation, however, remains to be solved, as long as the Flavors Bar remains

open in Arima! One needs to plan carefully and possibly stay in more than one establishment. My second choice was a hotel close to Piarco International Airport, another rather advantageous location, but the room rates were significantly higher there, from the viewpoint of a solo traveler. It all depends on charge structure: Is the room/flat charged as a unit or according to the number of people occupying it? A double next to the airport is not necessarily that expensive if two people share it. Also my Cannons of Trinidad and Tobago flat would have been an even better deal for three persons, each of them having their private bedroom.

Fortunately, new information does regularly surface in the Internet and helps us to solve these practicalities. The main point remains: Trinidad is a large island with plenty to see and discoveries to be made, and also a fair alternative to Venezuela, currently not an attractive destination for travelers.

A tailor made independent tour is in many ways superior to the tourist trap alternative, even though doing it by oneself may include a few setbacks, at least as long as the available information remains inadequate. The tourist trap alternative may, however, be one big setback, with a rather limited list of bird observations and lots of idle time because of set timing and organizational inertia. On the independent trail, there is the excitement of discovery, especially when birds like **Trinidad Piping Guan** show themselves, after a self-initiated effort.



**Fig. 20.** I really liked the lotus gardens around some houses of Kernaham Settlement. In the wet, marshy habitat, this is the way to go. Add a few marsh birds, and the ponds around the one-family houses become very attractive indeed, at least for us lovers of birds, flowers and natural beauty...