



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 7/2015

TOBAGO, JULY 2015

Petri Hottola (phottola@gmail.com)



Fig. 1. A pair of **Rufous-vented Chachalacas**, at Grafton Estate, a haven for the species.

In July 2015, 27th to 30th, I had a pleasure to visit the Caribbean island of Tobago, Trinidad and Tobago. I had a British Airways flight from Hewanorra, St. Lucia, to Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, and a Caribbean Airlines flight to Tobago. The transit in Trinidad was a time-consuming one (long lines) and the airport had no decent food, just substandard processed food (McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Subway etc.), downright harmful to one's health and taste buds. Fortunately, the staff knew better: walk out at the arrivals end of the building and there is a food court, with a variety of stalls and some freshly made local food (recommended!). The servings tend to be large.

One needs to exchange Trinidad & Tobago dollars (TTD). Other currencies are not widely accepted. There were a few currency exchange counters at the Piarco Airport, with variable exchange rates, some of them showing the rates and some not. Not surprisingly, the latter ones had worse rates.

All the flights to Tobago leave at the same gate, next to the main entrance (large, circular open area, to the right from the arrivals). It is ok to carry a water bottle on board. Caribbean Airlines check-in counters are located close by, and one may check-in at any time. I was offered to go at once, earlier than reserved, but declined the offer, because I needed to eat and rest between the flights. It is important to reserve a seat before arriving in Trinidad, because there normally are

many people on stand-by line and vacant seats do frequently sell out. The flight shuttle between the islands is a popular one, with many flights (25 minutes, once every hour) and pleasingly affordable Internet rates. I paid USD 48 for the return journey, USD 24 one way, including taxes and surcharges, and bought the tickets already in March.

Regrettably, my 25 minute flight was then delayed by 30 minutes, and I therefore arrived in Tobago later than planned. At the other end, at the Arthur Napoleon Raymond Robinson (3rd president, father of the International Criminal Court) Airport, the baggage carousel was broken and we had to wait another 25 minutes for our bags. Also my return flight was delayed, by more than an hour. Both the ANRR and the Piarco airports suffer from capacity shortages.

The prices of Tobago airport taxis are fixed. My ride to Scarborough, Ann's Villa, was TTD 100 (€13, \$15). Expecting the rental car to be delivered there the next morning, I did not rent the car on arrival (more below). The taxi driver did not know where my accommodation was (not signposted), but after a call we were able to locate the correct building, at 21.00.

The main target species on the island include: **Rufous-vented Chachalaca**, **White-tailed Sabrewing**, **Trinidad Motmot** (much easier to see than in Trinidad, to say the very least), **Northern White-fringed Antwren**, **Grey-throated Leaf-tosser**, **Stripe-breasted Spinetail** and **Venezuelan Flycatcher**. All of these species were observed during the short un-guided visit. In addition, there was a short-distance vagrant at Tobago Plantations (Petit Trou Lagoon), an adult **Franklin's Gull**. Birding in Tobago is, however, not only about listing the species. The island also belongs to the rare category of destinations where it is easy to photograph the habituated birds. There are feeders and they are accessible, unlike for example in Trinidad, where more than exorbitant fees (e.g. ASA Wright) are charged for such simple pleasures and guides are forced on visiting birders by various restrictions on bird observation, irrespective of people's individual wishes.



Fig. 2. Another Tobago target species; a **Trinidad Motmot** at Gilpin Trail entrance, Main Ridge.

The following report has been made to help other independent visitors and small groups to enjoy the birdlife of Tobago. It may also give tour participants some ideas on what to expect there. All in all, I recorded 88 bird species on the island. I am not going to mention each and every species in this report, even though the majority of them are going to be acknowledged. The most common and widespread species are readily seen and heard. There is no need to give details for them. Consult your copy of Kenefick et. al. Birds of Trinidad & Tobago (Helm Identification Guides).

CAR RENTAL AND MEALS

I rented my car at Sheppy's Car Rental, a local operator with a good reputation. At the time of the reservation, they asked me to state two options to be confirmed, and to be delivered according to availability. My choices were a sedan and a small 4x4, for USD 120 including CDW or for USD 140, two days, respectively. On site, they gave me the Nissan Tiida, my first and less expensive choice. A sedan is more than adequate for all the sites, the roads are fine.

The first morning was, however, a bit stressful. Their emails had given me an impression that a car would be delivered to my accommodation at 9.30. In practice, I had to call them and there was no car delivery. At 10.20, a man arrived to take me to the Sheppy's at Crown Point, right next to the airport. In there, I received my vehicle at 11.20. The two hour delay meant that I lost the morning and had no time for shopping (food) before hurrying to visit Grafton Estate, Adventure Farm and the Main Ridge. At each site I arrived too late and could not stay as long as I wanted.



Fig. 3. My Sheppy's Nissan Tiida, at Gilpin Trail, Main Ridge. Notice the cleared edges of the road.

Moreover, there was no food available on that side of the island. The few village shops sold items impossible to consume un-cooked, or just candy and drinks, or hydrogenated palm oil/GMO

corn/sugar/fat biscuits (= poison); a bad start for the visit. Fortunately, I had bought a large container of cashew nuts at Bacolet, while waiting for the expected delivery. The initial delay and stress, so typical of the Caribbean, did however not cause any loss of target species. Driving in Tobago was easy, the main problems being the odd narrow roads and confusing junctions, and the many traffic lights in Scarborough and towards the Crown Point.

Drinks and snacks were otherwise readily available on the island, for example, at gas stations such as the one at Roxborough junction. Locating proper food or take away meals (shops closed till noon) could, however, be a problem. There was great food at Jemma's Treetop Restaurant in Speyside, for example, but it was a popular place and the one hour waiting time simply too long for my itinerary. I therefore had a takeaway version of my gourmet fresh seafish lunch instead, more or less the same meal for half the price (TTD 100 ->50)!

There were simple bakeries here and there, and small shops. In Mesopotamia, there was a 'Chinese' takeaway right by the highway, with limited but delicious chicken meals with rice and/or noodles, and vegetables, according to customer's selection.



Fig. 4. Even though often classified as a 'trash species' by birders, the common and widespread **Blue-grey Tanager** is actually a rather attractive species.

ACCOMMODATION

As there was a need to find a low budget choice for accommodation, I spent some time exploring the various options. In the end, Ann's Villa in Scarborough, Bacolet area, was chosen as a base for the birding operations. Tobago being a relative small island, it does not really matter where one stays, as long as it is not at either end of the island. From Crown Point/Bon Accord or Speyside, the distance to some birding sites becomes a problem, because driving is slow in Tobago.

From Bacolet, it was only a half-an-hour drive to any of the western sites. In order to get to the Main Ridge or Speyside, one needed an hour. The eastern end of the Bacolet Street was a fast short cut to the Claude Noel Hwy, the main thoroughfare to east. The western end of the street, on the other hand, was complicated, with several traffic lights, and I therefore avoided the area.

I paid USD 36 (in TTD cash) per night for the accommodation. The 'villa' consisted of two small flats on top (wooden stairs to the second floor) of a small supermarket, next to the private house of the proprietor. The rooms are often rented for international students, on a long term basis, but tourists are equally welcome. The access was gated, and there was space for parking, but in practice I had to park by the street, in a vacant, well lit lot right by the owner's house. In the mornings, I had to use a separate key to open a small gate in front of the supermarket, to get out.

The flat had a large fridge, good air-conditioning and plenty of hot water. It could have been cleaner (and less cluttered), however, as there was plenty of dust on all surfaces above a certain level. Apparently the lady who does the cleaning does not reach up there. I slept well in the flat, because the neighborhood was peaceful at night, and my neighbors (medical students) were reasonably quiet. The assortment of groceries was limited at the supermarket, but I found some drinks and snacks, and the young lady in charge helped in contacting the car rental office.

Quite a few common birds were seen while waiting for the rental car in front of the shop, in the first morning. These included, among others, a number of **Magnificent Frigatebirds**, **Royal Terns**, a party of 20 **Green-rumped Parrotlets**, a **Red-crowned Woodpecker**, **Spectacled Thrushes** and many **Caribbean Martins**. Birds may be seen anywhere in Tobago.



Fig. 5. A Spectacled Thrush, a widespread resident in the Caribbean.

BIRDS AND SITES

Grafton Estate

The abandoned farm/nature reserve is a bit run down at the moment, with poor feeders (no hummingbirds) and limited nature trails. Grafton Estate is nevertheless a highly recommended site for birding, a great introduction to Tobago, with a good variety to more or less habituated birds. There is no entrance fee, but a 10 dollar (TTD?) donation (box) is expected. The place is located at Grafton Beach. The Shirvan Rd access (signposted) is just before (south of) the Grafton Beach Resort. Turn right (uphill) there and drive on for 250 meters, to the Grafton House, and park in front of an abandoned building on the right, the Copra House. The main trail is on the left, by the building. The feeders are on the right, behind bushes. The main trail continues for about 150 meters, passing a bench and a ruin of a farm building. The short side trails are also worth checking.



Fig. 6. The Copra House at Grafton Estate; parking space in the front, main trail up left and feeders behind the bushes on the right side of the building.

I visited the site twice, once at noon (28th July) and once early in the morning (30th July). At the feeders, I encountered the first evidence for the common claim that **Bananaquit** is the most abundant passerine in Tobago; a party of two dozen birds scurrying around a rum bottle (see **Fig. 18**). **Rusty-vented Chachalacas** were conspicuous, bold and noisy, with up to 30 birds present. Bit surprisingly, Grafton Estate and Tobago Plantations were the only places where I saw these national birds of Tobago (**Scarlet Ibis** is for Trinidad). Flowering bushes had the odd *tobaci* **Copper-rumped Hummingbird**, **Rufous-breasted Hermits**, and one of the two **Blue-chinned Sapphires** I saw in Tobago. A total of three **Northern White-fringed Antwrens** were also seen or heard. A pair of **Trinidad Motmots** was curious and showed well on several occasions. **Pale-vented Pigeons** were tame and easy to photograph.

The other birds at Grafton Estate included the following species: **White-tipped Dove**, **Rufous-tailed Jacamar**, **Red-crowned Woodpecker**, **Cocoa Woodcreeper**, **Barred Antshrike**, **Plain Antvireo**, **Yellow-bellied Elaenia**, **Fuscous Flycatcher**, **White-winged Becard**, **Chivi Vireo**, **Scrub Greenlet**, **Spectacled Thrush** and **Black-faced Grassquit**, in addition to species one sees everywhere in Tobago, such as the doves, ground doves, tyrants, tanagers, grackles, cowbirds and mockingbirds.



Fig. 7. A Pale-vented Pigeon, by the Copra House, Grafton Estate.



Fig. 8. A trail map was discovered, half buried under vegetation. Some of the trails are closed now.



Fig. 9. The modest **Copper-rumped Hummingbirds** may be seen just about anywhere in Tobago.

Adventure Farm

The park-like collection of cottages and feeders is located in Plymouth, along the Arnos Vale Road. Leave the Shirvan/Plymouth Rd by turning north on Arnos Vale Rd, towards the centre of Plymouth, and turn right at the third junction, the first major one. Drive straight on until reaching the entrance on the right, about 1.1 kilometers later. Drive up the access road and park your car by the house. The feeders are at the right end of the building, together with a box where an entrance fee of USD 10 may be left. There are short trails in the garden, potentially worth walking to see some edge habitat species.

At the Adventure Farm, the main birds included an assortment of about 75 hummingbirds of the following species: **Rufous-breasted Hermit**, **White-necked Jacobin** (about 20 males but only 1 female), **Black-throated Mango**, **Ruby-topaz Hummingbird** and **Copper-rumped Hummingbird**. There was a resident pair of **Trinidad Motmots**, and a variety of other habituated feeder customers: **White-tipped Doves**, **Ruddy Ground Doves**, **Red-crowned Woodpeckers**, **Barred Antshrikes**, **Spectacled Thrushes**, **Blue-grey Tanagers**, **Palm Tanagers**, a **White-lined Tanager**, **Shiny Cowbirds** and **Bananaquits**.

The walk in the garden was not very productive during the hottest hour of the day: a **Scrub Greenlet** and a **Rufous-breasted Wren** were seen. The situation probably is different early in the morning. The cottages and apartments looked nice but are pricey: USD 85 (no AC) to USD 105 for a single, USD 140 for a double.



Fig. 10. A fine adult male **White-necked Jacobin**, at Adventure Farm feeders.



Fig. 11. A Star of the Forest; a fruit has fallen and opened itself in order to spread seeds. What a charming way to reproduce the forest!

Main Ridge Reserve

By Tobago standards, this is a remote place with a fine, wide tarmac road running through the forest, the Roxborough Rd. Unfortunately, the edges of the road are cleared (grass) and birding therefore not as easy as it could be. During my two visits, one in the afternoon (28th) and one in the morning (29th), a team of men was cutting grass along a section two kilometers below the Gilpin Trail, disturbing me and the birds. There were also people collecting fresh water from mountain streams in the same area. Leaving one's car parked by the road did not feel secure, because of the light traffic and solitude, and I therefore did most of my birding from the tarmac.

The main accesses to the forest are the Gilpin and Nilpig Trails (Trail = Trace). The entrance areas are good for birding, too, if one does not desire to enter deep into the forest. There were other trails lower down, but they were occupied by the above-mentioned people. On the Nilpig Trail, I only walked in for 50 meters. On the Gilpin Trail, I did a 300 meter walk down and up. There was no need to go further, as I had already seen every target species otherwise. There was no rubber boot rental at the start of the trail (cf. Internet trip reports), probably because the trail was dry and easy to walk, wearing just trekking sandals. Overall, every site in Tobago was dry in the end of July and I had no rain during my stay there.



Fig. 12. No need for rubber boots on the easy to walk Gilpin Trail...

Another good spot was towards the Roxborough end of the road. Driving uphill from Roxborough, there was a steep climb and a sign 2.5 km, just before a right hand curve. On the left, there was a 'sunken' forested valley fringed by short-cut grass, and two tracks on the grassy ridges. On the way up, slowly driving in with my windows open, I had already heard a **Venezuelan Flycatcher** calling there. I preferred, however, not stop, as one of the road workers was just changing his clothes there, wearing nothing below his waist. I suppose he would not have minded, but it would have

been an awkward situation anyway. Another calling bird was heard in forest above the start of the Nilpig Trail, but I never managed to see it, despite considerable effort.



Fig. 13. The ‘Sunken Valley’ site; **Venezuelan Flycatchers** on the right, in the treetops.

The distinctive whistle call is perhaps the best identification feature of the **Venezuelan Flycatcher**. Driving back, I stopped and played my Xeno Canto recording at the above-mentioned ‘Sunken Valley’. The mp3 was (far) too powerful, if compared with the actual flycatcher calls, but eventually a pair of **Venezuelan Flycatchers** appeared on high branches of a tree growing in the deep depression, presenting themselves amicable on the same level of height where I stood! Not an endemic perhaps, but who wants to visit Venezuela for it, nowadays?

The endemic **White-tailed Sabrewings** were readily seen at the start of the Nilpig Trail (1), from the Roxborough Rd, and within the first 100 meters of the Gilpin Trail (2). To me, the sabrewing is the best bird one may encounter in Tobago. There was also a **Blue-chinned Sapphire**, at the start of the Nilpig Trail. **Trinidad Motmots** (total of 11) were seen at the Gilpin Trail shelter and on the lower slopes towards Roxborough. A **Grey-throated Leaf-tosser** was a lucky late afternoon discovery about 100 meters above the Nilpig Trail entrance, in a roadside spot with plenty of leaf litter. No need to explore the Gilpin Trail for it! At the Nilpig Trail, a pair of **Stripe-breasted Spinetails** showed well after I had played their calls. Another pair was observed at the Gilpin Trail, and a lone bird lower down along the Roxborough Rd.

Otherwise, the area had a juvenile **Little Blue Heron** (!), **Broad-winged Hawks**, a pair of **Southern Lapwings** and a **Giant Cowbird** (towards Parlatuvier), **Orange-winged Amazons**, **Pale-vented Pigeons**, **Red-rumped** and **Golden-olive Woodpeckers**, dozens of **Grey-rumped Swiftlets**, **Rufous-tailed Jacamars**, *xanthoscela* **Yellow-legged Thrushes** (e.g. 15 at fruiting palms behind the Gilpin shelter), **White-necked Thrushes**, **White-lined Tanagers**, a **Collared Trogon**, a **Plain-brown Woodcreeper** (Gilpin Trail), **Barred Antshrikes**, a **Blue-backed Manakin**, **Tobago House Wrens**,

Red-legged Honeycreepers, a **Violaceous Euphonia** and **Crested Oropendolas**. The numbers were low, but the variety was good for an island.

Speyside Hummingbird Gallery

In Speyside, the bird guides Dianne and Newton George have established a 'hummingbird gallery' at their home, another great spot to observe and photograph the hummers. There are chairs on their veranda, right in front of the feeders. The entrance fee is USD 5, and the place (signposted) may be located along a left hand (Y-fork) side road (uphill), just when entering Speyside. If you reach the Adventist Church, on the left, you have driven too far. There is limited parking along the side street. One needs, however, to be particularly careful when entering the Windward Road again. Visibility is limited there and it pays to keep the windows open to be able to hear approaching vehicles.

I went to the Speyside Hummingbird Gallery once, at noon, and spent about two hours, talking with Dianne and taking photographs. The feeders had a total of about 45 hummingbirds, the **Copper-rumped** being the most numerous, being followed by **Ruby-topaz Hummingbirds**, **White-necked Jacobins**, **Black-throated Mangos** and **Rufous-breasted Hermits**. **White-tailed Sabrewings** do occasionally visit the gallery, but not in summer 2015.

Above Speyside, towards Roxborough, a party of 10 **Short-tailed Swifts** was accompanied by four **Band-rumped Swifts**. The latter species is not listed for Tobago, even though it is common in the nearby Trinidad, which is clearly visible from Crown Point. Occasional visits must therefore be regular, the species being overlooked. There may even be a resident population?



Fig. 14. A male **Ruby-topaz Hummingbird**, a common and pretty winter visitor to Tobago.



Fig. 15. A **Black-throated Mango**, another fairly common and widespread species of Tobago.

Speyside Beachfront

From the Speyside beach, it is possible to observe seabirds. Little Tobago Island may be a bit far away (4 km), but the Goat Island is closer (2 km), and their breeding birds occasionally visit the inner bay. I had my take-away lunch on the beach, with a scope, and observed the following species during the short break: many **Magnificent Frigatebirds** and **Laughing Gulls**, a **Sandwich Tern**, a **Sooty Tern** and a **Red-billed Tropicbird**. Some young women in bikinis were initially suspicious of my actions, but they soon relaxed. Even in Tobago women seem to know the unnatural priorities of male birders...



Fig. 16. The beach at Speyside, with a view to islands with breeding seabirds.

Tobago Plantation

This collection of freshwater ponds, lawns, marshy habitats, vacant lots, mangroves and sheltered coastal bays (e.g. Petit Trou Lagoon) should not be neglected when visiting Tobago. The grand entrance to the Tobago Plantations Golf Club can hardly be missed along the Claude Noel Hwy, between Crown Point and Lambeau, 1.5 km east of the Shirwan Rd junction (to Grafton Estate etc.).

Beyond the gate, one drives in-between two large ponds, to a spot where a security check-point is located. Birders are welcome to visit, for an entrance fee of TTD 35 (USD 6). I went there only once, on the 29th, in the late afternoon. In a roundabout, 500 meters later, I turned right. In the next four-way junction, turning left took one to the edge of mangroves (space for parking), from where it was possible to either walk in, on a boardwalk, or continue forward by foot, to some semi-open forest and views to the Petit Trou Lagoon.

Driving straight on at the above-mentioned junction, one had stop soon, after arriving in a vacant lot used to store soil, rocks and plant matter. Turning right, on the other hand, one arrived at a Sewage Treatment Plant. On the right hand of the STP access road, there was a small roadside pond and, later on, a large, reed-fringed pond. On the left hand, one could enter a series of former ponds, now marshland. I drove in, and the embankments proved to be in good condition. At sewage works, it is always a good idea to use one's car as a moving hide, if possible. It is also more secure in the present case, as there were **Spectacled Caimans** around!

All the above-mentioned bodies of water were teeming with birdlife. The open water ponds had, for example, **Aningas (9), Black-crowned Night Herons, Green Herons, Western Cattle Egrets, Snowy Egrets, Great Egrets, Little Blue Herons, Tricolored Herons, a Great Blue Heron, Common Gallinules, White-winged Swallows** and **Caribbean Martins**. The overgrown ponds were favored by **Least Grebes, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Wattled Jacanas, Purple Gallinules**, a party of two **Greater Yellowlegs**, and **Smooth-billed Anis**.

On the lawns, four pairs of **Southern Lapwings** were seen. In the mangroves, **Yellow-crowned Night Herons** were searching for food, and **Spotted Sandpipers** rested during the high tide. An adult **Franklin's Gull** was a nice find at the Petit Trou Lagoon, among the common **Laughing Gulls**. I wonder if it had arrived in winter and stayed for the summer, too.

There were also roadside **Rufous-vented Chachalacas, Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, Pale-vented Pigeons, Red-crowned Woodpeckers** and **Spectacled Thrushes**. The vacant lot was a heaven for small seedeaters, with many **Black-faced** and **Blue-black Grassquits**, and, interestingly, a female **Yellow-bellied Seedeater**.



Fig. 17. Black-bellied Whistling Ducks, at Tobago Plantations sewage works.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

Tobago clearly is one of the more pleasant birding destinations in the Caribbean. It has birds, many of which are not afraid of people, and it is small and secure (with the exception of Buccoo, Bon Accord and Turtle Beach areas?). The island is easy to visit from Trinidad. There are hardly any restrictions in regard to access, or rip-off mentality towards the visiting birders. In that sense, it definitely surpasses its big neighbor, the island of Trinidad. As described in the report, I experienced only minor problems such as moderately delayed flights and a miscommunication in regard to car rental pick up.

Everything was there for an independent, solo visit. Bird guides are also available, if one looks for guided bird walks. Overall, birding in Tobago was an enjoyable, rewarding experience and I would like to recommend all those who have not yet been there to go to Tobago. New discoveries are waiting there, too. I did not see other birders anywhere in the island. In two and half days, few vagrants and supposedly rare species were observed, even though I did not venture far off the beaten track of regular sites. I did, however, carry a telescope and spent maximum time birdwatching, instead of hiking the trails, looking for toilets and having meals in restaurants, the time-consuming activities of bird tour itineraries.





Fig. 18. Alcoholism appears to be a serious problem among the local *luteola* **Bananaquits**. On the other hand, the species is incredibly abundant in Tobago. Could the alcohol increase promiscuous, hedonistic behavior among them, the way it sometimes does among the humans? An intervention would apparently be urgently needed...

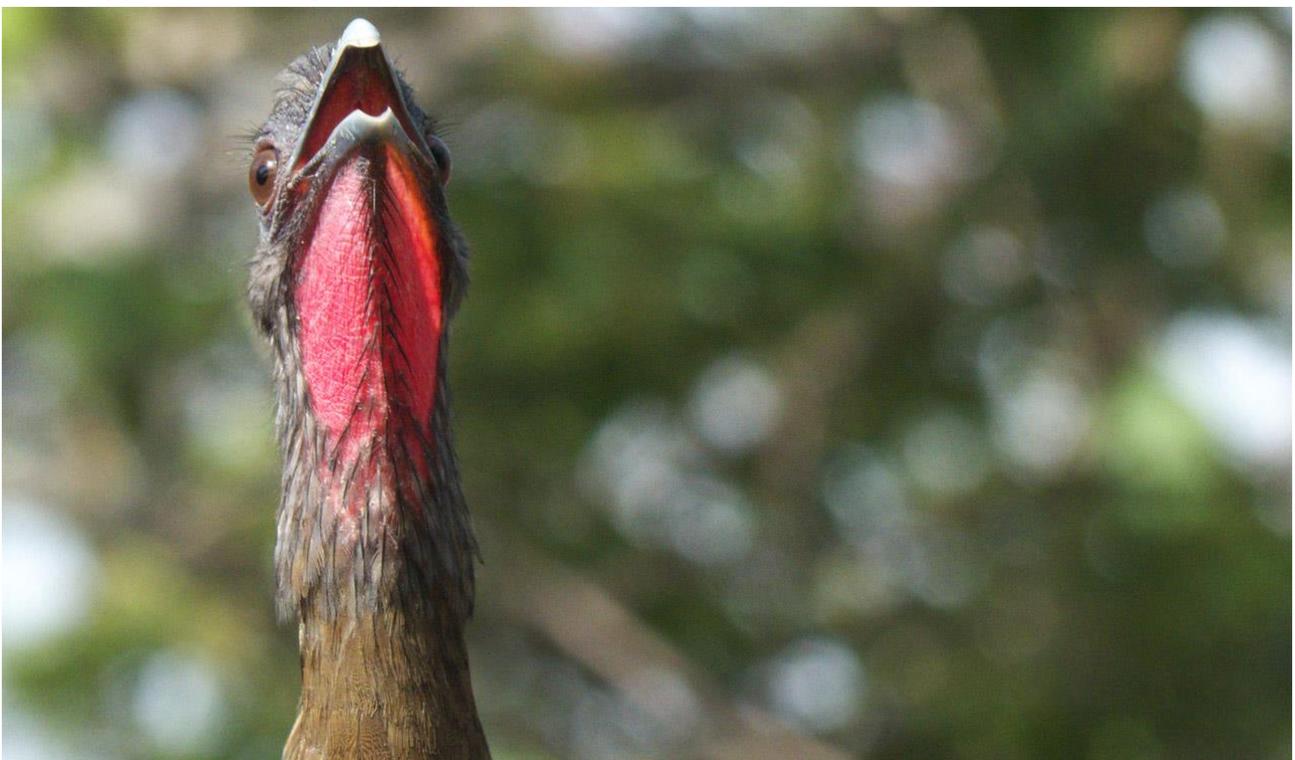


Fig. 19. 'CHACH-HA-LACA...CHACH-HA-LACA...HA-LACA...CHACH..A...CHACHA...HA-LACA!!!'