

Trinidad and Tobago

23 February–9 March 2008

Participants:

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Robert and Margaret Sellin
Ron and Lynne Caygell
Robin and Ann Gordon
Simon and Anne Mitchie



Bearded Bellbird

Leader: Martyn Kenefick

Birdfinders' 2008 tour to Trinidad & Tobago was an exceptionally successful tour. The group quickly became a team of friends and we had many sharp pairs of eyes matching their equally sharp wit! There is little or no migration at this time of year and, as always, we missed one or two relatively common species. Nevertheless our luck with traditional "hard to get" birds was almost unequalled and we ended with a total of 229 species, with just one more only seen by me (Long-billed Starthroat); the second highest ever total for a Birdfinders tour. The weather was often very "unCaribbean like" but only on one day did it make a real difference to the birding. There were no logistical difficulties to hinder us and, most important of all, we had fun.

Day 1: Transatlantic flights are always tiring but every cloud has a silver lining. A particularly turbulent crossing perhaps aided a very early arrival – 45 minutes ahead of schedule; almost unheard of in the Caribbean. Following the usual tedious process of Tobago immigration, 10 weary faces met me, in the late afternoon sunshine at Crown Point airport, for the short drive to the Mermaid Hotel, our base for the next five nights. First birds of the tour were hardly tropical; a female Peregrine flew down the side of the hotel and, over the course of the evening, there were several glimpses of the local Barn Owl flapping behind the buildings. Simon saw his first Black-faced Grassquit, but there would be lots of those tomorrow. To end the day on a high, Robert had a welcome surprise; someone returned his wallet to him, it had fallen out of his pocket on the plane

Day 2: The day dawned clear and bright so whilst Anne and Lynne opted for a lie in, the rest of the group set off for an introduction to Tobago birds at the nearby Bon Accord sewage ponds. Before the heat of the day sets in herons tend to be much in evidence. Today was no exception as we quickly found Great Blue, Little Blue, Tricoloured and Green Herons; Great White and Cattle Egrets; Yellow-crowned and Black-crowned Night-herons. On the first day of a tour you need eyes in the back of your head. Failure to do so would have missed the adult Yellow-headed Caracara that soared past. On the ponds themselves several Least Grebes were seen together with up to 20 White-cheeked Pintails, a couple with a squadron of ducklings in tow. On the back pond, a party of Snowy Egrets dropped in. Close scrutiny produced an adult Little Egret amongst them allowing direct comparison of bill and forehead shape and loreal skin colour. On the grassy banks, several Anhingas stretched their wings out in the warming sun and single Hudsonian Whimbrel and Southern Lapwing strutted around. Walking round the waters edge, common Tobago resident landbirds gave themselves up and our notebooks soon contained Eared Dove and Pale-vented Pigeon, Tropical Mockingbird, Tropical and Gray Kingbirds, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Blue-gray Tanager and Scrub Greenlet. Migrants were represented by wintering Yellow Warbler and Belted Kingfisher and an adult male Black-throated Mango, one of the hummingbirds, which breed in T&T and then disperse to mainland South America. Overhead we found our first Short-tailed Swifts and Caribbean Martins, whilst a party of immature Barn Swallows hawked insects from the surface. At one point an adult White-winged Swallow joined in. This is a recent colonist here in Tobago, the first birds being found as recently as 2000 ... and then it was time for breakfast. By 9.30am we were away again to visit a private site at Lowlands where access had been arranged. An Osprey perched up in a roadside tree was a familiar sight, but Red-crowned Woodpecker and the parties of Black-bellied Whistling-ducks on the ponds were new for almost everyone. By late morning we were walking a mangrove boardwalk that seemed to hold Northern Waterthrushes at every turn. Also on view were our first Cocoa Woodcreeper, several smart looking White-fringed Antwrens and a couple of confiding Yellow-breasted Flycatchers, whilst numerous Tent-making Bats fluttered up from underneath the boardwalk and a number of Rufous-vented

Chachalacas crashed through the canopy. Just before returning for lunch we looked out over a couple more pools. Wilson's Snipe was new for the tour, but what ever happened to that Pied-billed Grebe?

Living in the tropics has made me realise the wonder that is a siesta; a vision shared with customers on the first day of a tour after a long flight (after all, birds are quiet in the midday sun as well) With everyone rested, all of the group set off once more around 3.00pm for the dry lowland forest at Grafton. The Alefounders sanctuary is the only place I know where, without doubt, birds can tell the time. Grain and sugar water is put out in the same place twice daily, with the afternoon feed at 4.00pm. With 10 minutes to go, the trees were swaying with birds anxiously awaiting James' arrival. Once the grain has been thrown onto the concrete stage, there is actually order in the chaos that follows; and the pecking order literally depends on size. Pride of place goes to upwards of 50 Rufous-vented Chachalacas. Pale-vented Pigeons form an outer ring, diving in on occasional food grabbing raids with numerous Eared Doves patiently waiting their turn at the sides. Bananaquits monopolize the sugar water feeders but the star birds have discerning diets. In James' back pocket is a lump of cheese, which is cut into tiny cubes. Bare-eyed Thrushes are the first to seize a delicacy but a regular pair of Blue-crowned Motmots always put in an appearance. This afternoon an added bonus was an exceptionally confiding male Barred Antshrike, which clambered within touching distance amidst a Bougainvillea shrub. With the feeding spectacle still ongoing, we walked the central path to the hill summit, in the waning late afternoon sun. Highlights included our first few Rufous-tailed Jacamars; both Ruby Topaz and White-necked Jacobin hummingbirds; a number of Yellow-breasted Flycatchers and, just as we were returning to Andy's coach, Simon found a small party of Red-legged Honeycreepers – a fitting end to an excellent first days birding. Between us we had amassed a total of 71 species; nothing extraordinarily rare, but all good stuff.

Day 3: A day of sharply contrasting weather and extremely good fortune. Everything started off calmly enough (although there was considerable cloud cover) with a pre-breakfast return to Bon Accord. Life on the ponds appeared to be very similar to yesterday and so time was spent in the scrub and small marshy area closer to the lagoon. We quickly added Solitary Sandpiper to our lists together with both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. An extremely bright yellow warbler with what appeared to be a white vent flew across our path, it was almost certainly a Prothonotary but sadly it continued to fly on into the scrub, never to be seen again. Shortly before going back to the hotel, we walked down beside the mangrove to the sea. A Belted Kingfisher (almost certainly yesterday's bird) flew around our heads and we heard a rather distant Mangrove Cuckoo – coffee beckoned. Around 8.30am, we set off once more to drive the Windward road up to Roxborough. Whilst still in Canaan our first Broad-winged Hawk glided in front of the bus. A quick stop to view the seabird roost at Studley Park produced the expected Brown Pelicans, Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns but an early Cayenne Tern was an unexpected bonus. More anticipated, due to the colour of the sky, was the onset of rain. It rained on and off for the next hour as we drove northeast before branching off onto the Bloody Bay road and up into the Main Ridge rainforest (a protected area since 1765). Eventually we reached the trailhead at Gilpin Trace and were thankful for the presence of a couple of local entrepreneurs who rent out rubber boots. Even before the boots were on our feet the heavens opened with a vengeance, delaying our hike for around 15 minutes. With the skies partially clearing we set off down into the forest. It was dull, raindrops were still falling from leaf to leaf and in the first stretch we failed to find a single bird, save for a female White-necked Jacobin guarding her nest and two tiny white eggs. Jean livened our spirits by pointing out a stunning male Blue-backed Manakin close to the path and no more than 15ft up; then it proverbially poured down. There was nothing to do but stand it out, relying on either raingear, umbrellas or the belief that when it stopped clothing would quickly dry. It did eventually stop some 20 minutes later; the wind died down and birds started to call. After some searching, a White-tailed Sabrewing was found on a song perch but set back quite a distance on the other side of the gully. Closer, and much more obliging, was a male Yellow-legged Thrush, another male Blue-backed Manakin and perhaps the most sorry-looking, wet and bedraggled Blue-crowned Motmot I have ever seen. Some of the party managed to glimpse an elusive Fuscous Flycatcher and then the sun came out. A fair bit further down the trail there is a fairly reliable White-tailed Sabrewing song perch, close to the path and right out in the open. True to form our boy performed excellently for all. Our priority now was a rather brisk return hike up the trail; to reclaim our original footwear and drive on for lunch. However, the walk was still eventful with both Rufous-breasted Wren and Stripe-breasted Spinetail being seen by some but not all of the group. Lunch was taken at the Bloody Bay lookout; our sandwiches being supplemented by home-made chocolate cake and cherry vanilla ice cream, courtesy of two of the regular local lady vendors on site. With the sun now bright, and the afternoon really warming up, we decided to walk a fair chunk of the eastern slope of the forested road; and it was a phenomenal success. First to show, almost as we started to walk, were up to four Venezuelan Flycatchers. Our first Streaked Flycatcher could not have been more confiding; Roger pointed out an adult Great Black-hawk gliding through the trees; a superb male Collared Trogon perched right out in the open; a pair of Violaceous Euphonias fed on a fruiting shrub and a Red-rumped Woodpecker was heard by everyone, but only seen by a few. Ron was first to locate a calling Red-eyed Vireo and, just before getting back on the bus everyone had good looks at their first Giant Cowbirds and Crested Oropendolas. By mid afternoon, it could be best described as hot and still; the uneventful journey back down to the Mermaid allowing time for a swim before dinner.

Day 4: Back at Bon Accord once more, the Mangrove Cuckoo called just once and remained hidden. The ponds held the same species as on previous days and so we just enjoyed excellent views of the regular birds of the area with Yellow-crowned Night-heron and Greater Yellowlegs being particularly showy. After breakfast, we returned to Grafton and walked the lower loop trail. Birding could be best described as quiet. A Cocoa Woodcreeper showed well, as did a male Red-rumped Woodpecker albeit only briefly; Roger found a male Blue-backed Manakin; our first Red-rumped Agouti fed on the path; several Yellow-breasted and Brown-crested Flycatchers sat out in the open; whilst back in the parking area, a couple of Rufous-tailed Jacamars performed well for the cameras. Our visit to the Adventure Farm however was a roaring success. The adventure here is to sit on a balcony chair watching hummingbirds feeding mere feet away. The star of the show is undoubtedly male Ruby Topaz but

White-necked Jacobins, Black-throated Mangos and a Rufous-breasted Hermit were all well received. As an aside, we saw our first Shiny Cowbirds, but they barely deserved a mention. The late morning was spent driving the length of the Windward Road to the village of Speyside. We paused briefly at the lookout to view and photograph both Goat Island and Little Tobago. This allowed Ron to purchase a rather dashing hat (there is always one quote on a tour that stands out, and Lynne's comment of "Ooo, he can wear that at night" will long be remembered). Then it was the serious business of lunch at Blue Waters Inn – French fries with everything and Ruddy Turnstones running round your feet. Our boat over to Little Tobago was smooth and uneventful; the short hike up through the forest as humid as ever, but it was well worth it. Once again the main act was Red-billed Tropicbird. All in all, we probably saw around 150. Most were wheeling around the forested slopes below us; some engaged in courtship display flight and of course there was that delightful female sat on her nest mere feet away. The supporting cast comprised "brown morph, white tailed" Red-footed Boobies, several of which were nesting atop shrubbery; Brown Boobies of all ages and marauding Magnificent Frigatebirds. Our return boat briefly paused over a huge Grooved Brain Coral. This one is 2000 years old and still growing. It was then time to marvel at the submarine world of Angel Reef and Japanese Garden. Here we were introduced to Giant Clam Sponge, Common Sea Fan, Yellow Tube Sponge, Potato Coral, Smooth Brain Coral and Dead Man's Fingers. Numerous fish of every hue and colour were to be seen including Striped and Spot Light Parrotfish, Sergeant Major, Blue Tang and Creole Rasse. A lucky few also glimpsed a Hawksbill Turtle swimming by. Back on dry land, there was just time to say "hello" to the pet Blue-and-yellow Macaw that lives in a tree over the Dive Shop (it actually waddles down each evening to sleep behind the counter in the office) before the long drive back down to The Mermaid.

Day 5: The day dawned clear and bright – it was to be the warmest day so far. Most of the group revisited Bon Accord before breakfast. Roger found the highlight of the morning, a small group of waders on the flooded field which included seven Lesser Yellowlegs, five Solitary Sandpipers, two Greater Yellowlegs and the first Short-billed Dowitcher of the tour showing off its typical "sewing machine" feeding action. Whilst Lynne and Anne toured the beaches on the southwest peninsula, the rest of us drove back up to the rainforest, very successfully birding the roadside. Almost everything we saw, we saw well. Highlights included an adult Great Black-hawk circling just over the treetops; an adult male Collared Trogon actually sat on the grass (this is the first time I have ever seen a trogon on the ground); both Golden-olive and Red-rumped Woodpeckers and a confiding Streaked Flycatcher. With the sun still bright and hot, we tried one last trail to enable Robert and Jean to catch up with Blue-backed Manakin. We walked the less muddy section of Niplig trail (that's Gilpin spelt backwards because it's on the other side of the road!) and after hearing several birds fairly close by, we were able to lure in an adult male who sat right out in the open preening for perhaps five minutes. Lunch was taken once more at the Bloody Bay lookout before a scenic drive back down the Leeward coast passing through Parlatuvier, Castara and Runnymede before returning to The Mermaid in time for a relaxing swim and the tedious job of settling bar bills and packing suitcases. Our time in Tobago had produced 104 species. Only one of the viable specialities (that doesn't occur in Trinidad) eluded us; Olivaceous Woodcreeper. So there has to be a reason to come back!

Day 6: The main focus of today was the inter island transfer and our relocation to Grande Riviere, Trinidad. So often, travel is fraught with the most unexpected of problems that are totally outside your control; and the day started so well. We left the hotel on time; check-in at Crown Point airport was straightforward; the flight left early; the journey was smooth; our luggage appeared promptly at Piarco airport; Ramdass, our principal driver was there to meet us; we found our first Savannah Hawk; both Black and Turkey Vultures and scores of Gray-breasted Martins immediately outside the terminal building – and then things started to go down hill. Our support driver, the ever-smiling Ashford had been badly delayed in traffic. Whilst initially irritating that we were nearly an hour late departing Piarco, it became a blessing in disguise. A major accident on the main road close to Valencia had caused a huge backlog of traffic (an hour earlier and we might have been far too close for comfort!). As it was, we were forced to detour for miles on narrow country roads adding at least 75 minutes to our journey. There was little time to stop for birds en route but between the two buses, we managed to add Gray Hawk and Common Black-hawk; Gray-headed and Plumbeous Kites; Yellow-rumped Caciques and Yellow Oriole to our tally before stopping at the bridge over the Grand Riviere which gives rise to the village name. Perched low in riverside shrubbery was a fine male Green Kingfisher. Two minutes later and we were checking in at Le Grand Almandier, our base for the next two nights. Several early afternoon showers delayed our afternoon walk until around 3.45pm. A stroll along the lower slopes of Montevideo trace was an excellent introduction to Trinidad forest edge birding. Over the course of 90 minutes both male and female Blue-chinned Sapphires flitted too and fro; a pair of very confiding White-flanked Antwrens clambered about in a cocoa tree; we glimpsed a fleeting Plain-brown Woodcreeper; Margaret found a fine male Black-tailed Tityra perched high in a bare branched tree whilst a couple of Boat-billed Flycatchers noisily fed in nearby *Cecropia* trees. Our first Silver-beaked Tanagers enabled everyone to see why I describe the males' plumage colour as "crushed velvet" and we found both Olivaceous and the much more localised Trinidad Euphonias side by side. There ended the birding of a day of highs and lows – but the excitement was far from over. Around 9.45pm, the hotel security guard knocked on everyone's bedroom door, reporting that a female Giant Leatherback Turtle had come up on the beach mere yards from the hotel – the next 45 minutes were pure magic.

Day 7: It's Leap Year day and the morning virtually started and ended with Pawi. We assembled outside the hotel gates around 5.30am whilst still pitch black and walked up into the beginnings of the fruit and cocoa orchards along Montevideo trace with 3–4 Ferruginous Pygmy-owls calling tantalisingly close. As the first hint of dawn hit the sky, a Short-tailed Nighthawk drifted over at tree top height, then the focus was on the humid, steep but short walk up to the clearing. Once on site, literally the first bird on view was a rather distant (but through a telescope perfectly adequate) Trinidad Piping-guan. It stayed in the same tree for about 30 minutes and when the sun hit the tops, perched right out in the open, taking in the rays. After a while it flew closer into a fruiting, but quite densely foliated Nutmeg tree, and was joined by a second bird. The first sun always gets birds out in

the open, our second such success was a Channel-billed Toucan calling from an exposed perch, shortly followed by a male Black-tailed Tityra. With the group having decided to walk down the eastern slope towards the river, Anne's priority was caffeine and so she returned to the Hotel (finding a Lineated Woodpecker en route) My next real surprise was the appearance of the (normally brusque and abrupt if not down right rude) lady who lives in a small shack in the clearing with a bag of nutmeg for everyone. Once able to see across the southern valley, a pair of Gray-headed Kites displayed overhead; we found a nesting pair of Plumbeous Kites and a Zone-tailed Hawk drifted past. And then it was all about swifts. First to show was a couple of Chestnut-collared; then a party of Band-rumped and finally an unseasonal White-collared (only the second time I have ever seen this bird in February). Closer to the river, we played an unsuccessful game of hide and seek with a pair of Silvered Antbirds; they came in inquisitively, but always hidden amongst the very low vegetation; found our first Golden-fronted Greenlets, female White-bearded and Golden-headed Manakins and a male Green Honeycreeper. Our first gaudy butterflies were attracted to the hot and bright conditions. Firstly Blue Morpho, followed by King Page and finally White-tailed Page, a daytime flying migratory moth. Soon it was time to retrace our steps, the smell of bacon lured. But the best was left till last. On the northern slope, another Pawi fed on a fruiting bush right out in the open at eye level, no more than 30 yards away from us. The mid part of the day was a "do your own thing". Some swam, some relaxed a read – and yes, some went off birding. Rob and Ann found our first Grayish Saltator; Roger a Cocoa Thrush. Simon and Ronnie stayed out through the middle of the day and were rewarded with a family party of White-bellied Antbirds, a number of both Cocoa and Plain-brown Woodcreepers and a flock of Turquoise Tanagers. We all assembled mid afternoon and walked back up the hill once more. Roger found a couple of Gray Hawks and the remainder of the group "caught up" with Turquoise Tanagers. The party of antbirds had become very elusive, again coming close to being visible but not quite. We took a side track through the forest, which yielded few birds, but those close to the front saw Rufous-breasted Hermit. However at the other end, we managed to lure in an extremely confiding male White-tailed Trogon. Once in the open, on the eastern slope, a seeding Wild Tobacco tree became alive with birds. The main component initially were Golden-headed Manakins, including many adult males (a tiny black furry gonk with its head dipped in egg yolk). Either side of a short sharp rain shower, we played "find the Black-whiskered Vireo" A dull bird of the subspecies *bonairensis* eventually gave itself up to everyone over a period of about 30 minutes. This is a rare wanderer from the Lesser Antilles but interestingly was found on the same corner in 2007 where Vaughan, Sveta and I found three birds. Also in the tree, we found our first Purple and Green Honeycreepers and an exquisite adult male Blue Dacnis. We started to walk back up the hill and immediately stopped again. A pair of Squirrel Cuckoos were lured in, one perched out right in the open taking in the last rays of sun for the day – a fine start to our first birding day in Trinidad.

Day 8: Heavy overnight showers meant that the track up into the forest was a good deal muddier than yesterday. We arrived just in time for the last flight of the Short-tailed Nighthawk, then the group split in three. Robert and Margaret went successfully looking for Pawi – they were to see four; Roger and Jean did their own thing and the rest of us made our way to the open eastern slope of the hill. Almost immediately the heavens opened which brought a temporary halt to proceedings but once the skies had cleared, swifts appeared from every direction. Most were Short-tailed and Band-rumped but a couple of very smart Lesser Swallow-tailed Swifts briefly joined in. The advent of sunshine brought a couple of Channel-billed Toucans out into the open; a Gray-headed Kite drifted over and a pair of Plumbeous Kites drifted up and down the valley before returning to their nest. A second attempt at seeing Silvered Antbird was far more successful than yesterday – an inquisitive adult male came right out into the path side vegetation; a fine way to conclude birding at Grande Riviere. Next items on the agenda were to pack our bags, have breakfast and await our transport for the transfer to the Asa Wright Nature Centre, our base for the remaining week of the tour. The journey took the rest of the morning and, for Bus No. 1, was an uneventful affair. However Anne, sat in Ashford's bus and no doubt encouraged by being the one to find a Lineated Woodpecker yesterday surpassed herself by spotting a much rarer Crimson-crested Woodpecker which posed perfectly for that half of the group.

There is no finer place to enjoy Trinidad birds than from the balcony at "Asa Wright". Over the course of the afternoon we were to find a pair of exquisite Tufted Coquettes feeding on *Lantana* bushes; several White-chested Emeralds coming into the sugar water feeders; a pair of Great Antshrikes and a Gray-fronted Dove picking up scraps from under the feeder tables; a Piratic Flycatcher making a nuisance of itself at the oropendola nest colony and our first Bay-headed Tanagers flitting through the *Cecropia* trees. The "second division" included White-necked Jacobin, Red-legged Honeycreeper, Grayish Saltator, Cocoa Woodcreeper and Cocoa Thrush. Not everything at the feeding station had wings. A Red-tailed Squirrel vied with a Red-rumped Agouti for scraps and several Golden Tegu lizards went voraciously for anything that came their way. Far too quickly the light began to fade, but it would all start up again at dawn tomorrow.

Day 9: A day of sharp contrasting weather and a degree of birding frustration. Everything started off on plan. There was very little time for watching from the balcony this morning; just enough to see a Lineated Woodpecker creeping up a dead Immortelle branch. An early breakfast was followed by a 7.00am departure in bright sunshine, turning north and climbing up the Blanchisseuse Road. From the roadside, we could hear a Bright-rumped Attila calling not too far distant, but for a species that is usually easy to entice in, this bird obviously had attitude and kept to the canopy, out of sight. Our first scheduled stop was beside the Textel Scatter Station on Morne Bleu. At 2,200 ft, this is the highest point in Trinidad negotiable by motor vehicle. An ever-increasing wind made birding difficult but we did finally manage to see a female American Redstart and a couple of Black-throated Mangos. Hoping that our luck would improve out of the wind, we descended back down to the main road and proceeded to walk to Las Lapas. Within a few minutes it began to rain and continued virtually non stop until lunchtime. Over the course of the next few hours, at various stages between Las Lapas and Brasso Seco we birded whenever the low cloud and rain eased off a little, gradually picking off several birds new for the tour. First to show were an almost silhouette of a Blue-headed Parrot; fortunately it has a different flight action and much harsher vocalisation that Orange-

winged Parrot – most certainly no plumage features were possible. A Chestnut Woodpecker showed a bit of colour in the gloom; a female Rufous-breasted Hermit diligently sat on her nest protecting the eggs from the rain and we finally began to increase our flycatcher list with excellent views of Tropical Pewee and Euler's Flycatcher. Both male White-tailed and female Collared Trogons were confiding, as was a calling Channel-billed Toucan. A hot picnic lunch of chicken pelau and salad was taken in Brasso Seco village. The clouds then lifted, the sun came out and birds started to appear. A mixed feeding roadside flock included Rufous-browed Peppershrike and a pair of Blue Dacnis. With the temperature rising, we decided to retrace our steps south and climb back up to Las Lapas, stopping briefly at Paria junction for a calling Stripe-breasted Spinetail and an unscheduled descent on my behalf to retrieve my MP3 speaker. A long leisurely walk produced excellent views of Slaty-capped Flycatcher and Golden-crowned Warbler; a light-phase Short-tailed Hawk drifted over but try as we did, we just could not entice a calling Black-faced Antthrush into full view – Simon got a brief glimpse, but everyone else missed out. Whilst we had eventually seen some extremely good birds today, we had only partially fulfilled the areas potential. Back at the Nature Centre, Roger watched a Short-tailed Nighthawk at “last light” and then it was the serious business of rum punch and dinner.

Day 10: Whatever our shortfall was yesterday, we more than made up for it today – and all it took was some sunshine. Following a nearly two-hour drive, we reached the eastern fringes of South Oropouche marshes just as the first rays dawn lit the sky. The journey had been clear and uneventful (commuter traffic would have been unbearable if we had left even 30 minutes later); the only stop being for an obligingly perched Barn Owl, close to La Romaine. A tall telecommunications mast by our car park held a pair of Peregrines which repeatedly sallied forth chasing bats and the first squadrons of Green-winged Parrotlets flew out from roost. Our walk was along a flat, wide path with a line of mangrove on one side, and open freshwater marsh on the other – and it was alive with birds. Wintering Yellow Warblers and Northern Waterthrushes “chipped” away; our first Pied Water-tyrants and Yellow-chinned Spinetails appeared at very close range, an adult Red-capped Cardinal showed itself briefly and, after a few tantalising glimpses in silhouette we managed to see the first of at least six Spotted Tody-flycatchers – the star bird of the mangrove. Out on the marsh, American Purple Gallinules, and Red-breasted and Yellow-hooded Blackbirds, all sat out in the open, our first dark morph Long-winged Harrier drifted over and there was a constant fly past of hirundines, sadly most against the bright light. Most were White-winged Swallows but several appeared too large in the wing and rump patch to be Southern Rough-winged Swallows and were possibly juvenile Cliff Swallows. Eventually we reached a raised picnic area where a Striped Cuckoo held court, allowing a very close approach. Green-rumped Parrotlets fed on the grasses and short bushes and a female Masked Yellowthroat was seen briefly by some of the party. From the western bank of this area, there was an excellent view over a large area of reeds. Ramdass found the star bird of the area, an adult male Least Bittern sunning itself right out in the open and a very confiding female Green Kingfisher. We also found our first White-headed Marsh-tyrants and three Long-winged Harriers quartering the reeds (one light morph adult; one dark adult and a dark immature). Back on the path, a Southern Beardless Tyrannulet called incessantly from a lone Immortelle; a couple of Brown-crested Flycatchers chased each other through the hedge and some of the party caught up with Yellow Oriole. By now it was 8.30am and already seriously hot. Having retraced our steps to our transport, we drove the short distance east to Debe, “the home of Indian cooking in Trinidad” and an introduction to “doubles” and “aloo pies” for a second breakfast. We then drove firstly north, and then west to reach the Gulf of Paria at the tidal mudflats generically called Waterloo on a rising tide. At Brickfields, we found our first Black Skimmers, an ever-increasing tidal roost of Laughing Gulls and single Semipalmated Sandpiper and Semipalmated Plover. A mile further south, close to the Floating Temple, we saw our first “seriously red” Scarlet Ibis feeding alongside a couple of Black-necked Stilts and a small party of Willet, Short-billed Dowitcher, Black-bellied Plover, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs. Simon called out a flyover Large-billed Tern and a scan out over the bay produced several Royal Terns idling up and down. The main gull roost is traditionally at Orange Valley, a few miles to the south and fortunately today, they were very close to the jetty. The Large-billed Tern had joined perhaps 1000 Laughing Gulls and 25 Black Skimmers but sadly the waders normally here must have been sheltering from the fierce sun under the mangroves. Our last birding stop was at Carli Bay. This really was just a stop in for one bird; Saffron Finch. Up to eight immatures were sheltering in the garden trees but views of adults were restricted to “fly pasts”. Lunch was beckoning, but en route we diverted to photograph the Hanoman Murti – an 85ft tall statue of the Hindu Monkey God. It had been a long, but extremely successful mornings birding, and here we called it a day with the mid afternoon drive back to the Nature Centre

Day 11: One of the joys of tour leading is when the tour becomes a team, and today was such a day with a number of different people finding good birds. Pre-breakfast on the balcony was a sedate affair. In addition to the normal honeycreepers, tanagers and thrushes, the only birds of note were single Golden-olive and Lineated Woodpeckers. The morning was to be a second chance at finding higher altitude forest birds. A quick revisit to Las Lapas corner was doomed to failure. The sun shone clear and bright at the Nature Centre and remained same half way up the hill. By the time we reached the corner, low cloud had fallen and no birds were calling. We could see that the eastern ridge of the Arima valley was free of cloud and retraced our steps towards Lalaja trace. And there our good fortune commenced. Here, and for the remainder of the day, we were not going to see a lot of birds, but those we did find were special and showed themselves off extremely well. First off was a confiding White-bellied Antbird right beside the trail, shortly to be followed by our first Forest Elaenia. Whilst walking up the hill, Simon called out “what's this raptor?” just as a superb adult Ornate Hawk-eagle glided by below treetop height. Within the next 30 minutes we had found both Gray-headed Kite and White Hawk whilst a number of parties of Turquoise Tanagers fed in roadside Black Sage trees. Several Blue-headed Parrots flew over; one loosely following a group of “Orange wings” allowing for a good comparison of size and flight mode. By 11.00am, the cloud thickened and the drizzle set in; time to return to the Centre for a particularly unique lunchtime. The Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall were calling into the Centre as part of their royal visit to T&T. Unfortunately heavy lunchtime showers prevented them from a brief walk through the grounds but nevertheless, we were able to find a perched Double-toothed Kite and a couple of Channel-billed Toucans from the balcony. Whilst all this was going on, Roger was outside watching a pair of Swallow-tailed Kites drift up the valley (this is the

first report of this breeding visitor for the season). The Royals departed by 3.00pm and we took the opportunity to walk the Discovery trail. First birds to show were a couple of Green Hermits feeding varyingly on Torch Ginger and “Sexy Pink” Heliconias. Further down, several male White-bearded Manakins appeared at their traditional lekking area, but the weather was far too dingy for any elaborate dancing. Our quest was then to find Bearded Bellbird – Anne found the first, a typical view of a male perhaps 40ft up in the middle canopy which sadly didn’t hang around for too long. The second bird, found this time by Ann was at least 100ft up in the higher canopy but was facing us, showing a full set of wattles and remained on view for about 15 minutes. Independently, Ronnie and Lynne had walked to the bottom of the trail and found a male Red-crowned Ant-Tanager our 201st species for the tour – and there was still more than three days to go. A “one off” day – as Margaret was heard to say “today I’ve seen a Prince and a Bellbird, now that’s a first”

Day 12: It took quite a while for dawn to break through this morning, with dry but overcast conditions. From the balcony, a Scaled Pigeon sat out in the open; two Channel-billed Toucans perched side by side on a thin branch and a couple of Bright-rumped Attilas were calling, one from each side of the valley. Today was to another “open lowland country birding day” as we set off down the Blanchisseuse Road before turning east. Ten minutes later we arrived at the Aripo Agriculture Research Station. This area of open pastures is primarily set aside for the raising of Buffalypso, a hybrid between Water Buffalo and Brahma cattle and was busy with birds. First to show were several Grassland Yellow-finches, a recent colonist from the mainland, and only found at this site; the first of two Cocoi Herons stalked one of the shallow ditches and Least Sandpipers occupied a number of rain puddles virtually running around our feet. In this primary area of the Station, were reacquainted ourselves with excellent views of birds seen previously on the tour, Red-breasted and Yellow-hooded Blackbirds; Savannah Hawks and Yellow-chinned Spinetails; Green-rumped Parrotlets and White-winged Swallows. A large, pale-mantled Peregrine sat atop a dead tree and, after much searching caught up with the rarest passerine in this area, Ruddy-breasted Seedeater. First to show, was a drab olive-brown immature bird with just a hint of rufous on the rump, but shortly afterwards a full adult male sat out on a barbed fence. Whilst the sun never really broke through the clouds, it was still pretty warm, and so we walked up into the shade of some deciduous dry woodland, finding two excellent birds – one of which I had never seen before at this site. A Streak-headed Woodcreeper put in a brief appearance, allowing most of the group to catch up with it flitting from one tree-trunk to the next but the real star of the show was a Little Cuckoo who whilst shy and trying to remain hidden in the undergrowth, actually perched long enough for everyone to have good views through a telescope. By mid morning, it was getting hot and time to drive east to the Atlantic coast at Manzanilla. A lunch of shepherd's pie and salad, and a paddle in the shallows were uninterrupted by birds and so we set off for a slow drive down Cocos Bay Rd, through over a million coconut palms seeking raptors sheltering under from the sun. We found a couple of Savannah Hawks, but the main attraction was a diminutive Pearl Kite sat atop a dead palm. A brief stop at a bridge beside some roadside mangrove allowed brief views of a perched Green Kingfisher and an even briefer look at an American Pygmy Kingfisher dashing under the bridge. More confiding was a pair of Black-crested Antshrikes clambering through the mangrove vegetation. At one point, a pair of Tropical Kingbirds were joined by a third vaguely similar individual; a Sulphury Flycatcher – extremely uncommon in the area. Driving further south, an abrupt stop heralded the fly-past, over the waters edge, of an immature Arctic Skua, probably the last species expected on a hot tropical afternoon. Eventually we turned west, into the south eastern quadrant of Nariva swamp through Kernaham settlement – a time for Rob to show his true colours. Bus No.1 was parked up looking at a perched Savannah Hawk on a roadside lamp-post, awaiting the attention of Simon and his camera. Instead, we got an out of breath exclamation of “Robs’ found a White-tailed Hawk back there” Sure enough, set back from the road and sitting in an exposed position on a tall palm tree an immature light morph bird attracted not only our prolonged look at this extremely rare bird (both Ramdass and I have only ever seen one before in Trinidad) but even remained in view long enough for a second group of birders to be “radioed in – the nearest thing to a “twitch” I have ever seen in Trinidad. We believed our luck was all used up when we tried to find an apparently confiding Pinnated Bittern which had been seen a short while earlier fishing in a roadside ditch – a local fisherman was right opposite throwing his Cascadoo nets and there was no bittern to be seen. Nevertheless, Ramdass came to our rescue, finding a perched White-tailed Goldenthrout perched on a thin reedy stem and loyal to one particular area for quite a while– we were having a good day! By 3.30pm, it was time to retrace our steps west, through the towns of Sangre Grande and Valencia before paying a brief visit to a line of Moriche palms within the Waller Field complex. Here Sulphury Flycatchers called from either side and, once the rum punch was poured, a flight of Red-bellied Macaws came into roost. Initially they hid themselves into the deepest centres of the foliage, but several slowly crept out along the branches picking off ripe fruit and then creeping back for a late evening snack in secret. And it was time for our evening meal too – a typical Indotrini feast of curried lamb with pumpkin, channa, bodi and bus up shot.

Day 13: A cool and overcast morning was excellent for our early morning birding down in the Aripo savannah. One of the most important aspects of touring is local knowledge, and we have Ramdass to thank for our first destination. Along a track west of the Agriculture Station we quickly found a calling male Masked Yellowthroat which, after a fair bit of enticing showed to all. Nearby, alongside a stand of bamboo, two Ferruginous Pygmy-owls (one decidedly rufous and the other much greyer) were busy raiding the nest of some unknown passerine (I hope it wasn’t rare!). Walking further north, a couple of parties of Grassland Yellow-finches fed in the tussocks; an adult Gray Hawk perched up in a bare branched tree and, close to some water cress fields a Limpkin flew up and onto a thatched roof. By mid-morning we re-entered the old airbase at Waller Field. Driving slowly down the side of the northern runway, we flushed a male Common Ground-dove into view. Along the track beside the Moriche palm grove, one of yesterdays Merlins was perched in the same tree; a Rufous-browed Peppershrike called incessantly from a bamboo stand; Simon found a parent Streaked Xenops feeding its fledged young and a small party of Lilac-tailed Parrotlets screeched overhead. The deciduous woodland bordering the south eastern corner of the estate is now far less productive than of old, due entirely to the amount of construction now taking place. We walked the main track, where once both White-winged Becard and Streak-headed Woodcreeper were regularly seen. Flitting in the track-side vegetation we found

both Small Blue and Red Grecian butterflies but of birds managed just several Yellow-breasted Flycatchers and a fly over Zone-tailed Hawk for our efforts – time to return to the Centre for lunch. Midday on the balcony was a little quiet, although both Ochre-bellied Flycatcher and Forest Elaenia fed in the tremor trees. Following a short, sharp shower, the group slowly walked the Discovery trail. Both Golden-headed and White-bearded Manakins were conspicuous; an immature White Hawk briefly perched on a bough over the trail and several male Bearded Bellbirds put on a superb performance. Some of us returned via the Bellbird trail. Here the order of the day was quality at the expense of quantity. Other than numerous White-bearded Manakins, the only birds found were a couple of White-bellied Antbirds, a couple of White-flanked Antwrens and a couple of Red-crowned Ant-tanagers. Late afternoon saw the Double-toothed Kite perched up on its favourite snag; a Boat-billed Flycatcher flew into one of the bare saplings next to the balcony; and then dusk fell.

Day 14: Our last full day in Trinidad and the two main items on the agenda were roosts: Duston's gorge for Oilbirds and Caroni swamp for Scarlet Ibis; but we managed a whole lot more. Yet again the day dawned overcast. We walked the entrance track before breakfast, and fortunately had umbrellas at hand. Despite the conditions, birds eventually became plentiful. New for the tour was a Yellow-olive Flycatcher but the supporting cast included a couple of Black-tailed Tityras and parties of Bay-headed and Turquoise Tanagers. From the balcony in the main it was our familiar favourites on view; Lineated Woodpecker, Purple and Green Honeycreepers etc., but with two additions: a male Red-crowned Ant-tanager fed underneath one of the bench feeders and (sadly I was the only person on the balcony at the time) a female Long-billed Starthroat briefly fed on the *Sanchezia*. After breakfast, Mukesh led the group down the Guarajo trail down to "the cave". Few birds were seen along the way other than a confiding Golden-olive Woodpecker, although an irritating Violaceous Trogon kept calling, just out of sight in the canopy. As we approached the entrance, the eerie calls could easily be heard, giving rise to their Amerindian name which the literal translation is "he who moans and wails" In groups of three, we entered the gorge standing on rocks in the middle of the stream. At least 50 Oilbirds were in view, "chest down, tail up" for balance and we could just make out two tiny chicks heads peeking out. At least twice, birds flew up and down the main thoroughfare, with a wingspan of around 40 inches, looking like a very small harrier.

Following lunch, Ronnie successfully led a delegation to stake out a Gray-throated Leaf-tosser site on the entrance track and most got reasonable flight views. By 1.30pm we were on our buses for the last excursion of the tour. Our first call was at Trincity ponds. Both Snowy and Great Egrets were plentiful, Ospreys were constantly overhead but the hoped for Ringed Kingfisher failed to put in an appearance. So onto Caroni swamp. A brief "comfort stop" at the newly built Visitor Centre, also produced a very approachable Clapper Rail in nearby mangrove; then it was time to board Charlie's boat to quietly chug down the Blue River (or to give it's less aesthetic local name, No. 9 drain). Almost immediately, we found two new birds for the tour; the first of two male Green-throated Mangos and a very confiding Greater Ani, a bird which has become very scarce in recent times. We briefly docked at the Visitor centre jetty to allow a local family to board and used the opportunity to find our third new bird of the ride – a Straight-billed Woodcreeper. Our next two boat stops were non-avian targets. Coiled up on overhanging branches were a couple of Cook's Tree Boas (or Cascabel in Trini) – a nocturnal snake reaching some seven feet long that preys on Bicoloured Conebills, and a little further on another sleeping creature – a Silky Anteater looking like a rusty brown baseball with a couple of tiny feet peeking out of the top. Along the canals we eventually found a party of conebills but they were very flighty; several Yellow-crowned Night-herons flew past and we finally reached our mooring spot. With rum punch in hand, the sun came out and we witnessed the amazing spectacle of over 2,000 Scarlet Ibis coming into a roosting island of red mangrove together with small numbers of Snowy Egrets, Little Blue and Tricoloured Herons. A small party of Neotropic Cormorants circled the island a couple of times and a Peregrine drifted over – we all agreed, the highlights are best left to last. As dusk fell, we quickly returned to the jetty for the drive back for our last night at the Centre.

Day 15: One last chance from the balcony and the entrance track before completing the tedious tasks of packing and checking out...and as the saying goes "it isn't over until the fat lady sings". Our initial walk pre-breakfast produced good views of familiar birds, especially Streaked and Euler's Flycatchers, Lineated and Golden-olive Woodpeckers but nothing new. The team took matters into their own hands. Simon found a Little Hermit on the entrance track, which was particularly faithful to one patch of vegetation; everyone got excellent views of "Ronnie's Leaf-tosser" and an obliging Olive-sided Flycatcher sat up on an exposed snag for at least an hour. Margaret caught up with the male Red-crowned Ant-tanager; and then it was all over. Our final drive down the Arima valley and up over Calvary Hill produced our very last Gray Hawk and we were soon checking into our Caribbean Airlines flight over to Tobago and connecting with Excel to London

Martyn Kenefick, Birdfinders