

—Postcard from Trinidad and Tobago—

Tropical field biology—a new course at the University of Arkansas, Fort Smith

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What is the best way to introduce biology students to the wonders of birding in tropical America without overwhelming them with its diversity? Ideally, find an island very close to the mainland with key representative habitats and bird families, but with limited numbers of species. Ensure the logistics are conducive, avoid strenuous hikes and provide ready access to good food and drinks. Choose an English-speaking and politically stable country with knowledgeable local guides to make it easier and safer for American students.

Sounds like a tall order? Not really. Those conditions fit Trinidad and Tobago, a delightful little island nation just 10 kms from Venezuela. That's exactly why I chose this as the venue for my new Tropical Field Biology course. At 4,904 kms²—about the size of Goa—it has the most number of bird species *per unit area* for any country in the world (234 species per 2,600 km², compared with about one species for the same area in India). That means you don't have to travel a lot to find new birds—perfect for the novice.

Ten students and I were pampered for a week (May 2009) at the world famous Asa Wright Nature Center (AWNC), a set of rustic cabins around a British-era bungalow nestled in the lush Arima Valley of Trinidad. From its legendary verandahs, oft mentioned in birding websites, we were treated to a panoramic view of the verdant tropical forest-clad valley that slopes away into the horizon. Neotropical specials like toucans, tanagers, antbirds, oropendolas, bananaquits, honeycreepers, motmots, and euphonias abound in the valley. Many of them ventured within arm's reach of the visitors on the verandah, attracted by an abundance of bird food and baths. Indeed, if there is the perfect place to start your forays into the new world tropics, this is it.

For ease of birding, no place in my experience compares to AWNC. You relax in the comforts of the verandah (where food, libations and sofas abound) and make a huge dent in your species-to-see list. Or enjoy the antics of the dozen or so species of hummingbirds ranging from tiny colettes with stunning colors and crests, to large jacobins and hermits that zoom in and out as blurs, constantly harrying each other with territorial zeal. In the afternoons when the frenzy of bird activity wanes, you interact with the apparently omniscient local guides who are always at hand. Or scan the skies above the valley for white hawks and swallow-tailed kites or any of the myriads of other raptor species that ride the thermals. And there is always an agouti (a large rodent) or a tiger lizard (a *Varanus*-like monitor) to break any monotony.

Each day, at the crack of dawn, AWNC staff load the bird feeders copiously with bread, fruit, and nectar. This regular feeding, coupled with the plethora of bird attracting flora in the

vicinity of the verandah means that the period between 0600 hrs and 0700 hrs can yield over 50 bird species spread over a gamut of bird families, all enjoyed over steaming cups of fresh-brewed locally grown and ground coffee.

One of the highlights of the week was the hike to a nearby riparian grotto to see the only nocturnal fruit eating bird in the world, the oilbird. These birds are also known for their echolocation abilities that enable them maneuver through dark caves where they roost and nest. Also, along one of the immaculately maintained trails that crisscross the property, we were treated to the extraordinary sight of two species of manakins displaying at their leks. So fixed are these leks that they are indicated by big, informative, and permanently rooted banner boards, and wooden fences keep visitors on the trails. The bearded bellbird (a cotinga) site too was similarly posted. And guides led us to see a broken stump on a dead tree, which upon close inspection morphed into a potoo, a nightjar-like master of camouflage and deception ("I see the stump, Dr. Kannan, but where is the bird?!"). One gets the feeling of being in a zoo, and we constantly had to remind ourselves that the birds are completely wild denizens of the area!

In our quest to cover as many habitats as possible, we spent one evening boating in the mangrove swamps near Port of Spain (the capital) and saw hundreds of scarlet ibises—the national emblem of Trinidad, proudly featured on their flag, currency notes, and coins. These gaudy birds derive their hues from a crustacean they consume in prodigious quantities. Many a zoo in the past has realized the hard way that the colours fade when they are not given that particular shrimp to eat. Apart from hordes of other mangrove and coastal specialties like bi-coloured conebills and black-crested antshrikes, we were also blessed with views of Cook's tree boas and silky anteaters, both coiled and asleep amongst mangrove branches while our boat glided below.

The *grand finale* was our night adventure on a remote forested beach where we witnessed the ancient ritual of leatherback sea turtles coming ashore to nest. We saw four massive females crawl out of the ocean, prepare their nests and lay up to 80 eggs each, bury them and then return to sea leaving tracks more than six feet wide in the sand. The sight of these half-ton creatures emerging from the water in the darkness was awesome. Students were able to walk up to them and make observations. Naturalists from Nature Seekers, a local NGO that has done commendable work on conserving these giants, served as guides. They stapled and tagged their flippers and injected electronic chips in the shoulder muscles to track them. Two of the females were returnees, having nested earlier that season (with their remarkable sperm storage ability, they could nest up to five times in one season, with each clutch sired by different males). Coincidentally, Nature Seekers'

work was featured in that month's (May 2009) *National Geographic*. The article was an invaluable teaching tool in one of our readings and discussions on the verandah.

Students returned to the USA after getting to know the major bird families of the Neotropics and an overall feel for tropical nature, without the sense of being flooded with too much

information. Above all, their curiosities have been piqued. Some of them are planning to return to Trinidad for post-graduate research. At least one of them appears to be hooked to bird photography and another is taking daring tentative steps towards taxonomic botany. The Tropical Field Biology course is off to a good start.

Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (1970)—23

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In my previous column I had said that 1970 was a year in which conservation and natural history activities gathered a new momentum mainly because of the meeting of the IUCN General Assembly, which took place in November 1969. The *Newsletter* too received a spate of good articles in that period. I have reproduced some from the January 1970 issue, and here is another by our diplomat/ornithologist, Sudhir Vyas, who has featured in this column before.

Incidentally I was asked to give a talk on conservation to the IAS probationers at the National Administrative Institute in Mussoorie at the time when Sudhir was in the institute. Later he offered to take me for a bird walk, which I declined because of an alternative offer from the equerry of the riding club to take me out for a canter. Horses and birds remain my passion in equal measure.

The birds of Mussoorie

Sudhir Vyas

"The first bird, which intrudes upon your peace in Mussoorie, is not the chirpy sparrow, not the garrulous crow, but that rough and ready champion of song, the Himalayan Whistling Thrush. It was everywhere in the woods, on the open hillsides, even in the bazaar. Its pleasant song was a regular feature of both day and night. But apart from this I saw very few thrushes. I saw the Blueheaded and Chestnutbellied Rock Thrushes occasionally. The Greywinged Blackbird was often heard singing, but being shy, was rarely seen. During the last week of our stay, however, a male took up quarters in our garden and delighted us with his song.

"An amusing incident took place one day, when I descended into the thorny undergrowth on hearing what sounded like a puppy. But no puppy was to be found. Instead, three Blue Magpies fluttered off from a bush. I gained a wise experience—always test for Blue Magpies before diving after unfamiliar noises—and paid for it by quite a few scratches. Redbilled Blue Magpies were, incidentally, very common. A party of nearly 20 frequented the municipal Gardens. On the contrary I never saw the Yellowbilled species.

"My exhilaration knew no bounds when I saw a Sirkeer Cuckoo at 6500 feet. It declined considerably however on reading in Whistler that they are often found up to '6000 ft and even

'occasionally higher.' It was much less rufous in colour than the ones I saw at Poona. Indian, Common, and Himalayan cuckoos were often heard. I once heard the 'Brainfever' of a Hawk-cuckoo but I could not find it.

"A lovely place for birds is the Kamptee Road. Here I once saw a Himalayan Barred Owlet feeding its brood of three. I once heard the Himalayan Scops Owl's double whistle at night but I could not find it. On another occasion, I saw a nightjar fluttering along at dusk but it was silent and could not be identified. Kokla Green pigeons were common along the Kamptee Road and they often fed on berry bushes close to the ground, thus providing an unobstructed view of themselves. They looked beautiful with their orange breasts and maroon backs. Kaleej pheasants too were fairly common here.

"A great disappointment was the paucity of hawks in Mussoorie. The Kestrel was the commonest falcon and a pair had a nest on a high ledge on Gun Hill. A small falcon was seen twice in forest, and I think it was a Hobby. On another occasion I saw a large peregrine-like falcon, but it had pale underparts. What could an Eastern Peregrine be doing here in June? I saw a Shikra once but no eagles at all. There was a refuse dump in Mussoorie where large number of Scavenger Vultures, Large Indian Kites and a Lammergeier or two fed on rubbish. A number of Grey Drongos also frequented this place. Could it be due to the flies attracted to the rotting refuse?

"The Redwinged Shrike-babbler was much commoner than what I had expected. I once saw a family party on the 16th of June with two young. They often associated with Treepies, Drongos and Dark Grey Cuckoo-shrikes. I also saw once what I think was a female Maroon Oriole.

"A Hoopoe and a huge colony of House Swifts had nests in the remains of the 'Standard Skating Rink' on the Mall which burnt down in 1968 and by courtesy of the municipality is still standing. I hope it survives long enough for the swifts to raise their young. Blyth's Whiterumped Swifts arrived in some numbers about the middle of June. A little later Whitethroated Spinetails and Alpine Swifts also made their appearance. Shortbilled Minivets had finished breeding by June and could be seen in family parties.

"The Great Himalayan Barbet was common in the jungles as were the Scalybellied and Blacknaped Green woodpeckers