

Trinidad and Tobago

19 April–3 May 2013

Participants

Alan and Diane Kydd

Andrew and Cynthia Przeslak

John and Angela Watts



White-bearded Manakin

Leader Martyn Kenefick

Day 1 Transatlantic air travel is a tedious business at the best of times, especially if there is a touchdown en route, so punctuality and efficiency make life so much easier. The British Airways flight from London via Antigua arrived in Tobago ahead of time. Within 30 minutes, with immigration and customs procedures out of the way, six smiling faces met me in the arrivals area of ANR Robinson airport. Andy, our driver for the Tobago legs of the tour, immediately loaded the bags onto his bus and within five minutes we were checking into Kariwak Village, our base for the first three nights of the tour. The late afternoon temperature was around 30°C and the swimming pool looked pretty inviting. As the group met up later for dinner there were tales of Rufous-vented Chachalaca, Barred Antshrike, Caribbean Martin, Spectacled Thrush, Bananaquit, White-lined and Blue-grey Tanagers in the hotel garden. All that remained was to enjoy a superb buffet dinner of grilled swordfish and ginger beef followed by a well-deserved sleep after a long day of travel.

Day 2 You know you're in the tropics when Magnificent Frigatebirds and Brown Pelicans soar over the dawn skyline. The day started off a little chilly with a reasonable easterly breeze – dawn temperature probably around 25°C. It warmed up to a sunny 31°C by late morning. After lunch the cloud cover came in and we had a most welcome five minutes of rain before the skies brightened up once more. Whilst awaiting Andy's arrival, we found White-tipped Doves, Tropical Kingbirds, Tropical Mockingbirds and Palm and Blue-grey Tanagers in the car park – good to get them out of the way! Birding this morning was intended to be both an introduction to common Tobago birds together with our only opportunity to visit freshwater wetlands, a fast diminishing ecosystem on the island. However there was a rare bird to be seen first. We drove a short distance to overlook the beach at Store Bay. In amongst the Laughing Gulls and Royal Terns was a 1st-winter Black-headed Gull sat on one of the fishing boats. It had originally been found back on 15th March and I had been hoping it was going to hang around – it's not often I see a species I've never seen in Tobago before. Indeed it's only the 4th record for the island in the last eighteen years. It is also the first time this species has been seen on a Birdfinders Trinidad and Tobago tour. The beach held a flock of non-breeding dress Ruddy Turnstones and a Sanderling chasing the waves as Sanderlings are wont to do, whilst a White-winged Swallow flicked around the various fishing pirogues. This latter species only arrived in Tobago in 2000 and is now regularly seen in the southwest of the island. Having "ticked off" roadside birds such as Ruddy Ground-dove, Yellow-bellied Elaenia and Carib Grackle, we drove the short distance to Bon Accord and walked the roadside ditches and dry scrub finding our first Little Blue, Tricolored and Green Herons, a couple of immature Yellow-crowned Night-herons, Spotted Sandpipers, Smooth-billed Anis and Blue-black Grassquits. Pride of place, however, went to a particularly photogenic female Merlin sat on overhead utility wires. Next stop breakfast. We set off once more around 09.00 visiting a series of lakes, sewage ponds and dry forest at the Lowlands complex. Trinidad and Tobago has endured an extremely hot dry season these last few months and I knew that with water levels low we might miss a few critical species. Once through the security barriers the first lake held single Great Blue Heron, Great Egret and Snowy Egret, whilst across the road a smaller pond produced at least 30 Black-bellied Whistling-ducks. The overhanging roosting trees were home to good numbers of Anhingas together with three Neotropical Cormorants – a very recent colonist in Tobago and first found on the island in 2005. We then entered a series of sewage ponds finding our first Least Grebes with young, a small group of Blue-winged Teals in full breeding

plumage, several Purple Gallinules together with the more familiar Common Gallinule (now split from European Moorhen) plus singles of Solitary Sandpiper and Greater Yellowlegs. Cynthia found a pair of Green-rumped Parrotlets nest-building in a dead palm trunk, our first Scrub Greenlets, Brown-crested and Yellow-breasted Flycatchers were seen well by some whilst Red-eyed Vireos led us a merry chase before seeing settling down for all to enjoy. Sadly, the lack of open water precluded us from finding Masked Duck, a rare breeding resident in this area. Our last stop for the morning was at the Arnos Vale Adventure Farm. The 'adventure' here is sitting in deck chairs, sipping homemade mango punch whilst primarily watching hummingbirds coming into the sugar water feeders. Most numerous were the dazzling Ruby Topaz – adult males are always a favourite with visiting birders. Also on view were White-necked Jacobins, Copper-rumped Hummingbirds, Black-throated Mangos plus several rather fleeting glimpses of a Rufous-breasted Hermit. Hummingbirds are not all the area has to offer however. Ean, the owner, rings a bell (rather like the start of business at the Stock Exchange) announcing to the nearby birds that fruit is being put out on various feeding stations. Within minutes, Red-crowned Woodpeckers, Barred Antshrikes, Shiny Cowbirds and White-lined Tanagers came in. Adding a touch of glamour to the proceedings, three Trinidad Motmots also flew in, their sheer size assuring their acquisition of the largest pieces of fruit on offer. The motmot is endemic to Trinidad and Tobago it was formerly part of the Blue-crowned Motmot complex that has recently been split into five species based on biometrics, under-parts coloration and vocalisation. Ours is the largest with the brightest rufous-orange underparts. Lunch was calling (birding in the tropics is at its lowest ebb during the middle hours of the day) so we switched off for an hour or so before gathering once again for a mid-afternoon visit to Grafton Sanctuary. This is a dry forest estate where the caretaker feeds the birds daily at 8am and again 4pm. He arrived with a supply of cornmeal and sugar water in his hands and a slab of cheese hidden in his back pocket. Rufous-vented Chachalacas and Pale-vented Pigeons were everywhere and the moment he banged his empty bucket noisily against a tree stump, they flocked in to feed. Accompanying them was a selection of Red-crowned Woodpeckers, all three tanagers and Bananaquits. Meanwhile, the cheese was cut into small pieces and placed on a prominent ledge inside one of the open-sided buildings. This was the motmots special treat and with just one impersonation of a motmot call, the bird came flying in for its special feast. Forest birding in the afternoon can be a very quiet affair and this afternoon was no exception. We saw a number of White-fringed Antwrens and everyone now had good views of Yellow-breasted Flycatcher, whilst an immature Yellow-headed Caracara flying past was really the only additional notebook entry. For a first day in Tobago we had amassed a species count of 66 and were set to look forward to another superb Kariwak buffet of creamed chicken and mahe mahe.

Day 3 The local Tobago name for Rufous-vented Chachalaca is "cocrico" mimicking its loud raucous call and they were in full voice sat on the roofs of our chalets during the pre-dawn hours. It is understandable why they are declared vermin! Pre-breakfast activity was very much an individual's choice this morning. Other than the usual suspects in the hotel gardens, the only additional species were found by Alan and Diane with a couple of *eurygnathus* Sandwich (Cayenne) Terns at Store Bay. This bird is currently considered (by most authorities) a yellowish-green billed cline of Sandwich Tern and regularly hybridises with nominate birds on the islands to our north. On mainland South America all birds share this bill colour. Our day was to be spent in the Main Ridge Forest Reserve, which forms the backbone of central Tobago, declared a protected forest reserve back in 1776. Being at a height of 1500–1800ft above sea level, the temperature was never more than 'comfortably warm' with relatively little humidity. The drive took us northeast up the Windward Road before turning inland just before the town of Roxborough, with a constant procession of Magnificent Frigatebirds overhead. Some 20 minutes later we arrived at the trail-head of Gilpin trace, a wonderful scenic narrow trail that winds its way down through the forest alongside several small streams. We enjoyed an exceptionally successful time and whilst mosquitos were ever present, they were never more than a little irritating. This morning really was a team effort with almost all of the group finding new birds for the tour at one point or another. Blue-backed Manakin, always a favourite and only found in Tobago on this tour, led us a merry chase with most of us only getting tantalising glimpses until we finally found three males lekking on their dancing perch, low down just above the stream and bouncing around like Zebedee from the Magic Roundabout. By contrast, Yellow-legged Thrush, a species that we normally struggle to find easily, were ever present. The key species here is White-tailed Sabrewing; a hummingbird who's world range is restricted to this forest and a couple of hillsides on the Paria Peninsula of Venezuela. Most of us saw three birds quite well but they never stayed perched for long. Our 'back up list' was equally impressive with a first year Great Black-hawk perched on a palm tree totally dismissive of our presence but much to the annoyance of the local Orange-winged Parrots followed by our best views yet of a number of Rufous-breasted Hermits. Dazzling Rufous-tailed Jacamars posing for the photographers amongst us (males with the white throat and females a subtle shade of peach throat) whilst both Plain-brown and Cocoa Woodcreepers were found climbing path side tree trunks. Subtly-plumaged Plain Antvireos and Fuscous Flycatchers perched right out in the open but our biggest surprise was a Blackpoll Warbler moulting into breeding plumage. This bird is best described as scarce during autumn migration yet decidedly rare in spring – another first for Birdfinders in Trinidad and Tobago. We took our packed lunch to the Bloody Bay lookout – a magnificent purpose-built structure (pity that there were no tables or chairs!) perched high on a hilltop overlooking the Caribbean. Here we enjoyed our first Red-legged Honeycreepers, whilst Grey-rumped Swifts were ever present overhead. Early afternoon saw us walking Spring Trail, another quiet winding forest trail, for an hour or so. Pride of place goes to the Olivaceous Woodcreeper that finally responded to tape lure and performed well for all, especially as it is one of those "Tobago only" birds on this tour. We had heard this bird on many occasions during the morning but they had always

been rather distant and remained totally out of sight. If only the Striped-breasted Spinetails that were repeatedly calling from the undergrowth had been as cooperative! Close by, a much larger Cocoa Woodcreeper maintained its monotonous descending call from trees right beside the pathway, two more male Blue-backed Manakins performed in the open and we enjoyed our best view yet of a male White-tailed Sabrewing. All that remained for most of us was the 90-minute drive back southwest to Kariwak Village, then to swim or otherwise relax before dinner. Andrew however went birding and found two Roseate Terns for his troubles. Dinner tonight was a tasty menu of breadfruit soup, salad and blackened fish.

Day 4 Whilst the main focus of today was the inter-islands transfer to Trinidad. Alan walked down to the beach at first light finding both Cayenne Terns together with an adult Yellow-headed Caracara, another recent colonist to south-west Tobago. With birding temporarily on hold, we left Kariwak at 07.15 and whilst a slight blip in the transit logistics was the cancellation of our scheduled flight, we were reallocated seats on the next plane and actually landed in Trinidad a mere 20 minutes later than originally planned. Ivan, our driver for the Trinidad leg of the tour was there to meet us; his brand new air conditioned bus was a blessing as the sun this morning was pretty fierce. The journey immediately highlighted the avian differences between the two islands with Black and Turkey Vultures ever present in the skies and with the Caribbean Martins of Tobago being replaced by the Grey-breasted Martins of Trinidad. By 10.30 we were checking into our rooms at Asa Wright Nature Centre, our base for the next seven nights, and a short stint on the centre balcony before lunch added a whole new set of birds to the tour list. We quickly learned how to separate Blue-chinned Sapphires and White-chested Emeralds from the Copper-rumped Hummingbirds that we had gotten used to in Tobago. We learned the differences between males and females of both Green and Purple Honeycreepers and of Boat-billed Flycatchers from Great Kiskadees. We enjoyed the first of many encounters with the crushed velvet plumage tones of male Silver-beaked Tanagers and the gaudy blues and yellows of Violaceous Euphonias. During the normal "quiet patch" immediately after lunch we had excellent views of a pair of Guianan Trogons (this name change follows the splitting by authorities of the Violaceous Trogon complex), an adult Common Black-hawk circling low in the valley and a perched Southern Rough-winged Swallow right in front of us. Our afternoon walk took us down the main Discovery Trail, returning via Chaconia Trail (in time for afternoon tea and pastries) and it couldn't have gone better. We found at least five lekking adult male Golden-headed Manakins who proudly showed why we believe that they taught Michael Jackson the "moon walk", whilst a little further down it was the turn of White-bearded Manakins. Here, the male snap their secondary feathers together whilst flitting from one tiny snag to another, recalling the noise an old fashioned child's cap gun makes. Both species performed admirably before we continued on down in search of our main quarry, Bearded Bellbird. Despite their bold black and white plumage and loud "hammer on anvil" vocalisations, these birds can be exceedingly difficult to pin down. Fortunately we were able to find one particularly confiding male within a few minutes, calling from a perch about 25ft high but very close to the trail. Retracing our steps, we chanced upon a White-throated Spadebill perched low over the trackside vegetation – only the 2nd ever seen on a Birdfinders tour. This was quickly followed by both male Collared Trogon and male Red-crowned Ant-tanager. Just as we got back to the Nature Centre buildings, a piercing call alerted us to an adult Black Hawk-eagle circling overhead. This magnificent raptor has increased in numbers in recent years with one pair residing in the Arima valley. Nevertheless, it is always a red letter day when one is seen. Not bad for an afternoon stroll, even if the conditions were hot, still and extremely humid. Late afternoon saw us back on the balcony where, after a most welcomed short but sharp rain shower, new birds for the tour continued to be added. The favourites perhaps were a perched Channel-billed Toucan and a confiding group of at least four Turquoise Tanagers feeding on a Trema tree. Whilst tea was being served, we had good telescope views of both a second Bearded Bellbird and a Black-tailed Tityra perched atop the same distant tree and added both Squirrel Cuckoo and Scaled Pigeon and finally an exquisite adult male Tufted Coquette to round off what had been without doubt an excellent first days birding in Trinidad. After dinner, whilst the rest of us retired to our rooms, Andrew joined one of the trail guides, Elsa, in a nighttime walk along the roads and pathways finding Chevronned Tarantula (the largest of our tarantula species in Trinidad), Coffe Snake and a whole host of other creepy crawlies

Day 5 A pre-dawn start today was necessary to cover the distance down to the freshwater marshes southwest of the village of Debe. Currently Birdfinders is the only UK-based tour company to reach south Trinidad and there are many prizes on offer. We parked up at the Sudama Teerath, a Hindu riverside stage where religious ceremonies are often performed, and walked west along a raised track with an open marsh on one side and a line of mangroves bordering a narrow river on the other. The skies were generally overcast and humidity high but the temperatures quite acceptable and rain only fell a few minutes before we arrived back at the bus. I guess that we walked around 3km in total with one of our principal target species, Spotted Tody-flycatcher, seen and heard throughout the walk. This species is almost totally absent north of this line of mangroves. We enjoyed a great introduction to Trinidad swamp species with Striated Heron, Yellow-chinned Spinetail, Pied Water-tyrant, White-headed Marsh-tyrant, Yellow-hooded Blackbirds and Masked Yellowthroats all showing well in numbers. The mangrove held surprisingly showy Rufous-browed Peppershrikes and we were able to entice into view a particularly inquisitive pair of Black-crested Antshrikes. Time spent watching over the reeds and marshes from a raised picnic area was rewarded with incredibly close views of both light and dark morph Long-winged Harriers, a group of five Fork-tailed Flycatchers and a distant Cocoli Heron. Sadly, our only Ringed Kingfisher of the day hurtled through with the group barely making out its shape before it disappeared over the trees.

Similarly, we just caught the end of a fly past by a pair of Greyish Saltators. Time for second breakfast and to enjoy real 'indotrini' street food of doubles and saheena – and damn good they were too. With stomachs full and a few lips tingling from the hot pepper sauce, we re-traced our steps north before driving out to the coast at Carli Bay. Here we found a small feeding group of Saffron Finches including at least four adult males but little else to trouble the notebook. Further north still, the tidal mudflats adjacent to the Orange Valley jetty was alive with sea and shorebirds. In amongst the 700 or so Laughing Gulls were perhaps 200 Black Skimmers and at least 40 Large-billed Terns together with two 1st summer *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gulls. The seabird highlight, however, was a moulting Roseate Tern, the first I have ever seen at this site. Of the larger wading birds, the most popular were a handful of adult Scarlet Ibises but in terms of rarity value the best bird by far was an adult Grey Heron. This latter individual has put in occasional appearances here since last December. Not the extreme rarity once thought, there are still just a handful of records for Trinidad & Tobago. Today was particularly instructive however as there was an adult Great Blue Heron fairly close by enabling both structural and plumage differences to be compared. The midday heat kept numbers of the smaller shorebirds hidden in the mangroves however we did manage to find our first Semipalmated Plovers, our only Wilson's Plovers, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Willet, *hudsonicus* Whimbrel (a likely future split to a species in its own right) and a couple of winter-plumaged Red Knots. Our very brief final port of call was some three miles further north where we scanned from the fishing depot at Brickfields. The tide was well in by now and in the distance, a line of posts held another 50 or so Large-billed Terns. In amongst them were two much, much smaller Yellow-billed Terns although I am the first to admit that viewing distance was hardly satisfactory. Following a brief cultural stop to view the Hamunam Murti – a 70ft high ornate Hindu temple dedicated to the monkey god, all that was left was a drive of close to two hours back to the centre with a short stop (care of eagle-eyed Ivan, to watch an adult Grey-lined Hawk perched in a treetop set back from the road. This is another recent split, this time from the Grey Hawk of northern Central America. Birding wasn't done for the day however, as in addition to several of the group finally seeing both Northern Waterthrush and Ochre-bellied Flycatcher missed earlier in the tour, we enjoyed excellent views of a perched Double-toothed Kite and a couple of Channel-billed Toucans from the Asa Wright balcony. Finally, as dusk encroached, a Short-tailed Nighthawk sallied to and fro around the tree tops until it was finally dark. As always, Andrew wasn't done however, another night walk and another species of tarantula – this time Pink-toed Tarantula. Not quite as large as its Chevronned cousin but just as hairy!

Day 6 Birding was hard work this morning with overcast skies, occasional drizzle, temperatures struggling to get past the high 20s and high humidity. We drove down to the lowlands and birded a wide track, which was formerly a railway line up until the mid-1960s and runs along the southern edge of the Aripo Savannah. Whilst we added a number of new species for the tour, in fairness birds were thin on the ground. Without question, the highlight was an adult male Common Pauraque that flew up from trackside vegetation and tried to distract our attention by fluttering along, and then sitting at the edge of the trail. Upon investigation, there were two fluffy beige, white and brown chicks sat right at the path edge, perfectly camouflaged. Other than that, two savannah specialists, Fork-tailed Palm-swift and Sulphury Flycatcher were much in evidence, the latter only being found in Trinidad where there are stands of Moriche Palms. We had glimpses of White Hawk, Blue-headed Parrot and Streaked Flycatcher but everyone would have liked to see them longer and in two cases closer. By contrast, Cynthia found an extremely close and confiding three feet long Horsewhip Snake replete with quivering yellow tongue. We returned to the centre in time for lunch and from the balcony, an old adult male Bearded Bellbird was watched sitting atop a distant tree, (replete with the longest wattles I have ever seen), and our first Band-rumped Swifts hawked flying insects. Shortly after lunch, we walked the Bellbird and Discovery trails in almost continuous rain. Birding could best be described as quality at the expense of quantity. Pride of place goes to a pair of inquisitive White-bellied Antbirds that came in to check us out and the other notable sightings were a male White-flanked Antwren flicking through the trees close to the path and a particularly confiding White-necked Thrush. As is always the case, when the rain stops and the light brightens, birds start to show themselves. Late afternoon from the balcony produced our first Plumbeous Kite, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Bay-headed Tanager and Blue Dacnis together with a couple of glide past views of Common Black-hawks and yet another showing of a male Bearded Bellbird sat atop its favourite distant perch. As the evening drew in, low cloud and mist filled the valley.

Day 7 At 02.30 this morning, the heavens opened – I think the dry season is officially closed! During the day, the weather did it's very best to thwart our efforts but despite the almost constant drizzle and low cloud, we managed a respectable list of additional species for the tour. The onset of rain after such a severe period of dry weather also instigated the first 'run' of Mountain Crabs and country roads were busy both with crabs and catchers (they make a really good curry!). Today we were scheduled to spend all day birding the upper levels of the Northern Range rainforest. Because of poor light we restricted ourselves to the upper Blanchisseuse Road, leading down to Paria junction and even lower at the village of Brasso Seco where we took our picnic lunch. It was a very slow start in the gloom of Las Lapas with only Long-billed Gnatwren troubling the notebook. A couple of fruiting trees added a much welcomed pair of Speckled Tanagers however, intermixed with a few Bay-headed Tanagers and Purple Honeycreepers. A little lower down we played hide and seek with a very confiding Black-faced Antthrush that eventually showed itself to almost all of the party at nearly point blank range. A pair of Streaked Xenops played around a dead tree, a mixed flock harassing a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl included several Golden-fronted Greenlets, single Slaty-capped, Dusky-capped and Boat-billed Flycatchers together with a Tropical Pewee, whilst close views of Tropical Parula and Golden-crowned Warbler added a

splash of colour. We were able to entice in a photogenic pair of Green-backed Trogons (again a separate species following the split up of the former White-tailed Trogon complex). Just outside Brasso both Plumbeous Kite and adult Common Black-hawk perched up in the open, a couple of Blue-headed Parrots flew over and in the gardens and more open land leading up to Paria Falls, we found a pair of Great Antshrikes, Pale-breasted Spinetail, Greyish Saltator and Yellow-rumped Cacique. By early afternoon, the mist had risen burnt away from the lowlands so we decided to try the Blanchisseuse Road plateau for Swallow Tanager. Everything looked good until we got within a few hundred metres of the top, then the cloud and rain swept in again. There was no alternative but to return to the Nature Centre, at least we could watch from the balcony in the dry there. A fly over White Hawk, several Blue Dacnis and Ochre-bellied Flycatchers eventually brought proceeding to a damp and misty close.

Day 8 The rain cleared overnight and the day dawned clear and bright – we even saw the sun first thing! We drove back up to the higher elevation forests with our first stop this morning being at the highest point on the island to which a vehicle has access, beside the Troposcopic Scatter Station on Morne Bleu at a height of approximately 2,200 ft. Here we enjoyed our best views yet of a family party of Collared Trogons and a couple of Dusky-capped Flycatchers. Several fruiting trees on the slope held feeding parties of Bay-headed Tanagers together with brief views of accompanying Speckled Tanagers. Walking the flat portion of the Blanchisseuse Road to the west of Morne Bleu we hit upon our principal target species for the day, Swallow Tanager. This bird arrives in Trinidad to nest around early March but is gone by late August and, from a personal point of view, is the finest looking of all our tanagers. Eventually we reached the top of Las Lapas trace but cloud cover had gradually been building up although the visibility was still far better than yesterday. Two of Trinidad's 'secretive species' came right in to check us out on the trail this morning. We spent perhaps five minutes with a calling male Grey-throated Leaf-tosser perched at eye level on a hanging bough some ten meters away from us whilst on the other side of the track, a Black-faced Antthrush walked nonchalantly right past us with tail cocked. It was clearly understood by all why this bird is locally called 'cock of the woods'. A far rarer a sight, and only sadly seen by Diane and Angela, was a Tayra, or High Woods Dog. This sooty black mammal is visually most akin to a Pine Martin but is perhaps two and a half feet in length. Other sightings on the trail included another male Common Pauraque displaying its wounded wing flutter to distract from its nest, a couple of Golden-olive Woodpeckers, another Streaked Xenops pretending to be a tree creeper, Tropical Parula and a couple of Golden-crowned Warblers. By late morning, cloud cover had turned into constant rain that was to last until late afternoon. The remainder of the day was therefore spent enjoying the variety of common Trinidad birds found from the Asa Wright balcony. Turquoise Tanagers mixed with Violaceous Euphonias and Ochre-bellied Flycatchers with Purple Honeycreepers. A female Tufted Coquette was seen only briefly yet Black-throated Mango, White-chested Emerald, White-necked Jacobin and Copper-rumped Hummingbirds were ever present. Crested Oropendolas fed from the bench feeders whilst a Grey-fronted Dove picked scraps from the floor. Of particular interest were our Ferruginous Pygmy-owls sheltering from the rain in a Sip tree and a Squirrel Cuckoo clambering through a Yellow Pou.

Day 9 It was certainly raining well before dawn and carried on, almost continuously until well after dark – indeed it really didn't even get truly light today and we certainly never saw a glimmer of the sun. And of course being in the tropics, with mist and rain comes humidity. Nevertheless, we were to spend much of the day in the freshwater swamp and agricultural land of east Trinidad. A tedious journey through the puddles brought us to the village of Plum Mitán, which lies on the western edge of Nariva swamp. Here we probably saw the most exciting bird of the day as a Blue-and-yellow Macaw flew past. This species became locally extirpated back in 1970 due to the pet trade. However, under the auspices of the Cincinatti Zoo and under license, approximately 40 birds were taken from the wild in Guyana around the turn of the century and placed in a breeding project safe in a protected swamp forest environment within Nariva before being released into the wild once more. Some 12 years later, the signs are encouraging. Several pairs have bred and they are actively monitored by representatives from the various village communities in southern Trinidad. As the price tag in a Miami pet shop is close to US\$800 per bird however, there is always a threat hanging over them. Once inside the area, Giant Cowbirds and Yellow-hooded Blackbirds became very familiar sights. Of more interest were several Limpkins, Savannah Hawks and dark-morph Long-winged Harriers all looking as wet and miserable as we were. There was little to be gained from wandering around any further and so we drove back through the village and parked up by some flooded ploughed fields. Cattle and Great White Egrets were everywhere and after careful scouring we came across a small party of sandpipers comprising four Solitary, two White-rumped (a new species for Birdfinders in Trinidad & Tobago) and single Semipalmated and Spotted. Eventually, we reached the Atlantic coast and beach at Manzanilla where we coaxed some security staff to open up a locked building for us to eat our picnic lunch. A lunchtime planned seawatch was abandoned and instead we very slowly drove down Cocos Bay Road, which follows the coastline through perhaps close to one million coconut palm trees. Normally we seek raptors sheltering from the midday sun; today they were sheltering from the wet. First of all we found a perched Ringed Kingfisher, which posed for the photographers amongst us, followed by several Grey-lined and Savannah Hawks, a couple of Yellow-headed Caracaras and an adult Common Black-hawk. We then turned into the southeastern quadrant of Nariva swamp to slowly drive the bund road embracing the settlement of Kernahan. A Merlin flew across the road in front of us – a particularly late date for this winter visitor from continental North America and a few Yellow-chinned Spinetails braved the elements but there really was little else to see. By 15.00 we had called "stumps" – the whole island was rained out, there was considerable roadside flooding and

we slowly made the tortuous drive back to Asa Wright in good time for a buffet of onion soup, jerk pork and stir fried vegetables.

Day 10 The intensity of rain had certainly lessened as dawn approached and pre-breakfast birding from the balcony was quite busy, if a little predictable. Added to the usual hummingbirds, female Tufted Coquette and male Ruby Topaz put in brief appearances, a fine Double-toothed Kite perched up in the tree tops down the valley, Blue Dacnis and Bay-headed Tanagers foraged in the Trema trees whilst Zone-tailed and White Hawks and Common Black-hawks glided over. The undoubted highlight however, was our now familiar pair of Ferruginous Pygmy-owls together on an open branch with the male delicately feeding a cicada to his mate. Our prime activity this morning was an appointment with Oilbirds, the world's only nocturnal fruit-eating bird, which navigates by echo location. With a wing span approaching a small Montagu's Harrier it is certainly far bigger than most people expect. There is a stable population of around 150 birds in Dunston Cave and, with local guide Barry adding his expertise, we made the sometimes steep and always sweaty walk down to see them. About 15 birds were perched on their nesting ledges inside the first chamber. Their reflective red iris in the torch light earned them the local name Diablotin, or devil bird, whilst their guttural screeches gave rise to their original Amerindian name "guacharo" which literally means "he who moans and wails". Little else was seen from the trail, save for a female Red-crowned Ant-tanager. Our final destination of the day involved an hour long drive across country to the west coast of the island where we stopped at the Caroni Swamp Information Centre. This is a critical piece of infrastructure as it houses, amongst other things, perfectly acceptable washrooms! As if on cue, the sun came out and we were to enjoy a beautiful warm Trinidad evening as we boarded our boat for the evening glide into the swamp. The swamp is a 40 square mile protected reserve of mangrove forest and lagoons and, as always, our guide Shawn excelled, not only with his uncanny eyesight but also his professionalism in explaining various aspects of the swamps ecology. We hadn't moved more than 50 meters when we stopped to look up at a trio of Tropical Screech-owls, mum, dad and little one, roosting in a branch hanging over the river. A little further on a large Calio or Owl butterfly perched beside the banks and we enjoyed a swim past by a quartet of Four eyed Fish or Anableps. Turning the boat around, we now sailed downstream along the Blue River (or No 9 drain as it is unromantically locally known), which flows directly into the Gulf of Paria some five miles away. First birds found were a confiding pair of Masked Cardinals exhibiting our national colors of red, white and black. Next up a brief perched view of an adult male Green Kingfisher, shortly followed by a particularly colourful Spotted Red Mangrove Crab and three Straight-billed Woodcreepers, a mangrove speciality in Trinidad. Some way further downriver, we came across the only snake of the afternoon – a small Ruschenberger's Tree Boa, only about three feet long and coiled up in an overhanging branch. We then took an 'off road' detour into a very narrow channel that always houses a number of heron species. Of special interest, but typically skittish and only seen well briefly was an adult Boat-billed Heron (yet another first on a Birdfinders tour of Trinidad & Tobago) together with a number of Snowy Egrets and Little Blue Herons. Returning to the main channels and turning south we quickly found our next two target birds – a particularly obliging adult male Green-throated Mango, again primarily found in mangroves, and a particularly obscure Common Potoo. This latter bird has roosted on the end of the same broken tree branch intermittently for at least three years. Finally, we moored up on the edge of one lagoon and refreshed ourselves with cake and rum punch whilst watching skeins of Scarlet Ibises come into roost. At this time of year, many adult birds are breeding in a colony at the other end of the swamp (or so we thought) and, as expected at this site we only saw birds in their hundreds. We had actually left to make the return journey when we rounded a corner and there, the usual wintering roost island was alive with red – at least 2000 ibises, mostly full adults were adorning the vegetation just like Christmas tree decorations. None of us locals had ever seen this number of adults at this roost in late April – could it be disturbance at the breeding colony or quite possibly wandering birds from neighbouring Venezuela moving out of traditional areas due to the unusual weather pattern – we just don't know – but a fine spectacle nevertheless to bring to a close an incredibly successful couple of hours. All that remained was the return drive and our final dinner at Asa Wright.

Day 11 Our main objective today was to transfer accommodation to the village of Grande Riviere on the northeast coast of the island. The sun rarely appeared today – a good day for travelling. So after a hasty birding session on the balcony, we left the Nature Centre, drove south down the valley before turning east and shortly thereafter entering the Aripo Agriculture Research Station. This is open country birding overlooking cattle grazing lands and water meadows. Almost immediately on view were our first dazzling male Red-breasted Blackbirds, quickly followed by much tinier but equally bright and cheerful Grassland Yellow-finches. This latter species first occurred in Trinidad as recently as 2004. It is a known nomadic wanderer from mainland South America and, to this day, is still only found at this one site. Numbers fluctuate slightly but peaked at about 60 birds. Walking further along the track we approached the water meadows home to the main subject matter of the station – Buffalypso – a hybrid Water Buffalo x Brahma cattle. They immediately became alert to our presence, stood and stared menacingly at us, but seemed totally oblivious of the superb Pinnated Bittern stalking quietly behind them in full view. Back up species included several proud and upright Savannah Hawks, a few Green-rumped Parrotlets, several Fork-tailed Flycatchers and ever present White-winged Swallows. From here we journeyed northeast via Valencia and Matura briefly stopping to view a spiral of four large-winged birds: two Black Vultures, a single light-phased Short-tailed Hawk and a stunning Swallow-tailed Kite – the latter two species clearly not enjoying each others company. After a further hour, we reached Galera Point, the north-easternmost point of the island, where the Atlantic meets the Caribbean. This convergence of water is often good for seabirds and today five Roseate

Terns hunted over the troubled water. The Clusier trees in the car park held a small party of Red-legged Honeycreepers whilst a large, full grown adult male Green Iguana claimed his own Sea Grape tree. We then turned west and drove along the Caribbean coast for a further 45 minutes before driving down to the beach and the Le Grande Almandier hotel, our base for the next two nights. After a snack lunch, the remainder of the afternoon was free to enjoy the peace and quiet of this rather remote quarter of Trinidad. A few Giant Leatherback Turtles, or "Calderon" as they are colloquially known, floated off-shore, waiting for darkness to fall – and with it an interpretive guided tour to watch the nesting habits of a number of these remarkable creature. This small beach, just over 1km long holds the highest density of nesting Giant Leatherbacks in the world – they could easily peak during late May at 600 creatures a night.

Day 12 Thankfully, last night's rain storm had passed and the weather reverted to a typical tropical sunny 33°C. It was, however, somewhat cooler as we gathered in the pre-dawn to set off on our quest for Pawi. The huge forested area behind Grande Riviere holds the lion share of the world's population of Trinidad Piping-guans. Access to a regular viewing area is up a straightforward but steep and sweaty track, made all the more comfortable by using Cyril's truck! It took a while to get fully light but by 06.30 a pair of these magnificent birds were found sat out in the open on a prominent Wild Nutmeg tree. They remained on view for at least 20 minutes before flying into a closer but more heavily foliated tree. Mission accomplished, time to relax and enjoy the other forest birds of the area. Several Channel-billed Toucans and a male Guianan Trogon were on view before we decided to walk down into the river valley to the south. On the slope, John and I found a Southern Beardless-tyrannulet, which sadly flew off before others could get onto it. A distant Streaked Flycatcher perched up and a trio of Common Black-hawks flew over. In amongst the banana plantations, we finally enjoyed close views of a pair of Lined Woodpeckers plus a fleeting glimpse of a male Black-tailed Tityra. By now the smell of bacon and eggs was in our minds, if not yet in our nostrils – time for the slow steep walk back over the hills and down into the village. En route, Alan finally caught up with his nemesis Long-billed Gnatwren and we managed to lure in a very confiding adult male Silvered Antbird. Cynthia had decided to return earlier, walking at her own pace and found her own Pawi for her efforts together with, very surprisingly, the only Forest Elaenia to be found on the tour. Our two principal targets for Grande Riviere, Pawi and Calderon, were safely in the bag – time to earn a well-deserved middle of the day break on the beach. Like everywhere else, forest birding in the afternoon is rather quiet, although we still enjoyed a very successful second hike up into the hills. First to show were a pair of Swallow-tailed Kites circling low in the valley. A little later on Andrew briefly saw a Pawi fly between two sets of trees whilst the rest of us had to make do with an obliging perched Ferruginous Pygmy-owl that attracted a host of irritated Bananaquits and Blue-grey Tanagers. Taking a short cut along one of the hunter's trails through the forest was well worthwhile as not only did Cynthia manage to "pull back" Lined Woodpecker but within five minutes we had found an equally obliging adult female Crimson-crested Woodpecker allowing all to understand the structural and plumage differences between the two species. But there was still more to come, almost back in the centre of the village, a harsh series of raucous calls betrayed the presence of up to 10 Lilac-tailed Parrotlets preening and, presumably preparing to roost in a large mango tree – an excellent culmination to a particularly successful days birding.

Day 13 Today really was about the internal transfer back to Tobago. A 'free' pre-breakfast agenda however, produced yet another Trinidad Piping-guan, this time for Alan and Diane, plus another Crimson-crested Woodpecker for Andrew. En route, the Lilac-tailed Parrotlets had transferred to trees close to the hotel whilst those up early enough saw a couple of turtles still going through the covering up and masking process at the end of their egg-laying. Having had the final breakfast, we loaded up Ivan's bus and said goodbye to the staff at Grande Almandier who had looked after us so well. We broke the journey briefly at Galera Point once more but only found a few Red-legged Honeycreepers and then it was a straight dash to Piarco airport. After another goodbye, this time to Ivan our ever careful and considerate driver, our flight logistics went completely smoothly so by 14.40 we were reclaiming our bags at ANR Robinson airport, Tobago, meeting up with Andy and journeying up the Windward Road to the village of Speyside and Blue Waters Inn, our base for the final two nights of the tour. The only birding moment during the drive was a surprisingly blasé immature Great Black-hawk sat atop a roadside telegraph pole

Day 14 Our last full day in Trinidad & Tobago. A pre-breakfast stroll over the ridge and down to the stream from Blue Waters Inn usually holds few surprises bird-wise when you've already spent two weeks in the country. However no one could complain today when species on the menu included a delightful pair of Roseate Terns flying almost over the shore line before alighting onto a moored boat, nor of the adult Great Black-hawk that posed nonchalantly in the trees across the road. White-fringed Antwrens were much in evidence together with a couple of Red-eyed Vireos and the usual Black-faced Grassquits, Pale-vented Pigeons and Caribbean Martins. After breakfast, we walked along the dry forest ridge above the hotel onto Starwood Road. Rufous-tailed Jacamars were almost constant companions flitting from one low perch to another whilst Scrub Greenlets chased each other frenetically round and round the vegetation. A couple of Ruby Topaz hummingbirds showed well as did a particularly photogenic Trinidad Motmot. Whilst most of the action overhead involved Magnificent Frigatebirds, at long last we manage to see our first Broad-winged Hawk soaring across the bay. Tobago raptors on this tour seem to make a mockery of known status and abundance. "Broad-wings" are common, usually involving multiple sightings daily whereas "Great Blacks" are pretty scarce and in some years tour groups miss them altogether! By late morning, the sun was pretty fierce – time for a relaxing swim before lunch with

both Laughing Gulls and Roseate Terns hawking low over the water. At 13.00 we gathered on the jetty ready to board our glass-bottomed boat for the 15-minute ride over to the island of Little Tobago. This is a protected, heavily forested reserve primarily known for its breeding seabird colonies. The crossing was exceptionally smooth and both boarding and disembarkation well managed (one needs to exercise caution when moving between a fixed concrete jetty and a boat moving up and down with the water). The walk up to the seabird lookout points, whilst on a well maintained track, was short, steep and typically humid with Trinidad Motmot and Brown-crested Flycatcher watching us curiously from open perches. Once at the clearing, the screeching flight calls of Red-billed Tropicbirds filled the air. Most were full breeding plumaged adults but a few had lost their tail streamers, presumably whilst maneuvering their way to and from nest sites under bushes. We quickly worked to separate the three colour forms of Red-footed Booby (brown morph, cream tail; brown morph, brown tail and white morph) from the slightly less numerous Brown Boobies and enjoyed looking down on pairs of Sooty Terns hovering around their nesting areas. Laughing Gulls were absolutely everywhere seeking out any possible nest site under the trees whilst Magnificent Frigatebirds menacingly patrolled the skies, ever watchful for a free meal. Whilst this was going on we managed to carefully approach an alert (even though it pretended to close its eyes) roosting male White-tailed Nightjar amongst the leaf litter. The return journey gave more close fly bys by Brown Noddies before we approached "Einstein". This is the world's largest living Grooved Brain Coral – at least 2000 years old and still growing at a rate of about an inch a year. Closer to Goat Island we spent a few minutes gazing down at the myriad of sea ferns, corals and clams that form the twin tropical fish paradise of Japanese Garden and Angel Reef. Here we quickly found up to 25 species of Angel Fish, Wrasse, Tang and Parrot Fish before heading back to our jetty in time for a well-earned beer as the sun neared the yardarm.

Day 15 Our final few hours before the rigours of packing and returning to the airport for our various flights home. John, Andrew and I watched from the jetty finding our elusive Bridled Terns together with Roseate Tern fly pasts that really took our breath away – they really are the most graceful and beautiful of all the *Sterna* terns. The fish shoals were closer to shore than normal and attracted a mixed feeding frenzy of up to 100 Red-footed and Brown Boobies with much smaller numbers of Brown Noddies skimming the surface. On the rocks, an adult Yellow-crowned Night-heron showed off his white head plumes waving in the breeze. Meanwhile, Alan had tracked his way up Starwood once more looking in vain for his elusive Rufous-breasted Wren and Cynthia watched a surfacing Hawksbill Turtle..., and then it was all over.

What do I remember most about this tour? Perhaps the fact that it was a happy tour. Everyone enjoyed each other's company, varying sense of humours came to the fore early on and most of all it was great fun. All of our administrative logistics worked smoothly (not always possible in the Caribbean), everyone we met, not only hotel employees and our drivers but also general members of the public were all open, warm and friendly. The weather was typically tropical. When the sun was out, it was extremely hot; when it rained, you just waited for the sun to re-appear. Between us we amassed a creditable total of 220 species, plus Chestnut-collared Swift, Chestnut Woodpecker, Euler's and Bran-colored Flycatcher seen only by me. Additionally we heard, but did not see Little Tinamou, Striped Cuckoo, Bright-rumped Attila, Venezuelan Flycatcher and Trinidad Euphonia. We saw more species than in some years and less than in others but most importantly all of our important birds were seen well by everyone. Encouragingly we added five to the cumulative Birdfinders Trinidad & Tobago species total, which now stands at an impressive 306 as a result of nine tours. I would just like to thank all six tour members for their friendship during the last two weeks and hope that one day we can meet up again

Martyn Kenefick
Birdfinders
martynkenefick@hotmail.com