

Trinidad and Tobago

14–29 April 2007

Participants:

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Leader:

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Trinidad Piping-guan

This tour was an unparalleled and unqualified success. We found Pink-toed Tarantula, Giant Leatherback and Hawksbill Turtles, a Bushmaster pit viper and, oh yes, a total of 234 species of bird (excluding Feral Pigeon), a record for a Birdfinders tour in T&T. Highlights were many: who could forget the pair of Mangrove Cuckoos perching mere feet away from us at Lowlands; the Lilac-tailed Parrotlet feeding so close on *Clusia* fruit at Galera Point or those two Little Tinamous obviously picking their way through the leaf litter at Asa Wright. Our various accommodations were excellent, the food superb; the weather held no nasty surprises; there were no logistical difficulties and everyone became firm friends – a pleasure to be involved.

Day 1 Despite leaving a mini heat wave in the UK, the XL Air transatlantic flight still managed to arrive in hot sunshine at Crown Point airport, Tobago, a little early, where I met three tired but smiling faces. Within ten minutes we had arrived at The Mermaid Hotel, our base for the first four nights of the tour with time for unpacking and refreshing before dinner.

Day 2 The day dawned clear and bright, so shortly after 05.30 we headed off to nearby Bon Accord lagoons for an introduction to Tobago birding. On the water a number of Least Grebes swam to and fro and a couple of White-cheeked Pintails put in a brief appearance. Opposite a party of Black-bellied Whistling-ducks sat perched up in a dead tree and several Anhingas spread their wings for the early morning rays. The heron family was represented by a good number of Green, a couple of Tricolored and a young Little Blue, whilst egrets included not only Great, Snowy and Cattle but also a lone Little Egret. Several Greater Yellowlegs and Spotted Sandpipers walked the waters edge and the grassy causeways together with a few Southern Lapwings, a solitary *hudsonicus* Whimbrel (no doubt an armchair tick for the future) and good number of Wattled Jacanas. Overhead, numbers of Barn Swallows, with underpart colouring varying from deep orange-buff to grey-white, hawked early morning flying insects together with several Caribbean Martins, and an adult Yellow-headed Caracara put in a brief appearance. A short walk around the perimeter of the lagoons added Yellow-crowned Night-heron, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Black-throated Mango, Barred Antshrike, several Red-crowned Woodpeckers and Grey Kingbird together with those everyday common birds of the island, Magnificent Frigatebird, Eared Dove, Ruddy Ground-dove, Tropical Mockingbird, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Tropical Kingbird, (Southern) House Wren, Bare-eyed Thrush, Scrub Greenlet, Bananaquit, Black-faced and Blue-black Grassquits and Carib Grackle. Then it was time for breakfast.

Once refreshed, we set off once more for a visit to the large estate at Lowlands, which incorporates the Hilton Hotel complex – we weren't attired correctly for the Hilton, so we went to the sewage ponds instead. Now the whole focus of today was intended to be an introduction to common Tobago birds, I never anticipated seeing rarities today – certainly not a new species for the island. Nevertheless, no sooner had we walked the length of the first pond when I was alerted to two low flying small but long tailed passerines, which landed in some nearby, scrub – instantly recognisable as Common Waxbills. This species was introduced into Trinidad back in 1990 and there has built up a large and self-sustaining breeding population in the central and west coast wetlands; now it has been found in Tobago! Of other interest on the lagoons were over 30 Black-bellied Whistling-ducks, an adult American Purple Gallinule, several Greater Yellowlegs, fewer Lesser Yellowlegs, a single Solitary Sandpiper, a couple of Least Sandpipers and a couple of Semipalmated Plovers. By now it was getting seriously hot and we opted to seek the shade of a red mangrove forest boardwalk – and our luck got even better. Right above the entrance were two exceptionally confiding Mangrove Cuckoos that allowed us to get within feet of them. Once inside we enjoyed our first Cocoa Woodcreepers and an adult male White-fringed Antwren, a couple of Yellow-breasted Flycatchers, a single Brown-crested Flycatcher and a

number of still lingering over-wintering Northern Waterthrushes. It was now close-on noon with a temperature well into the 30s °C, time to switch off for a few hours and enjoy a leisurely lunch back in the hotel. By 15.30, we were on our way to Grafton sanctuary. This area of dry forest is particularly “birdy” and the owners of the estate arrange for birds to be fed twice daily, at 08.00 and 16.00. Now birds certainly have body clocks because by 15.50 numbers of Pale-vented Pigeons and Rufous-vented Chachalacas had assembled in the trees surrounding the feeding veranda together with Blue-grey, Palm and White-lined Tanagers, a couple of Blue-crowned Motmots and a Barred Antshrike. Food and drink arrived promptly at 16.00 and within five minutes literally scores of Bananaquits were fighting over pole position at the sugar water feeders. There was a melee of pigeons, doves and chachalacas scoffing down the grain, but the motmots had the cheese to themselves. Walking up the trail produced a couple of Rufous-tailed Jacamars, Ruby-topaz and Black-throated Mango hummingbirds, Fuscous, Brown-crested and Yellow-breasted Flycatchers, more White-fringed Antwrens and an exquisite male Red-legged Honeycreeper. All in all, a very successful first day on tour; 69 species under the belt including a couple that I certainly did not expect.

Day 3 Again another clear and bright dawn heralded the likelihood of a very hot day. An early morning return to Bon Accord paid off with stunning views of yet another Mangrove Cuckoo found by Brian, Bank Swallow (Sand Martin) which is bordering on rare for the island, several White-winged Swallows, an adult Black-crowned Night-heron and an educational “wader 5 minutes” as Dave found single Western and Semipalmated Sandpipers standing side by side. Following yet another excellent breakfast we drove northeast up the Windward Road, stopping off to view a gathering of Sooty Terns close to the grassy slopes of Smith Island, just offshore. These birds had just arrived within the last couple of days, and will shortly breed in very large numbers there. Passing along offshore were small groups of Brown Noddies, another recent arrival. Eventually we reached Roxborough and turned west, up into the Main Ridge Forest Reserve, a forest protected since 1765. Giant Cowbirds feeding beside grazing cattle were new for the tour, as were the low-flying Grey-rumped Swifts. Further on, we reached the trailhead of Gilpin Trace and spent a hard working but rewarding few hours in the rain forest. The key bird here is White-tailed Sabrewing, (the only other site for this globally threatened species is on the Paria peninsula of Venezuela). We were to find at least six birds, including one sat on an exposed song perch, mere feet away from us. By now the sky had become overcast, and this certainly made finding new species difficult. We did eventually get excellent views of Rufous-breasted Hermit, White-necked Jacobin, adult male Collared Trogon, Golden-olive Woodpecker, Plain-brown Woodcreeper, Yellow-legged Thrush, White-necked Thrush and Rufous-breasted Wren. However, our views Blue-backed Manakin, a real target bird, left a lot to be desired. Having taken our “bake and saltfish” lunch at the Bloody Bay lookout and enjoyed homemade pineapple juice, we tried our luck along Niplig Trace (that's Gilpin spelt backwards because it's on the other side of the road!). Within just a few minutes we had found several male manakins and better still, extremely close views of Olivaceous Woodcreeper, just about the hardest bird to find in the forest. In one day, we had found all of the Tobago forest specialities and to celebrate Dave bought a huge bunch of bananas from a roadside stall. All that remained was for a long hot drive back down to the south west of the island, a short siesta, shower and then dinner.

Day 4 We tried something different for early morning birding today, and it paid dividends. We drove to Crown Point, the southwestern tip of the island, and parked up on the shore just as the sun came up. Initially there was just a trickle of Laughing Gulls passing through, but soon the first of over 100 Royal Terns flew west. During the course of the next hour, we saw 31 Roseate Terns, 20 Cayenne Terns, 2 Gull-billed Terns (my first in Tobago), 2 Sooty Terns and a 1st winter Sandwich Tern. For good measure a single Osprey and an adult Yellow-crowned Night-heron passed along the shore. Following our final Ziggy's sumptuous breakfast, we returned to Grafton sanctuary to try and photograph woodland birds seen previously. Rufous-tailed Jacamars stole the show, allowing us to approach extremely close. Also showing well were Yellow-breasted, Brown-crested and Fuscous Flycatchers together with several White-fringed Antwrens. A Red-rumped Woodpecker called repeatedly from tall trees surrounding the owner's estate house, but kept out of view.

From there we journeyed further west to the Adventure Farm. This site merits a place on the Tobago birding circuit primarily for the abundance on hummingbirds coming into the feeders. This is the only site I know which regularly attracts Ruby-topaz to feeders – we were to see about a dozen, mostly adult males. Also present were a number of Black-throated Mangos, several White-necked Jacobins and a couple of Copper-rumped Hummingbirds. Almost rivaling the hummingbirds for value, was the homemade fruit punch. We then drove the entire windward coast of the island to the village of Speyside and lunched at Blue Waters Inn. Here Ruddy Turnstones run along the floor of the bar, perch up on the railings and take food from the hand. Many of these birds bear color rings and flags, the result of a major banding project at Chesapeake Bay, Delaware. By 14.00, we were aboard our glass-bottomed boat for the journey over to Little Tobago Island. The walk up over the saddle was as humid as ever, but within 20 minutes we were watching endless fly passes of Red-billed Tropicbirds. A short walk further up to the 2nd lookout gave us a much wider panorama. Here we spent the next hour watching over 70 tropicbirds, some pairs performing their courtship dance flight. On the rocks we found perhaps 20 Brown Boobies whilst perched in the stunted trees there were at least half a dozen Red-footed Boobies including two white morph birds. The return boat trip passed over one of the largest Grooved Brain Corals in the world, still growing at a rate of an inch a year and over 2000 years old. Closer to Goat Island we slowly passed over two prime scuba diving sites: Japanese Garden and Angel Reef. The bottom was studded with Potato coral and Dead Man's Fingers, clams and sponges, whilst swimming effortlessly along was a superb Hawksbill Turtle alongside a variety of tropical fish including Blue Tang, Black Durgan and Sargent Majors. The return drive was uneventful, except for a brief stop overlooking Smith Island. This time over 70 Sooty Terns were present, and we were able to pick out at least 2, possibly 4 Bridled Terns. The Tobago leg of the tour had come to an end from a birding perspective – we have amassed a total of 105 species in three days, which is exceptional (excluding Blue-and-yellow Macaw and Red Junglefowl – Dave, you cannot count them).

Day 5 The objective today was a transfer over to Trinidad, and then a drive up the east coast, round the north eastern tip of the island and finally arriving at the village of Grande Riviere and Le Grand Almandier hotel, our base for the next two nights. Everything went to plan. We caught the first flight out for the day: our Dash 8 aircraft was no more than 10 minutes late departing, the flight was smooth, Dale and Calliston were there to meet us and transport our baggage and after a very acceptable airport breakfast, the two-vehicle convoy was on the road. En-route to Toco, vultures were ever present in the sky; mainly Black, but a good few Turkey Vultures thrown in for good measure. Our first Plumbeous Kites soared over and every stretch of utility wire seemed to hold either Southern Rough-winged Swallow or Grey-breasted Martin. We took a break at Galera Point, the most north-easterly point on the island to look out over the sea, and check the *Clusia* trees in the car park. The sea was empty of birds save for a brief view of a distant Leach's Petrel which sadly I could not relocate for the others. The trees held a few Red-legged Honeycreepers, a Savannah Hawk flew over the scrub, but little else was seen. During the final leg of the drive to Grande Riviere a couple of Common Black-hawks briefly circled over the road. It was now seriously hot, neither bird nor man wanted to move, so the post-lunch period was spent sitting in the shade of the dining area watching Giant Leatherback Turtles swimming just offshore, selecting an area of beach to lay their eggs after dark. By 15.50, it was cool enough to walk up Montevideo Trace for a basic introduction to Trinidad woodland birds. Knowing that afternoons in the forest are pretty quiet, our expectations were low but we managed a reasonable spread of new species. First to show was the 4th member of the "common 4 tanagers" – Silver-beaked Tanager. Shortly after, a fine male Violaceous Euphonia flitted around a nearby tree, a pair of Scaled Pigeons showed briefly, but they were extremely skittish and we had a number of sightings of perhaps five different Plumbeous Kites. Our first Trini flycatchers included Boat-billed, Piratric, Forest Elaenia and Southern Beardless-tyrannulet but, for sheer beauty, pride of place for the afternoon must go to a pair of Tropical Parulas criss-crossing the trail in front of us. Sunset, followed by a dinner of curried crayfish and a late evening with up to 15 Giant Leatherbacks on the beach, brought the days proceedings to a close.

Day 6 A pre-dawn start this morning saw us walking the lower slopes of Montevideo trace when the first rays of daylight illuminated three or four Short-tailed Nighthawks swirling round "hovering up" flying insects. Our principal target bird for the morning was Trinidad Piping-guan, the only endemic species on the twin islands – seen by 06.30 feeding quietly in a Nutmeg tree. Surprisingly, this was the only one to show in this, the traditional "Pawi" viewing area. We also found our first Yellow Orioles and four unseasonal White-collared Swifts zoomed past. Walking down to the river brought a steady trickle of new birds. First to show was a superb Swallow-tailed Kite drifting just over treetop height, whilst in a mid storey tangle a mixed feeding flock included Golden-fronted Greenlet, Purple Honeycreeper and a Blue-chinned Sapphire. Following a side track into the forest, we had brief but hardly satisfactory glimpses of a Long-billed Gnatwren, excellent but brief views of a Rufous-browed Peppershrike, played hide and seek with a male Silvered Antbird, which eventually showed itself well to almost everyone, and found a Little Hermit feeding on some Balisier heliconias. Close to the river, a Lineated Woodpecker and a pair of Squirrel Cuckoos were very obliging. The walk back was punctuated with stops for our first Yellow-rumped Caciques, two close and confiding male White-bellied Antbirds and another Pawi perched low in a Cocoa plantation – just enough to wet the appetite for breakfast. After a lazy morning in the hot sunshine, we set off back east to Galera Point. The wind was blowing a brisk easterly, light conditions on the water were excellent – just one problem, in 45 minutes of intense looking, not a single bird flew past. Not to be outdone, we decided to really scrutinise the trees in the car park, and after perhaps 15 minutes were rewarded with a Lilac-tailed Parrotlet, no more than 15ft away from us delicately picking at a *Clusia* apple, and there it stayed for at least 20 minutes. A brief walk across the secondary scrub behind the lighthouse failed to trouble the notebook, but the impromptu trip had been very, very worthwhile.

Day 7 Pre-breakfast activity this morning was in two parts. Firstly a scour of the beach showed that several turtles were still out on the sand, allowing daylight photography. Birding commenced with a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl sat in the Mango tree just outside the hotel gate. Our aim this morning was to catch up with a number of species found more easily in secondary forest and cultivated estate. Along the flat lowland stage of Montevideo trace we found our first Pale-breasted Spinetail, a rather non-descript juvenile and three splendid adult males birds – Blue Dacnis, Trinidad Euphonia and Black-tailed Tityra. A flock of 18 Lilac-tailed Parrotlets flew over and Dave caught up with Streaked Flycatcher. Turning onto Esperanze trace, we climbed through a cocoa plantation finding our first White-flanked Antwrens and a Tropical Pewee. A second Ferruginous Pygmy-owl was enticed in, together with his entourage of angry small passerines, which included several Golden-headed Manakins, our first Turquoise Tanagers, Green and Purple Honeycreepers, Cocoa Thrushes and Bananaquits by the score. Perhaps the highlight of the morning was higher up, where we found a pair of very confiding Violaceous Trogons perched right out in the open. Soon it was time to retrace our steps, have breakfast and pack our luggage for the transfer to the Asa Wright Nature Centre, our base for the final eight nights of the tour. The journey was uneventful, and the afternoon spent relaxing on the balcony. New birds were well represented with Gray-fronted Dove, White-chested Emerald, Bay-headed Tanager, White-tailed Trogon and White-bearded Manakin. Brian and Pat caught up with two Blue-headed Parrots flying down the valley, however, the sheer proximity of so many hummingbirds ensured that cameras were much in evidence. So another leg of the tour had come to conclusion. We had found 91 species during our two-and-a-bit days in northeast Trinidad, with everyone seeing everything extremely well.

Day 8 The morning broke rather gray and overcast; indeed it took some while for the birds to get going. The feeder trays were filled with papaya, banana and bread but other than the four common tanagers and the two common honeycreepers, the only visitors of note were Great Antshrike and a stunning male Red-legged Honeycreeper. A male Tufted Coquette made a fleeting visit to the Lantata hedge, but the highlights of the pre-breakfast session were our first Channel-billed Toucan and Double-toothed Kite both perching out in the open once the sun broke through. Straight after breakfast we quietly walked the main Discovery trail. First to show was a confiding Rufous-browed Peppershrike whilst a Ferruginous Pygmy-owl sat on an exposed

bamboo giving us “the eye” In fact a pair were nesting close by so presumably this one was on sentry duty. A little further down a Common Potoo sat atop a broken stump on a Pomerac tree, initially spreading its wings and looking around very attentively, before assuming its more usual “dead branch posture”. The White-bearded Manakin lek was in full swing – a female briefly visited the arena, enticing the males to flit from snag to snag, flicking their secondaries. On the other side of the track a series of short mournful whistles heralded the presence of a Dusky-capped Flycatcher, a very uncommon species on the estate. All the while, we could hear Bearded Bellbirds, and over the course of the next 45 minutes, we were to find at least four different adult males. Discovery trail had been extremely rewarding, so we decided to return via the Bellbird trail – but this was extremely quiet. We did manage brief views of a Golden-crowned Warbler but the highlight was a lek of perhaps 12 male Golden-headed Manakins. Whilst we didn’t see a female in their midst, their persistent calling, flying from perch to perch and, on one occasion, dancing along a branch meant that they were vying for the attention of something, and it certainly wasn’t us! The hot part of the midday was quiet for both birds and birders alike. However by 14.30 we were walking the entrance track for what was a very birdy afternoon. The first new bird for the tour was a light-phase Short-tailed Hawk hanging in the air over the valley. Other noteworthy species were both Yellow-olive and Ochre-bellied Flycatchers, a delightful party of Turquoise Tanagers, an exceptionally close Golden-olive Woodpecker and some very photogenic Violaceous Trogons. Back in the main building we celebrated the end of a very successful day with the usual rum punch and a dinner of cornflake chicken.

Day 9 A 04.30 start saw us driving down the Arima valley, cutting across the Caroni plain and then south to San Fernando, before heading through the sugar cane fields to some water meadows along the southern edge of Oropouche Swamp. The whole river valley was swathed in early morning mist, soon to be burnt off by the rising sun. Our first birding stop, as we walked the embankment beside the Oropouche river, started with a low flying Large-billed Tern, recently arrived from mainland South America plus the first of perhaps 15 Spotted Tody-flycatchers. This species is restricted to southwestern Trinidad, but is very common where it occurs. Other highlights of the area included up to six Long-winged Harriers, four of which were superb light-morph adults, a pair of Black-crested Antshrikes, both Pied Water and White-headed Marsh-tyrants, both Red-breasted and Yellow-hooded Blackbirds and a couple of late-lingering juvenile Peregrines. Yellow-chinned Spinetails trilled and rattled from every sedge bush, a female Green Kingfisher sat motionless upon a short bare twig in the middle of the canal and a couple of Masked Yellowthroats eventually showed to everyone. By 08.30 it was dry, still and extremely hot. We drove the north bank of the river, weaving in and out of a series of construction dumper trucks and excavators that were reinforcing the riverbank, to view a water inlet that seemed alive with birds. Both Great and Snowy Egrets were plentiful but the highlight was two pairs of Black-necked Stilts, also newly arrived from the mainland. Breakfast consisted of “doubles”; two pieces of deep fried dough, filled with curried channa, kutchela, mango and hot pepper sauce bought from a roadside stall. I thought they were excellent, Brian and Dave politely nodded approval but Pat declined. We then retraced our steps back north, and then west to look out over various areas of mudflats along the shore of the Gulf of Paria. Combined totals were quite impressive with at least 400 Black Skimmers, 175 Large-billed Terns, 50 Royal Terns, 20 Yellow-billed Terns, six *graellsii* Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a single Cayenne Tern all sat amongst countless Laughing Gulls. Almost all of the waders were at Brickfields, with over 100 Semipalmated Plovers and smaller numbers of Semipalmated, Spotted and Western Sandpipers, Willets, (Hudsonian) Whimbrel and Black-bellied (Grey) Plovers. A lone adult Great Blue Heron fed close to the water line, whilst up to 10 adult Scarlet Ibis added a splash of garish color to the proceedings. Our final scheduled stop at Carli Bay really was just for one species. In the short grass fields behind the beachfront, small parties of Saffron Finches are found in the early morning. However, it was 13.00 and roasting hot. We managed one adult and one immature perched in the shade of some nearby trees. Undoubtedly the remainder (there are upwards of 50 birds in the area) were seeking shelter from the sun elsewhere. The long return journey took in one small diversion. Acting on some recent local knowledge, we found several parties, perhaps totally around 500, of Dickcissels sheltering in dead palms along the edge of Valsayn rice-fields. This species is annual in Trinidad, but totally unpredictable. Sometimes huge flocks gather, tens of thousands strong at the start of their northward migration; in other years they are almost absent. We reached Asa Wright by 14.30 with the rest of the afternoon dedicated to missing out on lost sleep.

Day 10 Today was devoted to rainforest birding, a complete change of scenery from yesterday. We left the centre at 06.30, driving north up to the Morne Bleu, at 2,200 ft the highest elevation road on the island. Even at this early hour it was pretty warm; the sun was out and there was little, if any breeze. To be honest, the summit by the Textel tower was pretty quiet. However about 100 meters back down the road a Trinidad Piping-guan sat perched out on a Cecropia tree, in full view for at least 20 minutes. We walked sections of the Blanchisseuse Road, finding first a female Collared Trogon, then the first of at least six Red-rumped Woodpeckers to be seen during the morning. A Stripe-breasted Spinetail took a lot of coaxing out but eventually showed for everyone. Fortunately, a Euler's Flycatcher was much easier to see, sat in the middle of a bamboo patch. Whilst walking back to collect the vehicle, I stumbled upon a pair of Swallow Tanagers. Unfortunately, despite repeated efforts, this species was not to show again. We then spent an extremely successful few hours slowly walking Las Lapas trace. First to show was a male White-tailed Trogon, a bird that Dave had missed earlier in the tour. Shortly thereafter, several parties of Speckled Tanagers were found, target birds but a species normally found here. Much less dependable though were close, if brief, encounters with both Mountain Hepatic Tanager and White-throated Spadebill. We reached the bottom of the wooded section of the trace by 11.00 and it was getting seriously hot. An adult Gray Hawk soared over but generally the trees were quiet. Despite being the middle of the day, the return hike still produced good birds. At least two, possibly three Chestnut Woodpeckers were found, one apparently excavating a new nesting hole and a Slaty-capped Flycatcher appeared rather briefly but a Dusky-capped was more obliging. Lunch was taken in a bus shelter – a first for Birdfinders, possibly. Walking the road below Paria junction shortly after was pretty quiet but we still managed both Golden-olive and another Red-rumped Woodpecker, Dave found a Streaked Xenops, a couple of Tropical Pewees sat calling in the middle canopy and a Swallow-tailed Kite soared over. During the return drive, we stopped at a couple of likely looking areas of forest to no avail but did

manage to see a very close adult male Collared Trogon beside the road. Mid afternoon at Asa Wright is not normally associated with peak birding. Today proved the exception to the rule. First, Dave and I had a soaring White Hawk, then perhaps the biggest surprise of the tour to-date happened. All four of us managed to watch two Little Tinamous foraging beside the Discovery trail on and off for about 20 minutes. A Common Potoo called, its mournful four note descending whistle nearby and was easily located in the same Pomerac tree as earlier in the week. Back on the balcony, a couple of Fork-tailed Palm-swifts flew up the valley (the first time I have ever seen this species over the estate), both Black-tailed Tityra and Streaked Flycatcher perched in the blossoming yellow Poui tree and a female Trinidad Euphonia sat calling in the top of the Jamoon tree. Despite the onset of dark and yet another sumptuous Asa Wright dinner, there was still time to enjoy the Pink-toed Tarantula in its favoured position on the wall of the Cocoa House. We had broken the 200 species barrier today with still four full days birding remaining.

Day 11 A clear and bright start to the day on the balcony. There were few surprises on show but the Double-toothed Kite perched up once more and a Golden-olive Woodpecker tapped away at the Sip tree. After an early breakfast we journeyed south down the valley, before turning east to our main birding location for the morning, the Aripo Agriculture Research Station. We are approaching the end of the dry season, and it certainly showed here. What are normally wet water meadows were bone hard but nevertheless the birds put on a good show. Before I even had time to switch off the car engine a Grassland Yellow-finch appeared beside the track; one of 20 or so we were to see during the morning. The various South American “grass finches” are known wanderers and this species has only been found in central Trinidad for the last 4 years. We re-acquainted ourselves with Red-breasted Blackbirds, Pied Water Tyrants and White-headed Marsh-tyrants before Brian found, perhaps, the rarest resident bird for the area – a male Ruddy-breasted Seedeater. The tiny area of water that remained held just one Solitary Sandpiper. A little further on a Cocoi Heron grazed amongst the Buffalypso, a dark phase Short-tailed Hawk soared over and a couple of Savannah Hawks perched atop stunted trees. We left the main grazing meadows and slowly drove the roads amongst the secondary dry scrub. Here at least 25 Fork-tailed Flycatchers, recently arrived from the mainland, flicked too and fro, and we had all to brief a glimpse of a Common Pauraque disappearing into the undergrowth. We used the late morning heat to drive east, via Valencia and Sangre Grande to meet the Atlantic coast at Manzanilla, where we took our lunch. For the second time this tour, the sea looked favourable for perhaps a petrel, but again we were deceived. Some 15 km further south along Cocos Bay Rd we stopped to view two nesting raptors. Firstly a Pearl Kite sat out next to its nest, which we had been told held 3 chicks whilst a little way further on a Plumbeous Kite flew in to attend to at least one large white ball of fluff. A brief walk into roadside mangrove produced excellent close views of a female American Pygmy Kingfisher. It was now absolutely baking hot and completely still. We drove the bund roads surrounding Kernaham settlement but unsurprisingly few birds showed. It was however an opportunity to see rural village life replete with working Water Buffalo. Mid afternoon was spent retracing our steps back to central Trinidad where we paid a brief visit to Waller Field. This huge area is undergoing dramatic change, sadly not for the better as a huge light industrial estate is being constructed. To date, however, an area of Moriche palm has been spared and we were able to find a several specialised species of the area. Sulphury Flycatchers scratched and squawked all around us, a pair of Moriche Orioles put in a brief appearance, as did another Common Pauraque. As the evening drew in, several parties of Red-bellied Macaws flew in for the pre roost chatter – a fitting time to leave ourselves, and head back to the centre.

Day 12 Today the weather changed. After overnight rain the day dawned rather grey and overcast. However, it looked brighter down in the lowlands and that's where we were heading, back to Waller Field. Part of our time was spent slowly driving the fringes of the two main runways, looking for ground-doves feeding quietly between the tussock grass. We found a total of four Common and just one female Plain-breasted. Back in the Moriche grove a few Red-bellied Macaws were quietly feeding, a female Black-tailed Tityra perched in the tops and one or two Sulphury Flycatchers scratched away. Along an adjacent track we found one of our target birds for the morning – Bran-colored Flycatcher, typically skittish, never staying out in the open for long. In the southeastern quadrant of the estate a line of deciduous trees held our other main target. We managed to lure in a fine pair of White-winged Becards really close. Also, in the general area, several Red-eyed Vireos were calling and a Yellow-breasted Flycatcher was on view. Then came more rain. What started off as occasional showers became a solid downpour over lunch back at the Centre. The skies cleared by 14.00 and both Band-rumped and Gray-rumped Swifts were soon hawking flying insects in the valley. We decided to walk a loop of Chaconia, Discovery and Bellbird trails. The rain had brought out a number of Land Crabs onto the trails and hundreds of tiny black tree frogs were hopping from one puddle to the next. Bird highlights included our best views yet of Red-crowned Ant-tanager, several Rufous-breasted Wrens and White-flanked Antwrens, a couple of Euler's Flycatchers and we finally found the one common hummingbird that had totally eluded us – Green Hermit. Close to the main building, we came across a feeding party comprising three Golden-olive and two Red-rumped Woodpeckers in one small tree, and a female Lineated Woodpecker perched in a nearby Cecropia.

Day 13 A heavy overnight shower seemed to clear away the adverse weather system as today dawned still, bright and warm. However we were to spend the morning in the higher elevation forest where it is always distinctly cooler. The objective was to find several forest species that had so far eluded us, and the morning surpassed expectation. Whilst walking the flat stretch of the Blanchisseuse Road between Morne Bleu and Las Papas we lured in a Black-faced Ant-thrush, which sat on a low vine staring right at us, almost challenging us to enter his territory. Shortly after a female Collared Trogon perched up, and Brian briefly saw a White-throated Spadebill. Whilst trying to relocate the spadebill for Pat we found a very confiding Gray-throated Leaf-tosser preening itself, sat in the fork of a small sapling about two feet off the ground. Following brief views of a Slaty-capped Flycatcher, we moved down into Las Lapas trace. The trace was quieter than normal but we still managed a light phase Short-tailed Hawk; at least four White-tailed Trogons, a couple more Slaty-capped and a Dusky-capped Flycatcher, a very inquisitive male White-bellied Antbird and several White-flanked Antwrens. Back on the road once more, Dave found the

rarest bird for Trinidad so far this tour, a male Summer Tanager moulting from first winter plumage. In Trinidad confusion with Hepatic Tanagers is a very real problem, however, when a Summer Tanager emits that liquid descending “tiddle diddle dee” call, all confusion ceases to exist. Having lunched once more at the centre we decided on one last try at higher elevation forest and ascended Lalaja trace to over look the Guanapo valley. We amassed a respectable species list, although not adding to our overall trip list. A perched close White Hawk was a most welcome sight whilst overhead up to 10 Plumbeous Kites hawked for flying insects, a Swallow-tailed Kite put in a brief appearance, and another dark phase Short-tailed Hawk was seen diagnostically “hanging in the air”. In the roadside bush, we found Squirrel Cuckoo, Rufous-browed Peppershrike and up to 12 Turquoise Tanagers, before a late afternoon return to Asa Wright.

Day 14 The last full day in Trinidad and once again the weather couldn't make up it's mind. Dawn broke clear and bright, but by mid morning the cloud cover was complete, the humidity uncomfortable and there was drizzle in the air. A pre breakfast walk along the main entrance track was enjoyable but failed to produce any unusual birds. There were Tropical Pewees and Boat-billed Flycatchers, Turquoise and Bay-headed Tanagers, Violaceous Trogon and Great Antshrike – all new birds just 10 days ago, now firm friends. The focus of this morning was to walk the Guacharo trail to visit Duston's Cave – the most accessible Oilbird cave not only in Trinidad, but probably in the world. However there was still time for a new bird before the walk began as a Gray-headed Kite flew up the valley. It's not often that something other than Oilbird becomes the most memorable sighting of the day, but sat coiled up in a shallow ravine, close to the path, a 5ft Bushmaster, known locally as Mapapire, gave us the eagle eye. This is probably the most dangerous of the pit vipers, and extremely uncommon. However it is a nocturnal hunter, all it wanted to do was sleep off last night's activity and we were no more than a mere irritation. The Oilbirds were as impressive and noisy as always. We probably saw about 25 perched on the ledges, about 10 meters away from us. Everything about them is virtually unique: they are the only representative of their family; the only nocturnal, exclusively fruit eating bird in the world; and almost the only species that navigates by echolocation. They are found as far south as Bolivia, and as far north as Trinidad. On the return hike, a female Red-crowned Ant-tanager flicked across the path and we heard our only Bright-rumped Attila, calling from way down the valley. The Bushmaster was in the same position as before, so it was safe to pass! And then the rain came down once more. By 13.30, it was still raining when we set off for our last excursion down the valley. A light phase Short-tailed Hawk drifted over Calvary Hill as we passed through Arima. We turned west onto the highway and at Trincity ponds both Osprey and Large-billed Terns could be seen swooping low over the water, whilst a Ringed Kingfisher perched up on the roof of one of the service buildings. Finally we arrived at the Caroni Information Centre, where we would board our boat for “an evening with Scarlet Ibis”. The sun had come out and there was still plenty of time to search through the roadside mangrove. A couple of Red-capped Cardinals fed beside the path and we successfully lured out both Clapper Rail and Straight-billed Woodcreeper. A pair of inquisitive Black-crested Antshrikes came to investigate the commotion and a Yellow-breasted Flycatcher flew across in front of us. By 16.00, we were slowly motoring down the Blue River (or No 9 drain, to give it a more unromantic name) with Sean and his younger brother Egg at the helm. This area consists of 40 square miles of mangrove forest. Most is red mangrove, but in the more brackish upper waters, both white and black mangrove occur. First on show was a close female Common Potoo sat atop a stump. A little further down a little rufous ball of fluff slowly turned into a Silky Anteater. There is a strange relationship between these two creatures. Both have a similar vocalisation and both are locally called “poor me one”; when the potoo calls, the anteater seems to be attracted, maybe looking for a mate. So often, when one is found, the other is close by.

Further down the main stretch of public waterway we found both perched male American Pygmy Kingfisher and female Green Kingfisher. As we turned south into the protected forest reserve another Straight-billed Woodcreeper appeared followed by a couple of Black-crested Antshrikes and a few Bicolored Conebills. Egg's sharp eyesight brought the boat to a halt once more, a Cook's Tree Boa, locally called Cascabel, was asleep right over the waters edge and we were able to approach literally within inches. This one was about 3ft long (they grow twice the length), a nocturnal feeder that preys mainly on Bicolored Conebills' or other bird's eggs and chicks. Eventually we reached the more open waters of the tidal lagoons. There were a few narrow banks of mud still showing above the surface and we saw perhaps 70 Yellow-crowned Night-herons feeding together with small parties of Little Blue Herons and Semipalmated Plovers. A Cocoi Heron perched up in the mangrove, a flock of Neotropic Cormorants flew over and several Great Egrets waded in the shallows. It was time to moor up, open the rum punch, sit and relax as parties of Scarlet Ibis, Snowy Egrets, Little Blue and Tricolored Herons flew into the mangrove hammock to roost. We probably saw over 500 ibises; earlier in the year this figure would be four times as great but by next month there would be none. April is the start of the nesting season and the majority had already moved further north into the heart of the swamp to form a breeding colony. Shortly before dusk we speedily retraced our steps back to the jetty and commenced the return drive back to Asa Wright for the final dinner of the tour.

Day 15 All that was scheduled today was a couple of hours watching from the balcony, followed by a departure from Asa Wright and transfer to Piarco airport to commence the long drive home. In fact we had an excellent morning's birding! A total of 50 species were found including two White Hawks, three Common Black-hawks, two Chestnut-collared Swifts, two Black-tailed Tityras and singles of Long-billed Starthroat, Blue-headed Parrot and Violaceous Trogon. Sadly I was the only person to see the Brown Violet-ear perched briefly in the yellow Poui tree. There followed a drive to the airport for the domestic flight over to Tobago and the overnight journey back to the UK.

So another Birdfinders tour had come to an end – the previous record number of species seen was 223, in 2003. In 2007 we simply tore this record to shreds.

Martyn Kenefick, Birdfinders