

Trinidad & Tobago birding tour 2015

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By Jody Allair and Jared Clarke This past December, an intrepid group of 11 birders (led by Jody Allair and Jared Clarke) set off on our Trinidad & Tobago birding tour. This beautiful destination provides a wonderful introduction to the birds of South America, perhaps the most diverse and exciting birdlife on earth. This tour was also our annual Bird Studies Canada (BSC) members' trip, with a portion of the proceeds donated to help support the conservation and education work of both BSC and Trinidad's own Asa Wright Nature Centre. These two islands off the coast of Venezuela are widely recognized as being one of the best entry-level destinations to the new world tropics.

However, this incredible region is also known for having the highest number of bird families per square km in the western hemisphere. Not to mention world class birding opportunities, like the unforgettable Scarlet Ibis roost in the Caroni Swamp, the Oilbirds at Dunstan Cave, hundreds of nesting Red-billed Tropicbirds on Little Tobago Island and the amazing Asa Wright Lodge. The list of highlights for our 2015 tour was rather large and included amazing views and photo opportunities of Tufted Coquettes, great views of Channel-billed Toucans, three species of owls in one night (Tropical Screech-Owl, Barn Owl and Spectacled Owl), getting up close and personal with a nearly 6 foot long Tropical Rat Snake and of course those amazing Scarlet Ibis, Red-billed Tropicbirds and Oilbirds. A small sample of photo and video highlights are below. All photos by Jared Clarke, videos by Jody Allair. **Day 1:**



Channel-billed Toucan © Jared Clarke

Our home base in Trinidad, the famed **Asa Wright Nature Centre**, offered incredible birding right from the veranda. Dozens of beautiful hummingbirds fluttered just inches away, while many other species visited the abundance of shrubs and fresh fruit offerings. Prized species like trogons, bellbirds and this **Channel-billed Toucan** often appeared in the canopy below.



White-bearded Manakin © Jared Clarke

The many trails at Asa Wright Nature Centre also provided excellent opportunities to spot a variety of birds and other wildlife. Among the highlights was a **White-bearded Mannikin** lek where these spunky little birds put on an impressive and entertaining courtship display. **Day 2:**



Tufted Coquette © Jared Clarke

Tufted Coquette is one of the most sought-after species in Trinidad & Tobago. Although scarce, this brilliant male at Asa Wright Nature Centre was very confiding at times and everyone got great looks! **Day 3:**



Birding group © Jared Clarke

Birding the montane rainforests and higher elevations of the Northern Range was definitely a highlight. We got to see some amazing vistas and lots of great birds along the winding mountain roads.



Guianan Trogon © Jared Clarke

The diversity of birds ranged from camouflaged and skulky to colourful and showy, but few were more spectacular than this male **Guianan Trogon**. Our group was all smiles while this stunning bird sat obligingly right beside a village road. **Day 4:**



Pinnated Bittern © Jared Clarke

Our trip into Nariva Swamp proved very interesting. We enjoyed five species of parrot including Yellow-crowned Parrot, Red-bellied Macaw and the rare Blue-and-Yellow Macaw. We were also able to find several reclusive species such as Spectacled Caimen, Silvered Antbird and **Pinnated Bittern**. While the bittern was a prime target, spotting one is never easy and we were fortunate to spy this one sticking its head up from the tall grass.



Rufous Crab Hawk © Jared Clarke

Equally exciting, though much less expected, was this **Rufous Crab-Hawk** sitting in the open. What

a beautiful bird, and very uncommon to see! **Day 5:**



Oilbirds © Jared Clarke

One of the most special experiences we had was a trek to see **Oilbirds**. These almost mythical birds are the only nocturnal flying fruit-eating birds in the world, using a combination of echolocation (just like bats!) and specially adapted eyesight to navigate in the dark. They live in caves, and produce the most guttural, haunting sounds you can imagine. Visiting the cave is a surreal experience, to say the least! We were also fortunate enough to spot four flying over the valley in search of food one evening.



Ferruginous Pygmy Owl © Jared Clarke

Night time can be just as exciting as daytime when looking for life in the tropics. Our after-dark outings produced interesting critters including frogs, insects, tailless whip-scorpions and several species of bats. We also found nocturnal birds such as Common Potoo, Parakee, nightjars and owls. A fan favourite was this Ferruginous Pygmy Owl hanging out around the Asa Wright Nature Centre. **Day 6:**



Streaked Flycatcher © Jared Clarke

Returning to the lush rainforests of the Northern Range, we were able to find more exciting birds. Spotting even the brightest birds in the thick forest and high canopies can be a challenge at times, so the fact that our entire group was able to enjoy this much more cryptic Streaked Flycatcher was a real treat.



Violaceous Euphonia © Jared Clarke

Back at the centre, eye-popping colours were never far away. This brilliant **Violaceous Euphonia** was one of many amazing birds feeding in the treetops just metres from the veranda rail. **Day 7:**



Scarlet Ibis © Jared Clarke

A late afternoon boat tour into Caroni Swamp proved to be both fun and productive. Among the many birds seen were mangrove specialists such as **Green-throated Mango**, **Straight-billed Woodcreeper**, and **Masked Cardinals**. The climax of this boat trip, and a major highlight of the entire tour, was seeing hundreds of **Scarlet Ibis** (and many other herons/egrets) flying into roost on a single island before dusk. What an amazing, colourful spectacle! Watch a small clip from our boat ride through the mangroves: <https://youtu.be/GdXuz5QajXU> **Day 8:**



Ruby Topaz © Jared Clarke

One of the first birds to greet us when we arrived on Tobago was this stunning **Ruby Topaz Hummingbird**. We found a number of new species on our first day here, highlighting just how different the avifauna of two very close islands can be. Watch the hummingbird spectacle we encountered at Tobago's Adventure Farm: <https://youtu.be/bWZ0wIxfszg>



Barred Antshrike © Jared Clarke

There were also lots of familiar faces. **Barred Antshrike** was a clear favourite for our group, and we got our best looks at them on Tobago where many “secretive” birds seemed a little more

cooperative. **Day 9:**



Red-billed Tropicbird © Jared Clarke

One of the biggest highlights of the tour was a visit to the island of **Little Tobago**. Tons of great birding awaited us after a short boat ride and somewhat adventurous landing! Once ashore, we enjoyed finding an Audubon's Shearwater in its burrow, two Scaly-naped Pigeon and even the endemic Ocellated Gecko. However, the obvious highlight was the incredible seabird colony. While seeing hundreds of Red-billed Tropicbirds like this one was amazing, the colony also included both Red-footed and Brown Boobies. Watch and listen to the Red-billed Tropicbirds flying around Little Tobago Island: <https://youtu.be/XLZpjlglP58>



Tobago also produced some great reptile sightings, including Richard's Gecko, the easy-to-miss Shiny Lizard and this stunning Tropical Ratsnake. It was awesome to watch this snake actively hunting, expertly maneuvering through the tangled branches with ease and surprising speed. **Day 10:**



Birding Group Glipin Trace

Our last big outing of the tour was to the lush rainforests of Tobago's Main Ridge. These high elevation forests represent the world's oldest legally protected forest reserves, established for conservation in 1776! We encountered an incredible variety of birds here - many of which were challenging to spot in the tall, thick and shady surroundings. Highlights included **Blue-backed Mannikins**, **Yellow-legged Thrush**, **White-tailed Sabrewing**, and even the very rare (and unexpected) **White-throated Spadebill**!



Trinidad Motmot © Jared Clarke

Another great treat was this **Trinidad Motmot**. This beautiful species is endemic to Trinidad & Tobago, and can be quite secretive as they sit quietly in the shady rainforest. It was a major target for the tour, and this time everyone got a good look.



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Group photo with guide Jody Allair. A portion of the proceeds of this tour went to support the education program of the Asa Wright Nature Centre. It was a wonderful trip, including visits to many tropical habitats and the amazing birds and other wildlife that come with it. Our group tallied an incredible 224 bird species, took in some of the country's most wild and beautiful places, and had

an untold amount of fun together!