



Trinidad & Tobago Trip Report (Dec 1 - 11, 2023)

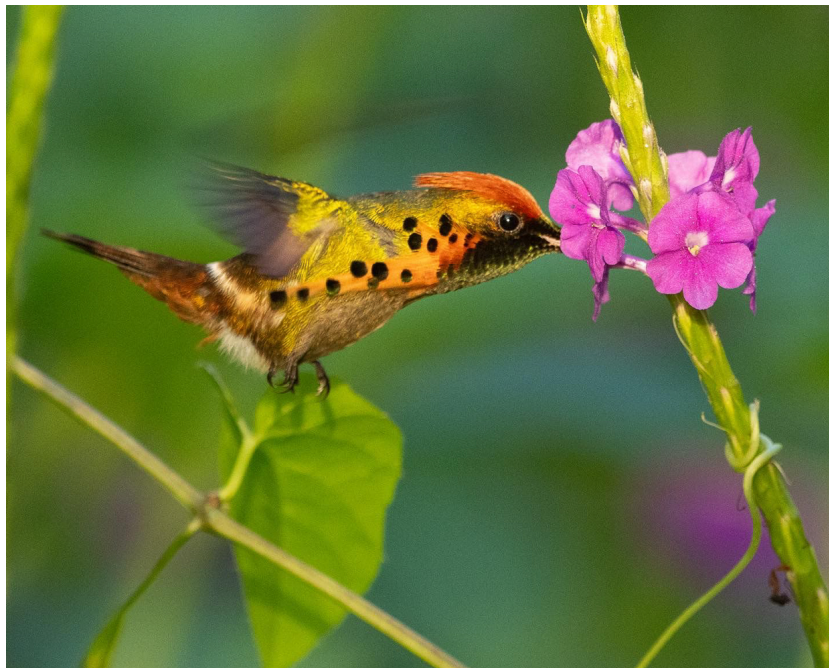
[Link: Trinidad & Tobago Trip Report \(Dec 1 - 11, 2023\)](#)

December 1 - Arrival at Pax Guest House

As participants arrived throughout the day, we settled in at the historic Pax Guest House – our home for the first five wonderful days in Trinidad. The lush valley and forest below the verandah was bustling with birdlife, including raucous Orange-winged Parrots and dozens of soaring Black & Turkey Vultures. Several exciting raptors put on shows as they zipped by or circled around overhead – Zone-tailed Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk and even a much scarcer Gray-headed Kite. The feeders were incredibly busy as dozens of Bananaquits and Purple Honeycreepers and up to ten species of hummingbirds swarmed around them – an absolute spectacle! While the smart-looking Copper-rumped Hummingbird was most abundant, they were joined by many others such as White-necked Jacobin, White-chested Emerald, Blue-chinned Sapphire and Black-throated Mango. We especially enjoyed our encounters with the tiny (but highly prized) Tufted Coquette and the incredibly iridescent Ruby Topaz Hummingbird. Although less dazzling than some of the others, both Rufous-breasted and Green Hermits were in attendance, and the much smaller Little Hermit was glimpsed visiting flowers below. This frenzy of avian splendour would become the backdrop to our entire week. Our hosts, Gerard & Oda, were some of the nicest and most helpful folks you can meet. Their friendliness, advice and especially cooking made our stay at this beautiful property a highlight of the entire trip.



Purple Honeycreeper © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



Tufted Coquette © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



View from the Pax Guest House © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

December 2 - Aripo Savanna & Arena Forest Reserve

With an early morning start, we headed downhill to some fantastic lowland habitats - the relatively arid, grassy areas known as the Aripo Savanna. Our very first stop produced excellent views of diminutive Green-rumped Parrotlets as a pair explored a potential nesting site. A speedy White-tailed Goldenthrout zipped by, evading most of the group, while we acquainted ourselves with many birds that would become daily companions like Tropical Kingbird, Tropical Mockingbird and Yellow Oriole.



Green-rumped Parrotlet © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

A gorgeous Savanna Hawk circled low over our heads, and a pair of unexpected Gray Seedeaters foraged deep in the tangly brush. Equally unexpected was a Variegated Flycatcher that perched cooperatively for everyone to enjoy - a rare but regular visitor to Trinidad. Pastures at a nearby livestock station provided our first looks at the gaudy Wattled Jacana, a pair of White-headed March Tyrants and a Peregrine Falcon perched in the grass.



Variegated Flycatcher © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

A late morning visit to the Arena Forest provided some much-needed shade, along with our first good looks at a pair of Golden-headed Manakins, Forest Elaenia and the recently renamed Ochre-colored Flatbill. Not to be outdone, three Green-backed Trogons flew in and sat quietly at the forest edge to allow prolonged study. Even our lunch stop was productive with our only Common Ground Dove of the week, a beautiful Black-crested Antshrike and a Tropical Pewee among others.



Green-backed Trogon © Jared Clarke

A heavy rainshower hit just as we arrived at Orange Grove, but the sun soon came back out to dry us off. We enjoyed the chance to explore the plantation roads and wetlands, spotting a great diversity of bird including our first Common and Purple Gallinules, Pied Water Tyrant and a fly-by Long-winged Harrier. We were especially charmed by a group of cooperative Smooth-billed Anis, some of them even cuddling up together after the rain. Several stunning Yellow-hooded Blackbirds sat out for killer views.



Yellow-hooded Blackbird © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

December 3 - Blanchisseuse Road

Today's excursion took us up the winding Blanchisseuse Road and to the higher elevations of the Northern Range. The lush rainforests and quaint villages here provide excellent birding, and we were not disappointed. Our first stop was special as we visited the garden of our local guide Barry's family, where an array of fruit and hummingbird feeders were teeming with birds. Of nine hummingbird species here, the "star" of the show was definitely the beautiful Long-billed Starthroat that offered up excellent views. Other highlights included a male White-bearded Manakin that popped in for a quick visit, making its characteristic "wing-snaps" as it did. We even spotted a Blackpoll Warbler - the first ever recorded on the property! Working our way up the mountain roads, we stopped to find and appreciate a wonderful array of birds. A stunning White Hawk flew over the valley and perched obligingly in a tree for all to see and photograph. Four colourful Guianan Trogons also cooperated for prolonged views, while several Channel-billed Toucans were less cooperative and flew off after a few short glimpses. Skulkier species such as Euler's Flycatcher, White-bellied Antbird, Golden-fronted Greenlet and White-flanked Antwren also put in appearances along the twisty roadside. Our next stroll along the ridge at Las Lapas provided not only spectacular views but also some spectacular birds such as Speckled Tanager, Bay-headed Tanager, Blue Dacnis and Black-tailed Tityra among many others.



Guianan Trogon © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

We ended our afternoon at the quaint village of Morne La Croix where we were treated to more new birds including Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Piratic Flycatcher, Gray Kingbird and Lineated Woodpecker. We also enjoyed some delicious sorrel juice - a seasonal drink prepared especially for us by Barry's family!



Long-billed Starthroat © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



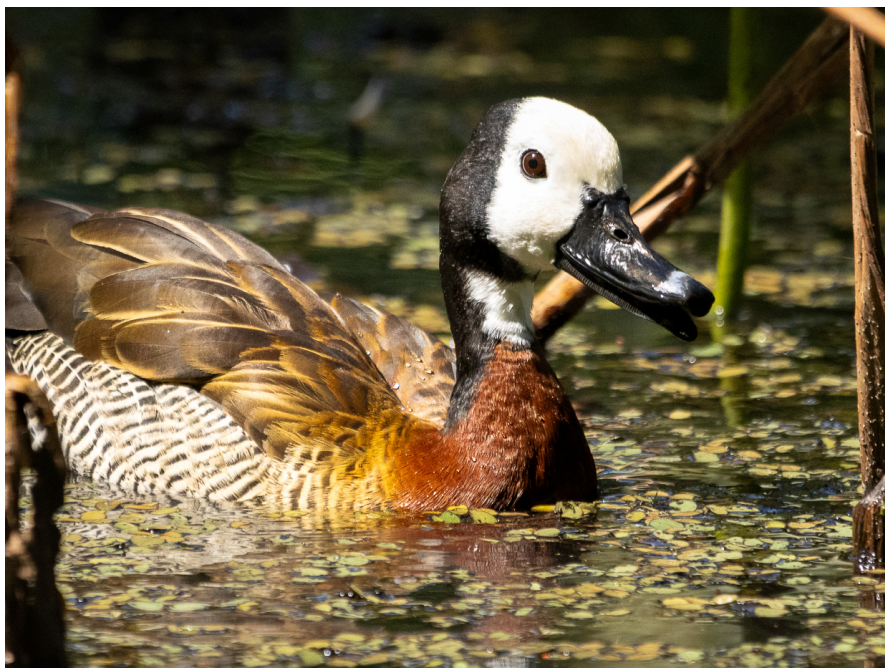
Rufous-tailed Jacamar © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



Rufous-breasted Hermit © Jared Clarke

December 4 - Waterloo, Point-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust & Caroni Swamp

This morning we made our way to the Point-a-Pierre Wildfowl Trust - the second oldest wetland trust in the world, situated in a unique location at the heart of a (now closed) oil refinery complex. We stopped along the entrance road to scope a Yellow-crowned Parrot, while several brilliant Blue-and-Yellow Macaws were spotted near the visitors centre. A variety of waterfowl paraded around the small ponds including dozens of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks and a lone White-faced Whistling Duck - the latter of which was virtually extirpated from Trinidad but occurs in small numbers thanks due a breeding program here at the trust and visitors from nearby Venezuela.



A Cocoli Heron was hanging out near another large pond, and several Striated Herons strutted around with the numerous Wattled Jacana. A pair of Ringed Kingfishers rattled away as they zipped past us. The forest trails were also busy with several Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Rufous-breasted Wren, Spectacled Thrush, Cocoa & Streak-headed Woodcreepers, Streaked Xenops and a very vocal Ferruginous Pygmy Owl that just could not be spotted.



Crimson-crested Woodpecker © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

Next we visited the fishing community of Waterloo, where our only gulls of the trip were spotted - more than a dozen Laughing Gulls flying over the ocean and foraging along the tidal flats. Shorebirds were also enjoying the exposed feeding areas - numerous Willets, Greater Yellowlegs, Black-bellied Plover, Southern Lapwings and even Whimbrel were probing the muddy water's edge while a group of Ruddy Turnstones loafed on a moored fishing boat. The shining stars, however, were several brilliant Scarlet Ibis parading around at surprisingly close range providing unusually great views. A distant Great Blue Heron was our first of the trip, while Little Blue Herons, Snowy Egrets and Yellow-crowned Night Herons were also taking advantage of the good feeding. Nearly two dozen Brown Pelican and several Neotropical Cormorants lounged around just offshore. Finally, we made our way to the famous Caroni Swamp - a vast estuary comprising more than 500 hectares of mangroves and marshes. Our tour along the quiet channels and into the main estuary was fantastic - both for scenery as well as birds. A very gregarious Masked Cardinal came out the mangrove edge and followed our boat for some ways, endearing everyone onboard. We also managed to spy two mangrove specialists - Straight-billed Woodcreeper and Bicolored Conebill - as they foraged in the shady depths. Not so easy to spot were two Tropical Screech Owls roosting in the mangrove, nor the secretive Little Cuckoo that crept along the tangly buttress. Keen eyes picked out a tiny American Pygmy Kingfisher sitting among the tangled branches. More than three dozen American Flamingos were spotted - a testament to the new and growing population here in the last few years. Other wildlife included *Mangrove Crabs*, a lone *Silky Anteater* and several *Cook's Tree Boas* clinging to branches. The grand finale took place as evening set in - the incredible arrival and

roosting of hundreds of Snowy Egret, Little Blue Herons, Tricolored Heron and thousands of Scarlet Ibis on a single small island. The beautiful scenery, still waters of the swamp and stunning birds combine for an experience unlike any other. We listened to the haunting call of Comon Parauque on our return at dusk, while a Green Kingfisher, two Gray-cowled Wood Rails and several Spectacled Caiman were spotted in the fading light. What a fantastic way to end our day!



Scarlet Ibis © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



Masked Cardinal © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



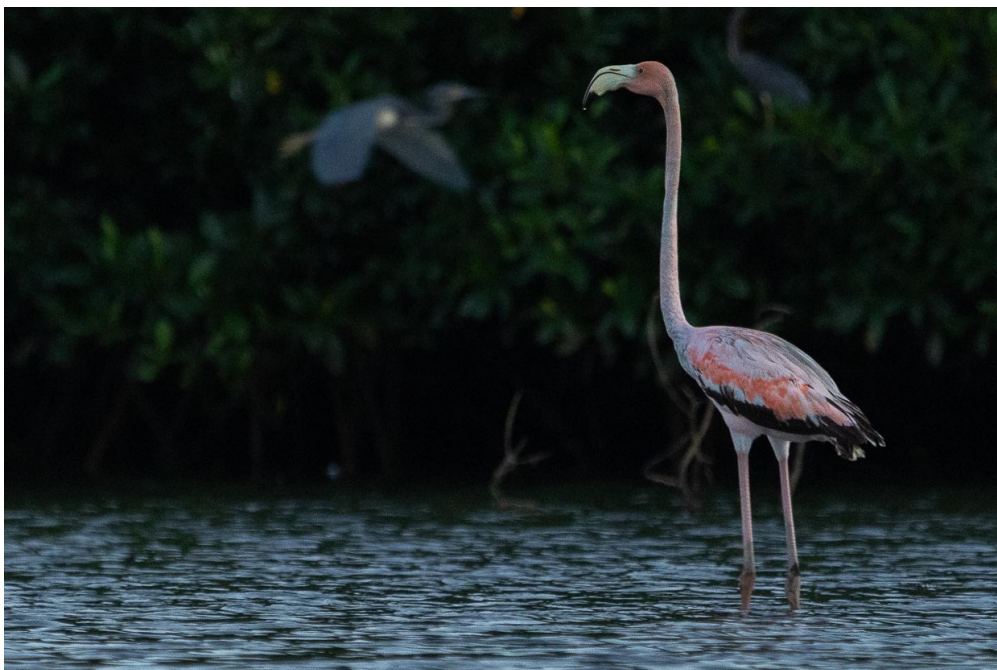
Caroni Swamp Tour © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



Boat tour © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



American Pygmy Kingfisher © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



American Flamingo © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



Scarlet Ibis coming to roost © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



Tropical Screech Owl © Jared Clarke

December 5 - Nariva Swamp

As with most mornings, the great birding began even before breakfast. While the feeders were hopping with all the usual suspects a Gray-headed Kite circled high above the valley, Orange-winged Parrots perched in nearby trees and a Streaked Flycatcher made a brief appearance on an open

snag near the verandah. Today we headed southeast along the coast to the rich mangroves and flooded fields of Nariva Swamp. Along the way, we stopped again in the Aripo Savanna and enjoyed our best looks at two Long-billed Gnatwrens, Pale-breasted Spinetail and Olive-gray Saltators among others. Perhaps the highlight of this stop was a chance encounter with a Gray-lined Hawk with a talon-full of prey - in the form of a large Cane Toad. Driving through the former Spanish region of Trinidad, we stopped at Sangre Grande to check out a small colony of Yellow-rumped Cacique and to sample some local roti - yum! Our lunch stop at nearby Manzanilla Beach produced many Brown Pelican and Magnificent Frigatebird.



Gray-lined Hawk with toad © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

Mangroves at the mouth of Nariva River made for excellent birding. Highlights included a very showy Black-crested Antshrike, a skulking Northern Scrub Flycatcher and two Bicolored Conebill. Heading to the town of Kernaham, we scoured the vast flooded fields (mostly former rice paddies) for a variety of wetland species including Purple Gallinule, Striated Heron, Yellow-chinned Spinetail and Pied Water Tyrant. An added surprise popped up in the way of a very vocal Striped Cuckoo which sat in the open for several minutes. Driving “homeward”, we spotted several Blue-and-Yellow Macaws heading off to roost for the evening.



Yellow-chinned Spinetail © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz



Northern Scrub Flycatcher © Jared Clarke

December 6 - 7 - Grand Riviere

Many folks took time this morning to enjoy our last encounters with the spectacular Tufted Coquette visiting flowers in the front garden of Pax Guest House, but our attempt at a birding walk was short-lived due to a sudden downpour of rain. After breakfast, we packed our bags and loaded a bus to our

next destination on the northeast coast of Trinidad - the small community of Grand Riviere. The drive was incredibly scenic (and twisty!) as we skirted along the ocean, through beautiful forests and quaint villages. The climate here is more humid with different vegetation than the regions we had explored thus far. After lunch and settling in at our beachside hotel, we headed out for a late afternoon walk along the Monte Video road - through a mix of forest, gardens and shade-grown cocoa fincas. The hands-down highlight was our first Trinidad Piping Guan (Pawi) - an endemic, endangered and rather unique bird! This cool yet awkward looking species lives its life in the canopy, munching on fruits like wild nutmeg and rarely coming down the ground. Pawi were our main reason for visiting this part of the island, and we soaked in excellent looks as this individual sat quietly on an open branch. Other highlights included a Black-tailed Tityra, Yellow-olive Flatbill, Violaceous Euphonias and several Turquoise Tanagers which had evaded most of the group up until now.



Trinidad Piping Guan © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

Early the next morning, we were picked up by a local driver and transferred to the top of Monte Video Road - an area known as "Pawi House Hill" due to its reliability for seeing these sought-after birds. And we were not disappointed! Over the next hour or so we were thrilled to watch at least 17 (!!) of the intriguing birds as they crept among the treetops, ate fruit and flew over our heads from tree to tree. Wow!! When we finally managed to tear ourselves away from the Trinidad Piping Guans, we were rewarded with lots of other birdlife including Green-backed Trogon, Crested Oropendola, Trinidad Euphonia, Boat-billed Flycatcher and Silvered Antbird. Back at the hotel we spotted four Royal Terns fishing just offshore, several Spotted Sandpipers running along the sand and a motley crew of Southern Lapwings, Little Blue Heron, Striated Heron, Great Blue Heron and Black Vulture patrolling the beach. Both Short-tailed and Brown-rumped Swifts were circling around the village. At dusk we were able to spot a Ferruginous Pygmy Owl causing a ruckus in a nearby tree, while a very unexpected Spectacled Owl popped in to visit Benny during a late night phonecall on the porch!

December 8 - 10 - Tobago

After an early morning bird walk and a relaxing breakfast, we once again packed our bags and headed to the airport for yet another exciting destination - Tobago! We were met by our bus driver and immediately sank our teeth into the birding at the nearby communities of Bon Accord and Caanan. A birding trip isn't a birding trip until you've visited some sewage treatment ponds!! We racked up several new species along the way including Blue-winged Teal, Lesser Scaup, Least Grebe, Sora, Lesser Yellowlegs, Bank Swallow and Black-faced Grassquit. The real crowd-pleasers, however, were a group of ridiculously handsome White-cheeked Pintails dotting around the water's edge. We were also surprised to spot a long Northern Pintail - a rare visitor to Trinidad & Tobago and an unexpected addition to our day. Our evening was spent relaxing by the beach at our hotel in Speyside, on the island's northeast coast. On one morning we headed off to explore the Main Ridge Forest Reserve - lush rainforest atop Tobago's highest elevations. Designated a reserve in 1776, this forest is the world's oldest protected area and conserves some of the most pristine natural forests in the region. We spent several hours hiking and birding along the famous Gilpin Trace trail. It didn't take us long to find our first target - White-tailed Sabrewing, a beautiful hummingbird that doesn't occur on nearby Trinidad. We enjoyed our first looks at Golden-olive Woodpecker, Plain-brown Woodcreeper and several White-necked Thrush. It took a little more work, but we eventually found two other Gilpin Trace specialties - a male Yellow-legged Thrush and the tiny White-throated Spadebill. A hands-down highlight of the hike was seeing both an immature and adult Great Black Hawk perched in different locations along the trail.



Great Black Hawk © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

We made several other stops along the road on the way back down, enjoying stellar views of very cooperative Rufous-tailed Jacamars, Collared Trogon and the endemic Trinidad Motmot. We also finally caught up to a beautiful male Blue-backed Manakin - another target that had eluded us all morning. Following up on a hot tip, we also stopped to scan the trees for a Common Potoo - eventually participant Mike's keen eyes spotted this very cryptic bird sitting quietly as they always do.



Collared Trogon © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

Back at the hotel property and adjacent Starwood Track, we managed to find several other target birds including the sneaky but smart-looking Northern White-fringed Antwren, Scrub Greenlets and Fuscous Flycatcher. Noisy yet endearing Rufous-vented Chachalcas pranced around the walkways, while a band of Ruddy Turnstones roamed the restaurant looking for handouts. Our downtime was spent relaxing on the beach and swimming in the ocean, while some of the group chartered a boat to do some snorkeling at the nearby Angel Reef.



White-fringed Antwren © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

Our last afternoon was a big one, as we boarded a boat and headed just offshore to Little Tobago - a wonderful little island with some big birding opportunities. Since the boat was glass-bottomed, we took time to appreciate some of the coral reefs and accompanying creatures (fish, crabs, snails, etc.) along the way. After a wet and rather adventurous landing, we hiked and birded along the trail that leads uphill through a very interesting forest. More than a dozen Crested Oropendolas chattered in the trees, two Chivi Vireos popped in for quick visits, a Brown-crested Flycatcher peered down at us from the canopy and a lone Trinidad Motmot sat quietly alongside the trail. A flyby Scaly-naped Pigeon was somewhat special here, having colonized this tiny island from nearby Venezuela.



Boat to Little Tobago © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

The climb to the top of the island was worth every step, since we found ourselves overlooking a large colony of Red-billed Tropicbird - perhaps one of the most beautiful and sought-after seabirds in the world. They soared around above, below and often right in front of us - a fantastic opportunity for the photographers in our group. The same cliffs were also home to dozens of nesting Brown and Red-footed Booby, while marauding Magnificent Frigatebirds circled around looking to steal an easy lunch. The spectacle of Little Tobago - a fantastic experience for everyone and the perfect way to end our birding adventure!



Red-billed Tropicbird © Jared Clarke



Our birding group on Little Tobago Island © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

December 11 - Departures

Our day started early this morning, as we headed back to the airport and a return flight to Trinidad, where most of us connected homebound. The time to bid farewell to this birding paradise came

much too quickly - but the incredible birds, amazing experiences and new friendships will stick with us for years to come. Until next time ...



Tobago sunset © Benny Jacobs-Schwartz

[Trinidad & Tobago species list \(Dec 1 - 11, 2023\)](#)