



White-tailed and Red-billed Tropicbirds – Little Tobago.

## **TOBAGO 04/09/99 TO 18/09/99**

### INTRODUCTION

Following information from M&J Pointon I was inspired to visit this tropical island. It is very small and many people do a side trip to ASA Wright in Trinidad comfortably within a visit. I decided against this in order to concentrate on Tobago. Incidentally the Asa Wright establishment was fully booked at this time anyway. We stayed at a mid range bed and breakfast called the Toucan Inn - 10 mins from beaches - 5 mins from airport in the area generally called Crown Point. Accommodation can be double or half the price of the Toucan Inn and range from the Grand Courland Hotel at £2000 for 2 weeks to the flight plus rooms at approx. £20 per night available at Crown Point. Car hire is readily available at approx. £20-30 per day for a 'legal' car / jeep.

The local roads range from adequate to very poor to four wheel drive only and although the island is only 20 odd miles long the road journey is somewhat longer and takes approx. 1.5 hours from end to end. There is a 30mph speed limit, which some people keep to - unfortunately they are in the minority. It is actually quite difficult to maintain a speed in excess of 30 mph for very long, as buses and lorries will soon slow you down.

Food can be obtained cheaply in the local mini marts and the Chinese in Bon Accord is excellent value averaging £3 per meal. Restaurants are good. I can recommend the Giulio Cesare Italian next to Speedy car rentals in the Old Store Bay road 200yds from the Toucan Inn for spaghetti and especially pizzas - don't blink or you'll miss it! Otherwise Bonkers @ Toucan Inn and the Shirvan Watermill are equivalent quality and price to good restaurants in UK. Many others have good reputations.

Local people are generally colourful characters, full of fun and of a happy disposition. They like the slow and easy style of life, and are naturally friendly and proud of their island.

'Guides' pop up throughout the rain forest area to negotiate guidance fees. The natural tendency is to regard this as an inconvenience. Believe me it is better to pay the guide a few pounds and let him help you find the birds. Several of them seem to have stakeouts of their own in areas where it is possible to get lost. The popular Gilpin Trace is reputed to be over used but still seems to turn up the birds. If you fancy spending some more money use the expert David Rooks for this trip - he'll give you lectures on the history of Tobago its flora and fauna along the way to make a really nice day of it. He also does tours to Little Tobago Island with excellent lunch thrown in but if its just the birds you want then pick up a boat (plus obligatory guide) at Speyside - its a lot cheaper.

The weather was hot 90F and very humid 80-90% with some rain - sometimes heavy- each day. The sun was strong and high factor protection advised. The rain forest and Buccoo Swamp were definite wellies recommended - they can be hired for £2 per day at the rain forest!

### SITES

The main sites visited were as follows.

(A) AIRPORT - Crown Point

The perimeter fence of the airport is accessible on three sides. Birds are present on the airport itself and especially on the southern side where there are extensive areas of fields, hedges, and trees.

There is a popular feeding area for sea birds on the coast at the eastern end of the runway.

(SP) SANDY POINT

This is a beach at the west end of the runway and a good sea watch point. Waders appear on the beach and land birds are present in the nearby bushes.

(SB) STORE BAY

A popular bathing beach on Crown Point

(PP) PIGEON POINT

A beach peninsular with a mangrove swamp and extensive growth. Not popular with waders.

(BAL) BON ACCORD LAGOON

A large area of land under redevelopment destroying what must have formerly been excellent habitat. To find it turn north off the Claude Noel highway at the Chinese Restaurant to a T-junction and turn left.

(B) BUCCOO SWAMP

This area consists of bog, grazing meadow and shallow lakes and can be approached via a gate on the Shirvan Road or from Buccoo Beach. Popular with waders, a visit here is essential for Jacanas.

(G) GRAFTON CALEDONIAN RESERVE

This is a privately owned reserve in the forest opposite the Grafton Beach. It is signposted but the sign is obscured from the west. A 200 yd drive to a car park where 3 walks are centred. This area consistently produces birds. It is looked after by a very helpful and friendly 'warden' who regularly feeds the birds - notably Blue Crowned Motmots (cheeses) at 4.00 pm. The feeding station is also a good roost for fruitbats, various lizards, tegu and gecko. Top spot for Chachalacas, Fuscous Flycatcher and White - fringed Antwren. Not to be missed.

(AVH) ARNOS VALE HOTEL

The established gardens of the hotel are a good place to find many of the species on the island. Also here they seem to be rather more tame than elsewhere. Afternoon tea is very highly priced but not essential to take. The birds are excellent, especially the hummingbirds coming to the feeder at the restaurant including Rufous Breasted Hermit and my favorite - White necked Jacobin.

(AVW) ARNOS VALE WATERMILL

This is a restaurant set in the location of the old sugar works deep in a wooded glade with a stream. It is very picturesque and full of Ginger Lily that attracts humming birds. The whole area around the car park is excellent birding especially in late afternoon following rain. A consistent site for Jacamar, Motmot, Parrots, Antshrike and Fork tailed Flycatcher.

(RF) Rain Forest - Road from Castara to Roxborough . One section in particular was excellent. It is on the Roxborough side of the Ridge reserve possibly half a mile down the slope along a section of road that has no surfacing near to a sign for weddings between two right angled bends. All three woodpecker species were seen here.

#### (GT) GILPIN TRACE

This is a walk - an old Amerindian path through the forest that goes right down into Bloody Bay. We didn't walk that far - just 1.7 km - then turned around and came back. At the point where living fossils - club mosses can be seen growing in the rocks on the left - the 'ferns' seen in coal - start looking for White - tailed Sabrewing - hummingbird once declared to be extinct!

#### (S) SPEYSIDE TO CHARLOTTEVILLE ROAD

This short drive produced the best raptors and was perhaps worthy of more time than I gave to it.

#### (KBWASA) KINGS BAY

Near Kings Bay on the main road to Speyside is a track leading off to the north which is announced by a small hand painted wooden sign on a post. In black paint it says 'Kings Bay WASA' . This leads to a reservoir, I believe, but before this there is an area that looks like a large roundabout from which a walk leads further up the hill. This is one of David Rooks stakeouts for Jacamar, Manakin and Motmot but we also saw Great Black Hawk.

#### (BWI) BLUE WATERS INN

This hotel has extensive gardens popular with birds and also waders on the beach and views across the bay to Little Tobago. A track - 4WD preferred - leads up the hill and along the coast for a stretch.

#### (LT) LITTLE TOBAGO

This small island off the North West tip is the main breeding island for many species of seabird throughout the year including Tropic Birds in winter and noddies and terns and boobies at other times. A trip there is required as these birds cannot be seen well from the mainland. From Nov to Mar there are approx 1000 Tropicbirds of 2 species - hundreds of Red-billed and just one or two White-tailed.

## THE BIRDS

**SPECIES****DETAILS****TROPIC BIRDS**

Red - billed	c. 20 arrived @ LT for the second week of our visit
White - tailed	1 of this island rarity was with the above @ Little Tobago

**BOOBIES**

Brown	breeding at LT and several were regular at SP, both adults and sub adults being present
Red - footed	dark and light phase adults and juvs were present at LT. None was seen elsewhere which is typical.

**PELICAN**

Brown Pelican	c.20 regularly at SP, A, Smith's Island and elsewhere on both coasts.
---------------	---

**ANHINGA**

Anhinga	though uncommon 2 were seen at Roxborough and others were present at B.
---------	---

**FRIGATEBIRD**

Magnificent	seen everywhere - hard to miss - c. 200 daily in all locations - not only confined to the coast even seen soaring with raptors at the rain forest!.
-------------	---

**HERONS**

Great Egret	1 at A on 4th and 5th only
Snowy Egret	1 at A on 4th only
Little blue Heron	5 sightings mainly on atlantic coast near streams - 1 white phase high in the RF on 8/9.
Tricolored Heron	seen at B on all visits
Cattle Egret	very common and widespread may be seen anywhere
Yellow c - n Heron	resident at SP 2ads + juv seen on nine dates

**DUCK**

Black bellied whistling duck	resident at BAL and possibly at B
White cheeked Pintail	present at B and BAL - only singles were seen on two dates
Blue winged teal	1 at B on 14/9

**HAWKS**

Great Black Hawk	2 at KBWASA on 16/9 over to Speyside direction
Gray Hawk	1 at S on 8/9 and at RF on 14/9.
Ornate Hawk Eagle	2 at S on 8/9 together flying east

**FALCON**

falcon sp	1 thought to be Bat Falcon seen at Bon Accord flying strongly west on 5/9 - all dark below with pale buff throat.
-----------	---

**CHACHALACA**

Rufous - vented	locally particularly common at G, BWI,
-----------------	--

**RAILS**

Common Moorhen 1 at B on 14/9 also seen there by others was purple gallinule

### LAPWINGS/ PLOVERS

Southern Lapwing locally common resident at B, soccer pitch at AVW , occasional at A and on the Shirvan Road golf course max. 20 at B.

Black - bellied plover 1 at SP on 9/9 and possibly later.

Semi - palmated seen on most beaches regularly and at BAL where some confusion with putative Collared. Finally though I was of the opinion that Collared was not present - possibly migrating at this time to the Venezuelan mainland (?)

### JACANA

Wattled Jacana Jacana jacana at least 4 were resident on the south side of B. This appears to be the only place that they occur.

### SANDPIPERS

Greater Yellowlegs Several were resident at B and possibly also at BAL

Lesser Yellowlegs Several present at B and at BAL not seen on beaches only in the marshy areas

Solitary Sand. Singles were seen at A on 6/9, at BAL on 6/9 and AVW in the road on 13/9.

Spotted Sand Fairly common on beaches at SP, back road at A etc. seen on 8 days especially around BAL.

Whimbrel US race at BAL only 2 on 6/9

Hudsonian Godwit 1 at A on 5/9 flying over.

Ruddy Turnstone Seen on beaches on 6 days especially at SP.

Sanderling Frequently on beaches in small numbers seen on 8 days.

Semi – palmated S. a small flock frequented roadside ditches at BAL on all occasions visited

Western Sand Seen in small numbers in early days but not thereafter beaches preferred were the base of PP and SB

Least Sandpiper Frequently seen on beaches, at BAL and at B in small numbers.

White – rumped S Some were present at BAL and B as above.

S-b-Dowitcher Only 2 seen – 1 at BAL on 9/9 and another at B on 14/9

### GULLS

Laughing Gull As expected these were the only gulls present and were not numerous. Strictly coastal only a few seen each day.

### TERNS

Gull – billed Tern Singles on 5/9 and 14/9 at SP.

Royal Tern Strictly coastal approx. 4 – 5 seen each day at SP, PP etc.

Sandwich Tern Seen at SP – not numerous seen on only three dates

Roseate Tern Suspected but rather distant feeding well offshore.

Common Tern Commics really with some confusion with above.

Least Tern 1-2 at SP on 15/9

Brown Noddy At A, SP, PP, S, LT – the most numerous tern seen every time at these locations max 50+ at A on 5/9 frequently close to shore

at SP

**DOVES**

Pale vented Pigeon	Not numerous though large size makes it hard to miss. A handsome species seen at A, G.
Zenaida/Eared Dove	Probably the most numerous dove – dozens at G for example. Seen every day – hard to miss. Juvs also present.
Ruddy Ground D.	Again common though normally seen in pairs good numbers at A and AVH / AVW – rich chestnut colour noticeable immediately when flying by.
White – tipped Dove	Fairly widespread and common seen most days in small numbers all over.

**PARROTS/ ANI**

Green rumped Parrotlet	The rump of this all green small parrot is ‘really’ green. Heard as often as seen on seven dates. Usually seen singly or in pairs but 4 at AVW on 12/9. Also at A, G, RF,
Orange winged Parrot	Noisy and gregarious and restricted to RF and its fringes in flocks of up to 30 at Roxborough on 14/9. Also a pair or two at AVW. Seen on six dates – easiest along road from Roxborough to Castara especially in late pm – a pest, they are unprotected!
Smooth-billed Ani	Common and widespread.

**SWIFTS**

Short – tailed Swift	Spent a long time trying to turn these swifts into other species but to no avail. Not common at Crown Point but elsewhere they are e.g. RF, AVW especially in evenings.
----------------------	---

**HUMMINGBIRDS**

Rufous-breasted Hermit	Large and distinctly rufous with a white fringed rufous tail, a grossly curved bill seen at AVW where Ginger Lily is grown also frequent at AVH feeder. Also seen at RF, G and on a total of five dates.
White-necked Jacobin	Superb large blue and white seen only at the AVH feeders a truly beautiful hummer.
Black-throated Mango	Again seen at the AVH feeder and at Bon Accord-female is distinctive with black ‘great tit’ stripe down a white breast.
Blue – chinned Sapphire	Seen at AVH feeder and at B – this is a small green species with a deep blue tail and a slightly coppery rump.
White-tailed Sabrewing	Declared extinct following the hurricane of 1963 this species of large hummer remains scarce. Two were seen – 1 in a cocoa plantation at Roxborough – evidently the first time seen outside of the rain forest (D Rooks). The second was seen along the Gilpin Trace at a lek site.
Copper-rumped Hummingbird	Quite large green hummer with obvious copper rump and black tail – larger than the sapphire. Seen at A, BAL on 6/9

**TROGON**

Collared Trogon	1 at RF – Gilpin Trace – well in – on 11/9, a female. Near the
-----------------	--

end a pair was seen by some in the group.

### MOTMOT

Blue-crowned Motmot I was unprepared for the size of this dazzler and also how easy they are to see. They seem to be naturally curious and can be called out of the woods! Seen almost every day up to as many as 6. Usually in pairs their constant contact calls are seen learned. Fed cheese at 4pm at G daily. Also feed at AVH at 4pm daily. Unmissable at AVW or RF.

### JACAMAR

Rufous-tailed Jacamar A candidate for bird of the trip. Tame but not easy to find, seen on five dates: at AVW on 9/9 and 13/9, RF on 11/9, KBWASA on 16/9 and G on 17/9.

### WOODPECKERS

NB. All three species were seen at the same spot, but on different days, on the Roxborough side of the rain forest reserve.

Red-crowned Common and likely to be seen just about anywhere. Uses the feeder at AVH for example

Red-rumped 1 at RF on 14/9.

Golden-olive 2 at RF on 8/9.

### WOODCREEPERS

Plain Brown 1 at RF on 11/9

Buff-throated 2 at G on 9/9, 1 at AVW on 13/9 & 15/9.

### ANTBIRDS

Barred Antshrike Female may be mistaken initially for a tanager – it is so bright. The male is shyer but then it stands out like a zebra. They are quite numerous especially along the road passing AVW and at AVH also seen in RF and on eight dates max.8 at Speyside on 8/9 seen also at SP.

White-fringed Antwren Only seen at G: a female on 9/9 and a pair there on 17/9.

### TYRANTS

Yellow-bellied Elaenia The 'crested' flycatcher – often seen around A and opposite the Toucan Inn. Common, seen almost every day in a variety of locations.

Ochre-bellied Fly'r 1 at AVH entrance on 12/9 was the only sighting.

Yellow-breasted Flycatcher Frequently seen on the central trail beyond the ruin at G.

Fuscous Flycatcher As above the only place seen for certain was G. The illustration in french is not good. It has biscuit coloured wing bars, a longish tail and a call like cur – wick wick wick

Brown-crested Flycatcher A surprise to see 1 at Toucan Inn on 5/9 and at AVW on 15/9

Streaked Flycatcher	1 at RF bend on 8/9.
Tropical Kingbird	Common and widespread seen everywhere each day
Gray Kingbird	Only slightly less common than above try A fences.
Fork-tailed Flycatcher	1 at A on 6/9, 1 at AVW on 9/9, 1 at Black Rocks on 13/9, 3 at AVW on 15/9, 1 at Mt Irvine on 15/9, 1 at A on 18/9.

**MANAKINS**

Blue-backed Manakin	1 at RF on 8/9, 8 in Gilpin Trace on 11/9, 3 at KBWASA on 16/9, 2 at G on 17/9 – noisy and not hard to find.
---------------------	--

**MARTINS & SWALLOWS**

Caribbean Martin	Common and numerous everywhere – hard to miss
Southern Rough-winged Swallow	1 on 5/9 at SB, 1 on 6/9 at SP.
Bank Swallow	1 at AVW on 9/9
Barn Swallow	Frequently observed at AVW, RF, A, SP etc.

**WRENS**

Rufous-breasted W	2 in RF – Gilpin Trace on 11/9
Tropical House W	1 /2 at Toucan Inn on 5/9, 6/9 – 1 at AVH on 13/9, 1 on LT on 16/9, 1 at G on 17/9.

**THRUSHES**

Yellow-legged T.	1 at RF on 11/9 a female.
Bare-eyed Thrush	Common and widespread
White-necked T.	2 at RF bend on 8/9 and 1 at RF on 11/9

**MOCKINGBIRD**

Tropical Mocking'd	Very common seen just about everywhere.
--------------------	---

**VIREO**

Chivi Vireo	1 at A on 6/9.
Scrub Greenlet	1 at A on 5/9, 1 at G on 7/9, 1 at AVW on 9/9 and 2 in RF on 11/9

**HONEYCREEPER & TANAGERS**

Bananaquit	Most common species, cute, seen everywhere-nesting also
Blue-gray Tanager	Beautiful bird and quite common around villages with a liking for black berries – unmistakable.
Palm Tanager	Dowdy and more secretive than the previous sp yet probably no less common seen at SB, A, G, KBWASA, S and many others.
White-line Tanager	Female, a rich chestnut, appeared more frequently than male which can be overlooked as a grackle or cowbird. However seen every day especially at AVH feeders.

### GRASSQUITS

Blue – black Grassquit	Very common around A and in villages local name of ‘Johnny jump-up’ seemed particularly apt as it leaps into the air about 2 feet when displaying.
Black-faced Grassquit	Probably the dullest plumaged bird on the island BfG was definitely short changed in the bright feather department. Nevertheless it has some charm – common and seen everyday especially at A, AVH, AVW etc etc.

### GRACKLES

Carib Grackle	Common, close views at breakfast table where they try to eat it for you - if the Banaquits don't beat them to it!!
Shiny Cowbird	Very handsome species, saw a juv being fed by a Tropical House Wren at AVH where quite common. Seen on most days often associating with the previous species.
Giant Cowbird	Not common often being seen first flying over as ‘a big black crow’ – familiar site at home and it takes time to realise that there are no big black crows in Tobago!! There were 4 at Canaan on 6/9, 1 at S on 8/9, 1 at RF on 14/9
Crested Oropendola	Magnificent (large Magpie sized) with bright yellow tail. Apparently a pest, spending much of the day in fields eating crops. Probably accounts for the lack of sightings. Most were seen in late pm going to roosts possibly in the mangroves at BAL, AVW and Roxborough but also seen at Castara and RF.

35 Manor Chase, Gwaun Miskin, Pontypridd CF38 2JD. TEL. 01443 205816

END.