

Trinidad & Tobago

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Trinidad and transfer to Asa Wright Centre for a 5-night stay.
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- Day 2/5** Asa Wright Centre. Excursions to Blanchisseuse, Nariva Swamp, Wallerfield, Arena Forest, Oilbird Cave and Caroni Swamp.
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- Day 6/7** Grande Riviere Beach for a 2-night stay.
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- Day 8/11** Fly Tobago, Blue Waters Inn for a 4-night stay.
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- Day 12** Depart Tobago
-
- Day 13** Arrive London
-

Departs

March/April

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code TTO01) or brochure

Grading

A. Easy birdwatching walks

Focus

Birds and wider natural history

Highlights

- 5-night stay at the world-famous Asa Wright Centre
- Delicious food prepared from locally grown produce
- Perfect introduction to Neotropical avifauna
- Access to Oilbird Cave
- Watch the dusk assembly of Scarlet Ibis on Caroni Swamp
- The chance to watch Leatherback Turtles come ashore with a 2-night stay in Grande Riviere
- Tropicbirds, boobies & other seabirds on Little Tobago Island
- Opportunities to swim over a coral reef



Tufted Coquette, Scarlet Ibis and Purple Honeycreeper,



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Introduction

The Caribbean island of Trinidad, lying just fifteen kilometres from the coast of Venezuela, offers a gently-paced introduction to the colourful array of birds in the New World tropics. Many of the seemingly complex range of South American bird families are represented and most can be seen with ease, making this a great place to begin Neotropical birdwatching. The Asa Wright Nature Centre, in the scenic setting of the northern range of hills, is an ideal base for our tour, providing standards of comfort and viewing facilities that similar establishments elsewhere in South America can only aspire to equal. We stay for five nights at the Centre thus allowing plenty of time to savour the abundant birdlife of the grounds and to explore a variety of habitats elsewhere on the island. We then spend two nights on the north coast at Le Grande Almandier Hotel in Grande Riviere with the chance here to observe Leatherback Turtles with the beach only 250m away from the hotel. We then move to the neighbouring island of Tobago for the last four days of the holiday and here we stay in an ocean side hotel tucked away in a private cove on the Atlantic coast. There are plenty of opportunities to swim or snorkel around a coral reef offshore from the hotel but we shall also be visiting the Tobago Rain Forest Reserve in the centre of the island, where many exciting birds can be found including a number of species absent from Trinidad such as Blue-backed Manakin, White-tailed Sabrewing and Yellow-legged Thrush. Seabirds are also much in evidence and an excursion to Little Tobago Island will provide stunning close-up views of Red-billed Tropicbirds, boobies and Magnificent Frigates.

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Asa Wright Nature Centre

We leave London Gatwick on a scheduled flight to Piarco Airport Port of Spain in Trinidad. As we emerge from the airport terminal we will be met by representatives from the Asa Wright Centre and transfer to mini-buses for the 45 minute drive, whilst our luggage is taken in a separate vehicle. Initially the dual carriageway leading from the airport and urban sprawl around Arima seem far removed from a tropical paradise but eventually we leave the lowlands behind and begin a gradual ascent into the northern range of hills, the narrow road twisting and turning through areas of secondary forest from which a chorus of frogs, cicadas and crickets resounds in the night air. Twelve kilometres north of Arima we turn into the entrance drive to the Centre and a few minutes later we will be welcomed with iced drinks and shown to our rooms. We will be staying here for the next 5 nights.

The Asa Wright Centre stands in 200 acres of grounds and consists of a main building and restaurant around which are grouped a number of cabins providing a total of 24 rooms. Each cabin has private facilities and a balcony looking out over the forest or gardens depending on the location. The Springhill estate, in which the Centre is situated, was formerly a working plantation

growing cocoa, coffee and citrus fruits but in 1967 ownership passed from Mrs Asa Wright to a Board of Management appointed to administer the estate as a recreation and study area for tropical wildlife. The Centre bearing Mrs Wright's name has established a world-wide reputation for the excellence of its facilities and with ever increasing numbers of visitors, the income from tourism is helping to finance a continuing programme of conservation and education. Particularly at weekends and bank holidays, numbers of day visitors also come to view the birdlife from the verandah or to take one of the forest trails.

Coffee is still grown on the estate and is one of the local products supplied to guests by the excellent

restaurant which seeks to provide a variety of Trinidad vegetables and fruits as accompaniments to the meals. After settling into our rooms, we will have our first opportunity to sample these as we return to the main building for a very welcome dinner in the restaurant where photographs of various local birds around the walls give promise of things to come!



A typical feeder scene at Asa Wright Nature Centre

Days 2 – 5

Asa Wright Nature Centre

The first morning at the Asa Wright Centre is typical of every start to the day at this haven for birds. At about 0530 the first few bird calls announce the approach of dawn and then gradually as the sky lightens, more and more individuals join in until a frenzy of song banishes all further thoughts of sleep. Palm, Silver-beaked and Blue-Grey Tanagers, House Wrens, Bananaquits and Cocoa Thrushes are among the most vocal residents but contributions also come from diverse sources such as the extraordinary noises emitted from a colony of Crested Oropendolas, Kiskadees shouting out their name, and Orange-winged Parrots screeching overhead.

On the verandah of the main building tea and coffee is already in place for the guests at 0600, whilst the bird tables are being replenished with fruit and the hummingbird feeders topped up with sugar solution by one of the resident guides. The well trained staff at the Centre will invariably be on hand throughout the day to offer advice and assistance where required. All have a good all round natural history knowledge and can advise on the identification of plants and insects as well as birds. On two evenings each week there is an escorted night walk in the grounds during which participants can see some of the nocturnal creatures living amid the vegetation, although some might choose to pass on the prospect of viewing large tarantulas!

At first the tanagers and Bananaquits lead the rush for breakfast but as the sun rises hummingbirds and honeycreepers repeatedly sip the sugar solution, bickering with each other as a queue develops

to fill each available space as it becomes free. A nervous Agouti may emerge from the undergrowth to snatch a few morsels from beneath the tables but Trinidad Squirrels adopt a bolder strategy refusing to move from their meal even when people walk by. Other birds pay brief visits to grab what they can from the banquet. Time slips by and whenever a diversion is required from the challenge of hummingbird identification there is always the option of scanning through distant vultures, raptors and swifts soaring over the Arima valley, or telescoping the forest canopy to pick out a Channel-billed Toucan, Bearded Bellbird, Scaled Pigeon or Black-tailed Tityra, all of which can be regularly seen from the verandah. The ringing of a bell signifies the serving of breakfast in the restaurant and a chance to discuss the morning's sightings as we tuck into a buffet of cereal, fruit, eggs and whatever else is on the menu.

Back at the bird table the traffic continues and by midday the heat has encouraged large Tegu Lizards to join the other scavengers below the tables. Hummingbird activity continues at their usual hyper-active level both at the feeders and around flowering plants in the grounds, particularly the nectar-filled blossoms of the Powder-puff tree. White-necked Jacobins are the boldest and most pugnacious hummingbird but ten or eleven species may be identified during our stay, including the impressive Green Hermit and the exquisite little Tufted Coquette, one of the smallest birds in the world. The latter shuns the feeders and favours garden flowers, often frequenting a particular area near some of the cabins where it looks more like an insect than a bird as it hovers amid the vegetation. The lunch bell at noon is an invitation to vacate the verandah for a while to enjoy another excellent meal, which invariably incorporates one or two Trinidad vegetables to give a taste of Caribbean cuisine. After lunch one can either return for more observations from the verandah or perhaps explore one of the various trails which facilitate entry into the forested grounds. At 1600



Blue Morpho

cakes and refreshments are served on the verandah, just in case hunger pangs are developing, and at 1800 the sound of trolley wheels heralds the arrival of the popular rum-punches, which can be sipped at leisure as darkness slowly envelops the grounds bringing to an end another day's entertainment. Life is certainly strenuous at the Asa Wright Centre! During our stay we will spend plenty of time on the verandah, (and photographers will certainly find it hard to move away) but not all the resident birds visit the feeders and walking along the trails is necessary to see these more retiring species. The grounds contain an interesting mix of secondary vegetation remaining from the former plantation, such as the large Immortelle trees which were grown for shade, areas of cultivation and primary rainforest. At the time of our visit the green expanse of trees filling the Arima valley should be enhanced by patches of yellow and purple as poui trees burst into blossom. The bewildering range of species is a challenge for any tour member interested in trees but to make things a little easier, some of the individuals have name plates attached by the Centre to assist identification and trail maps provide

further information. Brightly coloured butterflies abound but two of the most spectacular species, the Caligo and the Blue Morpho, are both insects of the forest, the latter flashing like a blue light as it passes through shafts of sunlight. The guides usually arrange at least two night walks each week and during these, participants may be lucky enough to see one of the nocturnal animals such as the pretty little Opossum.

Some of the forest birds do not need much effort to find. A short distance along one of the trails is a sign which reads 'White-bearded Manakin Lek' and a few metres beyond this the birds are invariably to be seen indulging in the communal display which occupies about 90% of the male's day. These dapper little birds seem oblivious to observers as they display and an enclosure has been constructed to ensure that



Guianan Trogon

visitors can enjoy close views. Their equally attractive relative, the Golden-headed Manakin, also frequents the grounds but is more of a canopy bird and somewhat less predictable. Guianan Trogons often silently appear in trees beside the trail and in the deeper forest we may also find the larger Green-backed Trogon. The long-tailed Squirrel Cuckoo is another canopy bird which can sometimes be seen from the verandah, and little flocks of Smooth-billed Anis inhabit areas of cultivation, uttering calls which sound disturbingly like Curlews! Another distinctive call of the Arima valley is the explosive cry of the Bearded Bellbird. This bird, the emblem of the Nature Centre, is heard every day but less frequently seen although occasional individuals do sit in the open. Turkey and Black Vultures soaring over the valley are joined by Common Black Hawks, and from time to time by other raptors including White Hawk and Black Hawk-Eagle.

Each excursion along the trails is likely to produce several new sightings but one outing that will ensure an addition to the holiday list is the morning we are taken to Dunston Cave where the Oilbird colony is located. To avoid disturbance, access is limited to Asa Wright guests and they are only allowed to visit on one day of the week. These strange nocturnal fruit-eaters have a very limited range in South America and Dunston Cave is regarded as the easiest nesting site to reach. It is said that Oilbirds were once safe from persecution because the noises they emit were thought to be the cries of devils living in the caves and hearing the cacophony of screeches coming from the dark interior of the cave, it is easy to understand the reluctance of early explorers to enter such places. We will have no such reservation and standing in the entrance to the grotto it is possible, with the aid of torches, to see part of the colony. The nearest birds are on ledges only metres away and it is a remarkable experience to be so close to such a mysterious nocturnal creature. At nightfall the

Oilbirds emerge to fly off in search of palm fruits and may then be glimpsed on occasions in the vicinity of the cabins. The walk to Dunston Cave involves a gradual descent through forest for about one kilometre but the trail is well maintained with a handrail to assist balance and should not present any difficulty to tour members. Because of the restriction on visitors this section of the grounds is less disturbed than the main trails and as a consequence it is often possible to encounter some of the more retiring forest species.

Most days at the Asa Wright Centre it is possible to see 60 or 70 species of birds and among the regular species not already mentioned are Grey-fronted Dove, Grey-rumped Swift, Golden-Olive and Lineated Woodpeckers, Cocoa (Buff-throated) Woodcreeper, Boat-billed Flycatcher, Tropical Pewee, Streaked Flycatcher, Spectacled Thrush, Golden-fronted Greenlet, Northern Waterthrush and Yellow Oriole. There can be few more pleasant places in South America to watch birds but exactly as envisaged by the founders, the Nature Centre also offers visitors the chance to observe all the different facets of a tropical forest. Whether marvelling at the industry of leaf-cutter ants



Ornate Snake Eagle

carrying their spoils or watching diurnal Sack-wing Bats wheeling around a forest clearing, there is always something to hold your attention in this most magical of sanctuaries.

Tempting though it may be to spend all our time at the Centre, there are other habitats to visit in Trinidad and during our stay we will be undertaking a number of minibus excursions to different parts of the island and below outline some of these destinations.

Blanchisseuse/Brasso Seco

The principal focus of this excursion is the birdlife of the forests cloaking the higher elevations of the Northern Range above the Asa Wright Centre. Many of the observations will be made by stopping at suitable locations to peruse the roadside forest but there are also a few hiking trails to permit birdwatching walks of perhaps an hour's duration. It is always difficult to predict the species seen at the forest edge but the expertise

of our driver guide is particularly valuable as they listen for calls whilst driving slowly past the trees. All three species of Trogon are likely and on occasions these impressive forest dwellers can offer remarkable viewing opportunities as they respond to imitations of their calls. If fruiting trees are in proximity Channel-billed Toucans may be tempted near the road as indeed might be other fruit-loving species such as Scaled Pigeon and Blue-headed Parrot. A variety of small birds inhabit the forest undergrowth and species to look for include; Black-faced Ant-thrush, White-bellied Antbird, Rufous-breasted Wren, Stripe-breasted Spinetail, Red-crowned Ant Tanager and Plain Antvireo. It

is always prudent to keep an eye on the birds soaring over the forests and whilst many will be Black or Turkey Vultures, Common Black Hawk, White Hawk, Short-tailed Hawk and Ornate Hawk Eagle are all likely to also take advantage of the thermals. A number of North American migrants pass through Trinidad or spend the winter in the hills and warblers to look out for include; Golden-crowned, American Redstart and Northern Waterthrush.



Rufous-tailed Jacamar

With plenty of stops to occupy our time, progress is slow but surprises can occur when least expected. These higher elevations offer the best chances of finding Speckled Tanager whilst other birds in the vicinity include; Chestnut, Red-rumped and Golden-Olive Woodpeckers, White-necked Thrush and Rufous-tailed Jacamar. The stunningly beautiful

Swallow Tanager is a summer visitor to these forests although arrival dates vary from year to year and the first individuals may not arrive until late March.

Once we have traversed the Northern Range thoughts will doubtless be turning towards lunch. Formerly it was the practice to eat the AWC picnic meal at the coastal village of Blanchisseuse but because of the poor condition of the access roads it has become customary in recent years to stop instead at the village of Brasso Seco where there is a convenient building for the purpose, albeit usually deserted and with locked toilets! Regardless of location the remainder of the afternoon is spent in the return drive to the Asa Wright Centre arriving back in good time for the Rum Punch serving! The journey will be punctuated by further birding stops and it is not unusual for species missed on the outward drive to be encountered on the return. Some of the birds seen during the afternoon in recent years have included Yellow-rumped Cacique, Blue-headed Parrot, Greyish Saltator, Rufous-browed Peppershrike and Ferruginous Pygmy Owl.

Nariva Swamp

Another day trip to one of the best-known of Trinidad's wetlands on the east side of the island. Before heading to the coast we pay a visit to a private ranch in the lowland savannah below the hills. This agricultural research station allows visitors to birdwatch from a road which circles through the property where rough grazing pastures, scattered bushes and muddy pools support a diverse selection of birds. The changes in habitat introduce 15 or 20 new species including Striated Heron, Savannah Hawk, Southern Lapwing, Wattled Jacana, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Yellow-throated Spinetail, Pied Water-Tyrant, White-headed Marsh-Tyrant, White-winged Swallow, Red-breasted

Meadowlark and Blue-black Grassquit. One of the most spectacular sights at the ranch is the soaring mass of Turkey and Black Vultures which congregates as thermals develop during the morning. Although the small ponds beside the track may contain little water, they often attract migrant waders such as Least and Solitary Sandpipers and a dark shape in the water could turn out to be a small Spectacled Caiman. Many of the new additions to our list are very attractive birds and the entertaining little Parrotlets have a particular charm as they display to each other and acrobatically clamber around the wooden fence posts.

Continuing south through the bustling town of Sangre Grande, we eventually reach the Atlantic coast at Manzanilla Beach and eat another splendid picnic in a recreational area beside a sweep of palm-fringed sandy beach, which looks exactly like the cover of a holiday brochure. Once again Brown Pelicans and frigatebirds occur offshore.

From here the road runs parallel with the sea, passing through endless lines of palms with glimpses of marsh and scrub inland betraying the fringes of Nariva Swamp. Yellow-headed Caracaras are often to be found in the palm belt and a diminutive Pearl Kite may be perched on the telephone wires. At certain places along the route to Nariva, patches of mangrove are worth checking for



Red Howler Monkey

Silvered Antbird, Bicoloured Conebill and Pygmy Kingfisher, whilst roadside trees may hold Black-crested Antshrike, Plumbeous Kite and Red-rumped Woodpecker. Troupes of Red Howler Monkeys live in the heart of Nariva Swamp but occasionally venture to the outer edges and we will hope that one appears beside the road.

Nariva Swamp is something of a misnomer as the area is largely dry at this season but some pools and ditches remain to attract small numbers of waterbirds. Great, Snowy and Cattle Egrets all occur in varying numbers, a Pinnated Bittern may stretch its neck above the vegetation and a few waders could be probing the muddy margins. Wattled Jacanas are one of the breeding birds in the marshier stretches and in wet years Azure Gallinules occasionally fly up from the swamp. Increasing areas of the accessible wetlands are being claimed for watermelon agriculture and whilst this is bad news for the waterbirds, it does bring large flocks of seed-eaters into the area including big wintering flocks of Dickcissel, Yellow-hooded and Red-breasted Meadowlark. A specialised hummingbird to look for is the White-tailed Goldenthrout, a frequenter of open areas which may sometimes be seen feeding from flowers among the grasses. Almost inevitably, after a full day we will have little time at our disposal to pay more than a cursory look at the swamp before returning to the Centre for a somewhat late evening meal.

Aripo Lowlands and Arena Forest

An early start is made on this day in order to reach the hot lowlands before the temperatures become too oppressive. The road distances are not great and once we have skirted the sprawling metropolis of Arima we will make the first of a number of stops in the flat savannah areas near Wallerfield and Aripo. This very different habitat to the moist hill forests is home to a range of Dry-country species and we will seek to find as many of these as possible. This is the haunt of Savannah Hawk, Pearl Kite, Grey-lined Kite, Plumbeous Kite, Yellow-headed Caracara, Southern Lapwing, Green-rumped Parrotlet, Common Ground Dove, Striped Cuckoo, Ruby-Topaz Hummingbird, Black-crested Antshrike, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Golden-fronted Greenlet, Rufous-browed Peppershrike, Masked Yellowthroat, and much else besides.



Masked Yellow Throat

The old US air-base at Wallerfield was once an essential birding stop but part of it has now become a business park and entry is prohibited although it is usually possible for the AWC to obtain permission for their groups to visit an area of Moriche Palms which seem to have avoided the building developments. These palms are an important habitat and it is here that we will look for such specialists as Sulphury Flycatcher and Moriche Oriole. Other possibilities include Fork-tailed Palm Swift, Red-bellied Macaw and Bran-coloured Flycatcher.

After an absorbing morning exploring a variety of lowland sites we make our way to the Arena Forest, the largest tract of forest in the area which fringes the huge Arena reservoir although the lake is unfortunately no longer accessible. A shelter close to the forest entrance is our usual lunch spot and here we can enjoy another tasty Asa Wright picnic. Although our visits inevitably take place at midday during the relatively quiet period of forest activity, previous Naturetrek groups have seen an interesting variety of species at this location including; all three Trogon species, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, White-bellied Antbird, Little Hermit and even on one occasion, the diminutive Short-tailed Pygmy Tyrant. The forest edge will be our final destination and from here we return to the Asa Wright Centre for the remainder of the afternoon.

Prior to the development work, night birding used to take place around the deserted airfield. In recent years the destination for these trips is the Agricultural Research Station at Aripo. After a picnic meal near the entrance buildings, the strategy is to drive slowly around the perimeter tracks, scanning the surrounding country with a powerful searchlight. A typical evening will result in sightings of Tropical Screech Owl, Paraque, White-tailed Nightjar and Common Potoo with the possibility of maybe coming upon some other nocturnal residents such as Opossum or Porcupine. After a night birding excursion we will usually arrive back at the Centre at approximately 2100hrs.

Caroni Swamp



Scarlet Ibis

This excursion takes place in the afternoon and represents a spectacular end to any day. The embarkation point for the boat trip into Caroni Swamp is at the head of a long straight canal lined on either side by mangroves. Red-headed Cardinals and Caribbean Grackles can be found near the landing stages but there is little indication of the rich birdlife of the swamp, although nearby rice paddies may be thronged with egrets and herons if conditions are suitable. The boat journey to the interior of the swamp may initially seem a little birdless, although occasional Striated Herons and Spotted Sandpipers may be glimpsed on areas of exposed mud between the mangroves. The boatman will stop to point out anything of interest and to begin with this is more likely to be a variety of crabs or peculiar Four-eyed fish swimming near the bank. Eventually we begin to encounter Little Blue Herons and possibly even a few Scarlet Ibises feeding below the mangroves and as the channel widens the boatman will attempt to locate some of the swamp 'specialities' which they always hope to show visitors. These include roosting Common Potoos looking like an extension of the trees they are perched on, a sleeping Silky Ant-eater curled around a bough or one of several snake species. Little Blue and Tri-coloured Herons, Great and Snowy Egrets become more frequent as we enter the more open expanses of water and if mud is exposed dozens of Yellow-crowned Night-Herons may be hunting crabs. A variety of waders inhabit the muddy margins and as the boat chugs by we may have close views of Willet, both Yellowlegs, Semi-palmated Ringed Plover, Whimbrel, Short-billed Dowitcher and Spotted Sandpiper. As we investigate various side creeks and thickets of mangrove we will be looking out for a variety of other birds including Osprey, Bicolored Conebills (looking much smarter than shown in the field guide!) and Black-crowned Night Heron. As dusk approaches we take up position at a respectable distance from the ibis roost and settle back to enjoy the spectacle. Small numbers of ibises will probably have been seen during the journey but in late afternoon flock after flock arrive from the surrounding marsh and glide in to gradually transform an island of mangroves into a fluorescent pink mass. The birds have recently started breeding again in Caroni but the majority come from Venezuela, commuting each day to the safety of the reserve. Hundreds of Tri-coloured and Little Blue Herons, Snowy and Great Egrets also fly purposefully over the water heading to their roosts and as the sun sets behind the swamp we witness one of the most colourful and spectacular ornithological scenes in the Caribbean. Our enjoyment is enhanced by the distribution of rum punches and cakes thoughtfully provided by the Nature Centre and it is certainly a different style of birdwatching to sit in the middle of Caroni Swamp, drink in hand, as chevrons of Scarlet Ibis stream overhead.

Day 6

Grande Riviere

After breakfast at the ASA Wright Centre we will pack up and depart for Grande Riviere on the north coast. We should arrive in time to enjoy lunch, before relaxing at the hotel and gentle explorations here before our evening/night excursion. Tonight, we have the wonderful opportunity for some very special turtle watching. Leatherback Turtles come ashore here to lay their eggs and we stand a good chance to observe them.



Leatherback Turtle

We will not be able to use 'white light' torches, but infrared torches supplied will enable us to appreciate these huge turtles, often within arm's reach! Dinner will be enjoyed afterwards.

NB: The hotel is based just 250m from Grande Riviere beach and group members are allowed to go down to the beach as much as they want. It is then possible to go to the beach on both nights but on the second visit (which is not included in the tour cost) we would ask you to pay as this contribution goes towards the protection of the turtles. Even at 530am both mornings it is possible to walk down and visit for free and it can be possible to get great pictures of any turtles still on the beach at sunrise.

Day 7

Grande Riviere

This morning, we will join a local guide for a short journey to the estate where the endemic Trinidad Piping Guans roost in the wild nutmeg trees. This is the last stronghold of this endangered endemic species, locally known as Pawi. If we are lucky, we can get excellent views of this truly unique bird, which can only be found on Trinidad! Red-legged Honeycreepers, Bananaquits and Channel-billed Toucans are never too far away either. Being up early today, the dawn chorus should also be in full swing, with Cocoa Thrushes often making the most noise. A great day exploring this fabulous area will be enjoyed with a range of species possible once again.

We will return to the hotel before embarking on the afternoon estate tour in search of any species we may have missed previously and we will enjoy another night at here.

Day 8

Blue Waters Inn

An early start may be necessary to ensure that we reach Piarco Airport in time to check-in for a domestic flight to Tobago (flight timing can vary). Twenty minutes after taking off from Trinidad the twin-engined aircraft touches down at Crown Point airport in Tobago and we disembark into the warm morning sunshine. Although linked with Trinidad in an uneasy political federation, Tobago is very different from its larger neighbour and during the next few days some of these differences will become apparent. The pace of life is very relaxed, indeed the island is so laid back it is almost horizontal! The climate resembles that of the Lesser Antilles more than that of Trinidad and humidity is generally lower although day temperatures can be high. The central spine of hills running the length of the island is cloaked in rainforest which supports a diverse population of birds. Despite the closeness of the two islands, a substantial number of bird species on Tobago either do not occur on Trinidad or have very restricted ranges and we can expect to encounter plenty of new additions to our holiday list during this short stay on the island. Much of the holiday development on Tobago is concentrated in the south and as we drive to Bon Accord we pass a number of tourist hotels but these are soon left behind and we spend an hour or two in the peaceful surroundings of small freshwater pools, some of the few to be found on the island, and scrubby bushes and trees beside the coast. In this area we may see Least Grebe, White-cheeked Pintail, Southern Lapwing, Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers, Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, Pale-vented Pigeon, White-tipped and Eared Doves, Red-crowned Woodpecker, White-fringed Ant-Wren, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Grey Kingbird, Caribbean Martin, Chivi Vireo and Scrub Greenlet.

After perhaps one or two other birding stops in the south we begin the 90 minute drive along the Atlantic coast to our hotel just north of the village of Speyside. Depending upon timing we may have lunch before starting the journey or perhaps have a late meal in Speyside. The journey reveals a superb



White cheeked Pintail (Ann Walter)

coastline mercifully free of development with little settlements bearing familiar names such as Pembroke and Roxborough, and secluded picture-book beaches surprisingly devoid of people. The road snakes and winds its way north through areas of forest and cultivation until we finally reach Speyside and turn off the main road along a private track leading to a small collection of buildings tucked away in a sheltered cove. This is the Blue Waters Inn, our base for the next four nights and no doubt the prospect of going for a dip in the sea will seem attractive after a long, hot day in the field. All the rooms are situated on the edge of the hotel's private beach and one can relax on the balcony looking out towards Little Tobago Island where Brown Boobies, Magnificent Frigatebirds and Red-billed Tropicbirds wheel above the ocean. The hotel gardens are full of birds and each evening the Chachalacas begin their noisy conversations, a ceremony that is rather less welcome when they announce day-break in similar fashion. Pale-vented Pigeons flap around the garden trees

and other residents include Barred Antshrike, Chivi Vireo, Tropical Mockingbird, Black-throated Mango, Ruby-Topaz Hummingbird and Black-faced Grassquit. Another exotic bird often seen here is the endemic Trinidad Motmot which appears on the hotel logo and each evening an individual roosts behind the light fitting on one of the balconies, although the room chosen varies with disturbance!

Days 9 – 11

Blue Waters Inn

For the next three days we have a choice of programme. Anyone wishing to swim or snorkel around the coral reef offshore will have plenty of opportunity to do so. For others the attraction of just relaxing around the hotel may be irresistible and many of our fellow guests will probably choose to spend their time on the sun-loungers or in the sea. We will be undertaking the following excursions during our stay and tour members can either participate in all of them or opt out whenever they wish, such are the benefits of staying in one comfortable base for several days.

Little Tobago Island

A morning or afternoon excursion on board a glass-bottomed boat. During the short journey to the island the skipper navigates over the Angel reef which begins a few hundred metres offshore, and points out the various brightly coloured tropical fish as they swim into view. After this glimpse of the corals and underwater life we splash ashore on Little Tobago and make our way to a vantage



Blue Crowned Motmot

point overlooking the seabird colony, following a trail up a forested hillside where Motmots, Brown-crested Flycatchers and other birds can be seen. From the viewpoint we look down on cliffs where Brown Boobies nest but the stars of the show are the numerous Red-billed Tropicbirds which circle around below, often coming to inspect us and hovering in wind currents only metres away at eye level. Many pairs nest amongst the vegetation at the top of the cliffs and at least one pair can usually be found within metres of the viewpoint, the adult sitting tightly in a little bower whilst the visitors pass by. Magnificent Frigatebirds maintain a sinister presence over the island and from time to time swoop down to harass a luckless booby or tropicbird. A few pairs of Red-footed Booby can be picked out after scanning the trees above the cliffs and a pair of Peregrine Falcons is often in attendance. Laughing Gulls in the bay and Short-tailed Swifts dashing across the sky complete a wonderful selection of birds and photographers are certain to expend a lot of film during a morning on this attractive island, which is maintained as a reserve. After dark Audubon's Shearwaters come ashore to feed young and as we return to the boat it is possible to see a few of



Red-billed Tropicbird

their nesting burrows beside the path, the entrance marked by deposits of droppings. From late April, Brown Noddies, Roseate, Sooty & Bridled Terns add to the seabird variety.

Tobago Rain Forest

We shall pay a visit to the Rain Forest preserve, which is the longest established forest sanctuary in the Caribbean. A surprisingly good road from

Roxborough allows access to the area within an hour of leaving the Blue Waters and one of the principal trails we shall follow is Gilpin Trace which extends for several kilometres through excellent primary forest. As we follow the trail we are likely to see several White-tailed Sabrewings, a large, handsome hummingbird which was formerly very rare but is now slowly recovering in numbers although still a very scarce bird. Collared Trogons are widespread in the forests and Blue-backed Manakins are often heard though less frequently seen. Another 'speciality' of the trail is the shy Yellow-legged Thrush which looks a little like a European Blackbird but is quick to fly off when people approach. Disturbance from other walkers along this popular trail is a constant hindrance but by taking our time and with a degree of luck we should see a fine selection of birds including Rufous-breasted Hermit, Rufous-tailed Jacamar, Stripe-breasted Spinetail, Cocoa and Olivaceous Woodcreepers, Yellow-bellied Elaenia, Fuscous Flycatcher, White-throated Spadebill, Plain Ant-Vireo and Red-legged Honeycreeper. We eat a picnic lunch at a splendidly situated picnic site looking out over forested hills towards Bloody Bay on the Caribbean coast. On a tour itinerary which includes many scenic lunch spots this is probably the best of all and enjoyment of the meal is enhanced by the regular appearances of Orange-winged Parrots, which are particularly common here, Red-legged Honeycreepers and the occasional Great Black Hawk.

There are other trails to follow, and in the Roxborough Valley, a more open aspect to the forest makes observation of some birds a little easier than the enclosed situation of Gilpin Trace. Logging is a major threat outside the forest reserve and this is illustrated by the damage that has been inflicted immediately beyond the preserve boundary at Roxborough.

Travelling from the Blue Waters we pass a small stream near the main road and this is often frequented by Green Herons, and a pair of Green Kingfishers. Elsewhere on our travels similar patches of wet ground may harbour a Yellow-crowned Night Heron and are always worth checking.

Day 12

In Flight

Most of the morning is free for some final birding or swimming before an early lunch and departure for Crown Point, where we catch a domestic flight to Piarco in Trinidad. Our London flight departs later in the day.

Day 13

London

We will arrive in London mid-morning.

Accommodation & Food

On Trinidad we stay at the Asa Wright Nature Centre for 5 nights. It consists of a main building and restaurant with a number of chalets or cabins distributed around the wooded grounds. Each cabin contains private facilities and most have a balcony. Wi-Fi is available in the main building and on the verandah, phone signal is available but can be patchy in its location at the centre.

We will end our stay with 2 nights at Le Grande Almandier Hotel in Grande Riviere. Grand Riviere Beach is only 250 metres away and each room is ensuite, has air conditioning and Wi-Fi.

The Blue Waters Inn on Tobago consists of a central building, restaurant and beach bar with blocks of accommodation bordering the beach on either side of this central building. Each room contains private facilities and a balcony, and some rooms are also within range of the Wi-Fi. Wi-Fi is available in the pool and bar areas, with phone signal also being readily available in most areas.



All food and accommodation are included in the price of this tour.

Tour Grading

This tour is graded A. Most of the birdwatching walks are gentle (and optional) and therefore suitable for any age and level of fitness. Some excursions, in particular the walk to the Oilbirds, are more demanding and you should contact the office if you think this might be a problem.

Climate

Generally hot and sunny with temperatures rising to 30°C but at the Asa Wright Centre the heat is tempered by cooler breezes blowing around the hills. Overcast conditions are not unusual and rain may occur, sometimes lasting all day. Humidity can be high during such conditions. Tobago can also be very hot but away from the forests the humidity and a fresh sea breeze is invariably blowing. As with Trinidad, precipitation can occur at any time but the monsoon period does not begin until late May.

Mammal, bird & plant lists

Where available these are automatically provided on booking, and will gladly be sent to you before, if you wish for a more detailed preview.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.