

Go Slow... in Trinidad (Asa Wright)

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Trinidad and transfer to Asa Wright Centre
-
- Day 2** Birdwatching from Asa Wright Centre
-
- Day 3** Blanchisseuse Road / Brasso Seco
-
- Day 4** Birdwatching from Asa Wright Centre and evening turtle watching
-
- Day 5** AM at leisure and PM visit to Wallerfield
-
- Day 6** Waterloo and Caroni Swamp
-
- Day 7** Dunstan Caves
-
- Day 8** Morning at leisure, afternoon fly London
-
- Day 9** Arrive London
-

Departs

April

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code TTO03) or brochure

Grading

A/B. Easy birdwatching walks with some optional more strenuous walks.

Focus

Birds and natural history

Highlights

- 7-night stay at the world-famous Asa Wright Centre
- Delicious food prepared from locally grown produce
- Perfect introduction to Neotropical avifauna
- Birding with ice cold rum punch from the verandah
- Watch the dusk assembly of Scarlet Ibis
- See Leatherback Turtles nesting



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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 seven 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.

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 Fly Trinidad and transfer to Asa Wright Centre

We leave London Gatwick on a scheduled flight to Piarco Airport Port of Spain in Trinidad, touching down briefly in St Lucia on route. As we emerge from the airport terminal we will be met by representatives from the Asa Wright Centre and will soon begin the short 40 minute transfer to the centre. 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 evening 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.

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, (which include the most powerful hot showers you will find anywhere!) 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.

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 adorn the walls and give promise of the birdwatching to come!

Day 2 Asa Wright Centre

For the early risers amongst us, 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



Blue-Grey Tanager

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.



Purple Honeycreeper

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 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!

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. Some mention should be made here about the Trinidad naturalists who will be our driver/guides during these outings and possess a phenomenal ear for calls and acute eyesight, invaluable assets in tropical forests! They are constantly in the field and thus have an unrivalled knowledge of the island birdlife but equally important, they are also pleasant companions with a good sense of humour and an ability to answer questions about most aspects of Trinidad natural history.

Day 3 Blanchisseuse Road / 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



Channel-billed Toucan

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.



With plenty of stops to occupy our time, progress is slow but surprises can occur when least expected. The forest around the radio transmitters at Morne Bleu are sometimes frequented by one or two Trinidad Piping Guans but these much persecuted birds are by no means predictable and must be regarded as very unlikely unless we are favoured with a great deal of good fortune. These higher elevations do however 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. The plans for lunch will be kept flexible on this day, and we will find somewhere to picnic at along the way.

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.

Day 4 Local guided walks around the Centre / evening Turtle watching

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. Many other creatures live in the grounds, like the land crabs which emerge from holes after rain and the Tarantulas which staff delight in showing visitors, but many are nocturnal and only seen by chance during the day.

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 visitors can enjoy close views. Their equally attractive relative, the Golden-headed Manakin,



White-bearded 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.

Down amongst the undergrowth we have a number of skulking passerines to look for but we will need patience and luck to see some of these. The Black-faced Ant-Thrush is another bird more often heard than seen as it creeps like a miniature rail through the leaf debris on the forest floor. Grey-throated Leaf-Tossers are equally retiring but invite attention by throwing leaf litter in every direction as they search for food. Other dwellers of the forest and overgrown gulleys include Stripe-breasted Spinetail, White-flanked Ant-Wren and White-necked Thrush. Turning our attention to the canopy we will find members of the tanager tribe much in evidence especially where fruit is to be found. In addition to the abundant Blue-Grey, Palm, Silver-beaked and White-lined Tanagers, other representatives include Bay-headed and Turquoise, along with brightly plumaged Violaceous Euphonias.

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 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.

For those that wish to partake, the evening will be spent visiting the beaches on the east coast of the island, to hopefully see Leatherback Turtles coming ashore to lay their eggs. Weighing up to 2000lbs the Leatherback is the largest of the world's seven marine turtles and watching them come ashore to first excavate their nests and then enter a trance like state as they lay their eggs, is one of the most fascinating spectacles of the natural world. However, it should be noted this will be a late evening, arriving back at the Centre around midnight and the journey is likely to be long and hot. It is not in keeping with the slower, easier nature of the rest of the tour, but for many this may be a once in a lifetime opportunity and therefore we are keen to offer it.

Day 5 Morning at leisure and afternoon excursion to Wallerfield

As we will have had a late night the day before, today's morning will be relaxed in order to give everyone a chance to rest and spend the morning at leisure. There are enough birding opportunities around the centre alone to occupy our time!



In the afternoon we will travel to Wallerfield. 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 our destination. 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 Savanna Hawk, Pearl, Grey-lined and 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.

We will return to the Centre in good time for dinner.

Day 6 Waterloo and Caroni Swamp

An excursion to Waterloo is a regular addition to our itinerary that promises an exciting variety of birds. Situated on the west coast just south of Caroni Swamp, Waterloo offers a contrast to forest birdwatching as we scan a variable extent of muddy shoreline exposed by a retreating tide. This is the haunt of herons, gulls, terns and shorebirds with impressive congregations occurring at times

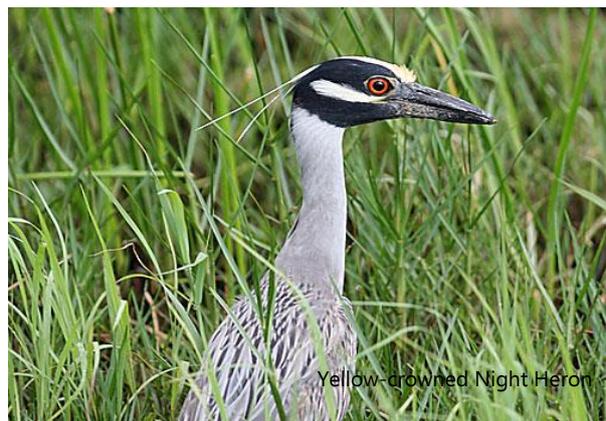
of passage. An hour or so here should provide excellent views of such species as Brown Pelican, Laughing Gull, Royal and Large-billed Terns, the latter trio often perched obligingly on the breakwaters allowing close scrutiny. These structures also supply a high-tide resting place for an assortment of waders which can include Willet, Greater Yellowlegs and Short-billed Dowitcher. One of the star birds at Waterloo is the bizarre Black Skimmer, numbers of which settle on the shoreline between periods of feeding over the bay where they employ their extraordinary 'skimming' technique.



A visit to Waterloo is combined with a brief stop in mangrove habitat at the edge of Caroni Swamp. Specialist inhabitants we will be hoping to locate include; Straight-billed Woodcreeper, Clapper Rail, Bicolored Conebill and Green-throated Mango. The flat expanses of the rice fields around Caroni may also produce a surprise with previous sightings here including Long-winged Harrier, Limpkin and a variety of herons.

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 7 Dunstan Caves

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.



Once we leave Dunston Cave, we will head back to the Centre where we will have the afternoon at leisure.

This evening, for those who wish we will go on a nighttime walk around the centre in attempt to spot some of the Asa Wright Centre's nocturnal inhabitants. For those who wish to spend the last evening in the lodge this is not a problem, in order to rest for the journey home the following day.

Day 8 In Flight

Most of the morning is free for some final birding before an early lunch and departure for the airport in time for our late afternoon flight to London.

Day 9 London

We will arrive in London mid-morning.

Accommodation and food

On Trinidad we stay at the Asa Wright Nature Centre, which 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 veranda, phone signal is available but can be patchy in its location at the centre.

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.

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.

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