

# DUBIOUS BIRD RECORDS FOR TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

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The number of bird species recorded to have occurred in Trinidad and Tobago is a little over 400. Most of these are satisfactorily represented by authentic specimens, to be found mainly in the ornithological collections at the American Museum of Natural History, New York, the Carnegie Museum at Pittsburgh, the Academy of Natural Sciences at Philadelphia, and the Leiden Museum in Holland. Smaller collections are to be found at the British Museum at Tring, the Yale Peabody Museum at New Haven, and the Trinidad Regional Virus Laboratory in Port-of-Spain. Many of these specimens were taken by professional collectors towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th; two collections were made in the years between 1930 and 1950 and two others between 1950 and 1960. A major disaster for Trinidadian ornithology occurred in 1920 when the classic collection of A. Leotaud, made in the mid-19th century, was destroyed in the fire at the Royal Victoria Institute in Port-of-Spain. Fortunately, this collection was adequately documented by Leotaud (1866), who published full descriptions and measurements for all the species represented in it.

The current checklist of species recorded for our islands is based on the above collections, augmented by the relevant literature and personal observations of a number of ornithologists. In a major publication on local ornithology, now nearing completion, I have evaluated the status of each species in the light of the above. Space has forbidden me to discuss there the principles on which I have rejected several species, though I have considered them briefly in the text in order that in future publications they may correctly be omitted. In this paper I shall outline my reasons for considering that these species have not been satisfactorily recorded and should accordingly be rejected from the checklist.

I should emphasise that unlike Bond (1962) I do not consider that only species represented by museum specimens can be taken as satisfactorily recorded. Such an attitude would mean rejecting, among others, the Turkey Vulture *Cathartes aura*, from the Trinidad list. However, Bond correctly points out a number of anomalies on the Tobago list, some of which I shall consider below.

Among the literature Belcher and Smooker (1934-1937), Junge and Mees (1958) and Herklots (1961) have included a number of species only because they have been mentioned in

previous works. Rarely have they evaluated the records, so their flimsy basis is overlooked and the species tend to become accepted through the passage of time, while their repetition in list after list merely increases their credibility.

In the following list of species I have adopted the modern nomenclature of Meyer de Schauensee (1966): reference to the scientific name may be necessary when comparing with earlier literature.

**Mediterranean Shearwater *Puffinus kuhli*,** This species was recorded by Herklots from a specimen. Collins (1969) pointed out that it is synonymous with Cory's Shearwater (listed separately as *P. diomedea* by Herklots) and that this is now correctly named Cory's Shearwater, *Calonectris diomedea*. In any case Herklots' specimen of *P. kuhli* cannot now be traced.

**White-tailed Tropicbird *Phaethon lepturus*.** I explained in this journal (1961) my reasons for rejecting this species from the checklist, since the original identification was based on a nomenclatural mistake. Several visits to Tobago since that time have produced no new evidence to contradict my view.

**White Pelican *Pelecanus erythrorhynchus*.** This species has been included in the checklist on the authority of Eckelberry (1964). I feel very doubtful about this for several reasons; the species has not otherwise been recorded nearer than Puerto Rico, the single record is a sight observation reported rather casually (for such an unusual occurrence) without any details of distance, conditions, field marks etc.; also I should mention that several times I have seen adult Brown Pelicans, *P. occidentalis*, whose upperparts appeared almost white in brilliant sunlight.

**Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*.** Herklots stated without details that birds were seen and shot in the Caroni Swamp in 1958. There are no other records (except that Kirk, 1883, said it occurred in Tobago), and no extant specimens can be found. Local hunters say the "Mallard" occurs, but there may be confusion here with the Northern Pintail, *A. acuta*. Bearing in mind that the species is often domesticated in Trinidad, and that its known winter range extends only to Panama and the Virgin Islands, I am inclined to reject this species.

**Lesser Yellow-headed Vulture *Cathartes burrovianus*.** Sight-records have been published by Belcher and Smooker, and Herklots. The latter describes his bird, which is clearly the subspecies *ruficollis* of the Turkey Vulture, *C. aura*. The fact that *ruficollis* has several yellow bands on the nape has led several observers here to assume that they have seen *C. burrovianus*, which is essentially a savannah species. There is also the possibility that the **Greater Yellow-headed Vulture, *C. melambrotos*,** a forest species, might occur in Trinidad. Until more satis-

factory records can sort out the confusion, it seems best to regard this species as unsatisfactory.

**Bat Falcon, *Falco ruficularis*.** Sight-records of mine from Tobago in December 1956 and April 1958 were published by Herklots. Identification was partly based on the fact that the falcons were hunting bats. I have since discovered that the Merlin *F. columbarius* also regularly hunts bats, so it seems at least possible that the species I saw was the Merlin. I accordingly withdraw the records. The Bat Falcon is of course widespread, if uncommon, in Trinidad.

**Long-billed Curlew, *Numenius americanus*.** This species is recorded for Tobago by Kirk (1883) under the name of *N. longirostris*. Kirk's nomenclature was extremely confused, and he may well have been influenced by the tendency of local hunters to refer to members of this genus as "Crook-bills". The winter range of this species is known to reach only as far south of Guatemala, with casual records to Panama. It seems likely that this record of Kirk's refers to the Whimbrel, *N. phaeopus*.

**Marbled Godwit, *Limosa fedoa*.** For similar reasons Kirk's record of this species in Tobago may well refer to the Hudsonian Godwit, *L. haemastica*. *L. fedoa* is, however authentically recorded from Trinidad.

**Lesser Noddy, *Anous tenuirostris*.** This species is included for Trinidad by Belcher and Smooker on the testimony of T. Spencer, who saw a bird and collected an egg on Soldado Rock in May 1928. However the egg described better fits the size and character of those of the Brown Noddy, *A. stolidus*; moreover, the described location, "on the bare rock", seems very unlikely for the Lesser Noddy, which is known to nest in trees. The record seems thoroughly unsatisfactory.

**Scarlet Macaw, *Ara macao*.** Two sight-records exist for this species, one at second-hand from Belcher and Smooker in October 1934; they refer to the corroborating testimony of "native guides". My own experience of local guides has led me to suspect that in most cases they tend to corroborate anything if it will please their employer! The other record is from May 1943 by Abbott (in Herklots). The latter, however, does not record the similarly sized *A. ararauna*, which is known to breed in Nariva Swamp, where all these records were made, and which may well have been confused here. Without adequate field data I am not inclined to accept this record.

**Red-shouldered Macaw, *Ara nobilis*.** Belcher and Smooker cite one very unsatisfactory sight-record from Nariva Swamp in October 1934; they themselves could not recognise the birds, but thought they were not the common *A. manilata*, which is very similar. A single specimen in the British Museum came from the

London Zoo, and was said at the time to have originated in Trinidad. There is no authority for this statement. Moreover, the species is sometimes kept in captivity, and escapes undoubtedly occur.

**Groove-billed Ani, *Crotophaga sulcirostris*.** This species has figured in the checklist for Trinidad on the authority of Beebe (1952), who does not comment but merely mentions it as occurring in the Arima valley. I knew the fine old gentleman in his later years, and can testify that on occasions his memory for names was a little clouded; his reputation was such, however, that few liked to question his assertions! In this case, as with one or two other records, it seems certain he was confusing one species with another, here undoubtedly *C. ani*.

**Hummingbirds (various species).** One source of confusion over records of unusual hummingbirds from our islands is the existence of 19th century millinery trade-skins marked "Trinidad", now found in various museums. Thus *Thalurania furcata*, *Amazilia fimbriata* and *Chrysuronia oenone* have been cited for Trinidad, (Meyer de Schauensee 1966), while the Blue-chinned Sapphire, *Chlorestes notatus*, has been recorded from Tobago on similarly doubtful evidence. Sight-records of this latter species and of the White-chested Emerald, *Amazilia chionopectus*, from Tobago by one or two observers should be treated with extreme caution. The very fast-moving hummingbirds are frequently difficult to observe in the field, except under perfect conditions of light and distance. All such sight-records should include full field data and preferably be corroborated.

**Euler's Flycatcher, *Empidonax euleri*.** This species is recorded for Tobago on my authority (in Herklots). Full field descriptions of birds seen by me and my wife near Scarborough in December 1956 were sent to Herklots, who mistakenly attributed them to this species, instead of the Fuscous Flycatcher, *Cnemotriccus fuscatus*. (cf. Bond 1962).

**Myrtle Warbler, *Dendroica coronata*.** The single sight-record of an immature bird from Tobago on 2 April 1959 was made by my wife and myself (in Herklots). We were misled by a reference book into reporting the bird as this species, when it was actually a Cape May Warbler, *D. figrina* (cf. Bond 1962).

**Blackburnian Warbler, *Dendroica fusca*.** Reported from Tobago on the evidence of Jardine (1846), but there is no date mentioned and the whereabouts of the specimen is unknown. This record should be rejected.

**Louisiana Waterthrush, *Seiurus motacilla*.** Six sight-records by Street (1946), constitute the only evidence for this species in Trinidad. It resembles the Northern Waterthrush, *S. noveboracensis*, fairly closely; the latter is a common winter visitor to

both Trinidad and Tobago. I feel it most likely that Street was mistaken. He may have been misled by the fact that in the Greater Antilles, where both species winter, *motacilla* frequents fresh water streams while *noveboracensis* is found mainly amidst mangroves. In our area both habitats are frequented by the latter. I have trapped many birds in both habitats, and several observers have checked on this matter since Street's observations. No *notacilla* have been found.

**Common Yellowthroat, *Geothlypis trichas*.** This species is recorded for Tobago by Kirk, who may have been referring to a specimen in the British Museum of a female or young male. Jardine (1846) said that this came from Tobago, but the specimen's label includes neither date nor locality in Tobago. In view of the confusion the status of this species remains extremely doubtful.

**Blue-black Grosbeak, *Cyanocompsa cyanoides*.** Also only mentioned by Beebe, and should also be rejected for the reasons given above (see Groove-billed Ani). Probably a mistake for the Blue-black Grassquit, *Volatinia jacarina*.

I am conscious that I have omitted several other hypothetical species from the above list, whose records depend only on sight-records of one or two individuals, and which might well be rejected as unsatisfactory records by objective ornithologists. Such are the Southern Lapwing, Snowy Plover, Parasitic Jaeger, Rufous Nightjar, Cliff Swallow and Bay-breasted Warbler. All these species, however, have been personally verified by me; full field data has been taken, in every case corroborative evidence is available, and I have always taken every step to avoid jumping to hasty conclusions, by rejecting all evidence about which any doubt exists. Similarly, I have not rejected other hypothetical species, reported to me by competent observers with all field data carefully noted; such are the Black-collared Hawk, Pomarine Jaeger, Bobolink and several species of Wood Warblers. In this connection the importance of taking full field-notes on the spot and, if possible, of acquiring corroborative support cannot be overrated if an observer wishes to obtain credence for a sight-record of an unusual species.

Some scientists will contend, perhaps rightly, that the status of a significant portion of the avifauna of Trinidad and Tobago will remain in doubt until a carefully selective collection is made and adequately documented, comprising those species at present represented only by literary references and sight observations. Such a collection would have to be made over a lengthy period; in some cases it would affect resident species whose very existence here is threatened by habitat destruction and other factors. I personally would prefer to leave these "rarities" alone, as there seems only doubtful value to be gained by producing them as concrete

evidence. Even such evidence is not always free from doubt (e.g. the classic case of the "Hastings Rarities" in England).

**Summary** I have presented my reasons for rejecting several bird species from the Trinidad and Tobago checklist, thirteen from Trinidad, eleven from Tobago.

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