

## THE REDISCOVERY OF THE YELLOW-TAILED CRIBO *DRYMARCHON C. CORAIS* IN TRINIDAD

By Hans Boos

(Emperor Valley Zoo, Port-of-Spain).

The snake fauna of Trinidad is little known by the general public. The commoner types are seen with varying frequency, and their names are fairly well known. Others, on account of their secretive nature, choice of habitat, or rarity, are seldom seen.

One of the strangest cases of a snake that, from all appearances and reports should be fairly common, and thus well known to collectors in Trinidad, is the Yellow-Tailed Cribbo, *Drymarchon c. corais*.

It is a large, black, swift-moving jungle snake, which cannot be confused with the two other similar ones, the Tigre, *Spilotes p. pullatus*, or the Yellow-Bellied Puffer, *Pseustes s. sulphureus* in that it has the distinctive yellow tail which accounts for about 1/3 of its overall length, as well as its common name.

R. R. Mole, in 'Snakes of Trinidad' published in the "Gazette" in 1926, states that he had caught them, up in the St. Anns Valley, as well as Monos Island. He admits however that, "in fact all Cribos are rare now, and one has not been seen for years." He says that his sightings were "fifteen or twenty years ago", which would be early in this century.

During my association with the late Ludolph Wehekind, when he was curator of the Royal Victoria Institute, he told me that he was not sure he had ever seen one, and if so, not for at least thirty years, and that they were probably very rare.

However, in 1966 there came a report from an estate in the North of Mayaro that a snake with a startlingly yellow tail had been killed some years before. Another report which described a snake looking as if it had the end half of a bright yellow one stuck on in place of its original black one, came from someone who had seen it dead on the Manzanilla Road.

Checks in the bottled collection at the Royal Victoria Institute proved fruitless, and the one held in the collection of the Regional Virus Lab. turned out to be a Tigre, *Spilotes*.

Reports from Tobago said that the Yellow-Tail Cribbo was common, and was well known. Elliot Olton chased what he described as a long black snake with a yellow tail, but lost it in a thorn patch at Speyside. But no specimen had come to hand in spite of these reports. Then on June 4th, 1974, Dr. Chris Everard called from the Virus Lab. to say that he had what looked like a Yellow-Tail, and would I come

and identify. There was no doubt in my mind the minute I saw it, for they are quite common in Guyana, and I had seen two huge specimens there in 1967. Finally, *Drymarchon c. corais* had made its reappearance. Chris had caught this specimen just inside the Turure Forest in Sangre Grande, lying coiled on the bog-forest floor. Three days later, Allan Rodriguez from Sangre Grande called and told me he had caught a large black snake with a yellow tail. I saw it at his home on July 22nd and confirmed that it was another Yellow-Tailed Cribbo. Incredibly, this was the second one caught and identified in such a short time, and perhaps the only two recorded for this century.

Since this "rediscovery" Derek Oudit of the Central Marketing Agency has assured me that this snake was caught by his men on the banks of the Caroni River behind Centeno in an abandoned coffee estate in 1967. It was killed before it could be identified or recorded.

The Yellow-Tailed Cribbo competes with the Yellow-Bellied Puffing Snake as the largest Colubrid in Trinidad. They are both swift-moving aggressive snakes in the wild, eating small mammals and birds and are famed for their ability to eat the Mapepire Balsin and Z'anana.

## A BIRD VISITOR FROM FINLAND

by Richard French

(St. Peter's School, T.T.I., Pointe-a-Pierre).

A most interesting and unusual record was recently brought to my notice through the kindness of Roland Staav, a Swedish ornithologist who visited Trinidad and Tobago late in 1974.

On 8 February 1970 Mr. Joseph Nandalal discovered on the sea-coast at Chaguanas, Trinidad, a bird which he called a "seagull" — a popular local name for any white seabird. It was exhausted and hungry and he cared for it. Its leg bore a ring (or band) with a number which Mr. Nandalal sensibly reported. It turns out that the bird was a Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo*, ringed as a nestling by Mr. Olof Sjoblom on 2 July 1968 at Trutgrund, Korpo, Finland. This place seems to be an island just off S.W. Finland, situated at 60.04 north latitude and 21.39 east longitude, some 7000 miles by direct flight from Trinidad.

Though Mr. Sjoblom was not sure whether the nestling he ringed was a Common Tern or possibly the very similar Arctic Tern, *Sterna paradisaea*, it seems likely for several reasons that the former identification is correct.

Common Terns are indeed common visitors to our coasts during the northern winter. In fact, the massive ringing campaign conducted with this species in North America, especially in Massachusetts, has produced nearly 400 recoveries from Trinidad and Tobago of birds ringed in the New World breeding colonies. This is in no way surprising, as the species is known to winter as far south as Peru, and Argentina.

But to my knowledge this is the first record of an European-ringed bird of this species being recovered in the South American region. However, birds of this genus are notoriously long-distance travellers, the Arctic Tern being generally known to migrate 14,000 miles each year.

Two other European-ringed birds, both herons, have been recovered from Trinidad during the last twenty years, one from France and one from Spain. Each constitutes the only record for the species known to have visited Trinidad. In addition, Mr. Staav informs me that a Finnish-ring Parasitic Jaeger, *Stercorarius parasiticus*, has been recovered near Rio de Janeiro. It certainly makes one wonder where all our visitors come from!

#### BOOK REVIEW

#### A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

Richard French. Livingston Publishing Company, Pennsylvania, 1973 490 pp. 28 colour plates, 8 full page portraits, 27 black and white drawings, 13 photographs. Price about TT \$25.00.

This compact book is an essential field guide for all those who watch birds in Trinidad and Tobago. It is also a valuable ornithological reference work and will be useful to anyone visiting the northern coastal region of South America. The concise descriptions of the plumage and voice of each of more than 400 species emphasise the field characters which can be used for identification. There are 25 species illustrated in black and white and 304 species illustrated in colour by John O'Neill. These illustrations are of such a high standard that they must establish O'Neill as one of the world's foremost bird artists and, together with the splendid portraits of a further eight species by Don Eckelberry, they make the book attractive to everyone, not just to ornithologists. The legends to the plates include the English and scientific names. I have found the book easier to use if the page number of the text dealing with the species is marked next to each name on the legend. It is also useful to add the Plate reference in the index.

In addition to details of methods of identification, Richard French's text deals with the habitat and status, range and subspecies, measure-

ments, food, nesting and behaviour of each species. This information is based partly on observations by earlier writers but owes much to recent original studies by the author and by Dr. and Mrs. David Snow. The first thirty pages of the book are a general introduction to the natural history of Trinidad and Tobago, with particular reference to birds. A section on the geography, climate, and vegetation of the island is of value to those interested in any aspect of the fauna and flora. Other sections include accounts of the history of ornithology in Trinidad and Tobago, the ecology and distribution of birds, their breeding and migration. An extensive bibliography is particularly useful. This book is much better than that of Herklots in every way except, perhaps, for detailed descriptions of the plumage of birds in the hand. Many mistakes in Herklots' book are corrected and a very large amount of new information has been added. The common name used for each bird is that which is internationally used but alternative names are also given. It is a pity that, since the cost of books has increased, this is not a cheap book but it is certainly good value for money and thus, the first publication of the Asa Wright Nature Centre, offers pleasure and scientific information to many.

D. M. Broom,  
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#### THE ASA WRIGHT NATURE CENTRE

The Centre situated in the beautiful Arima Valley offers residential and day visitor facilities to anyone wishing to study or simply enjoy the natural history of the area.

By becoming a FRIEND OF SPRING HILL (\$5.00 TT annually) you can make use of the facilities of the Centre and receive issues of Spring Hill - Simla News, a regular newsletter.

Advance booking is necessary for visits to the oil bird cave.

All communications (enquiries, bookings etc) should be sent to: The Asa Wright Nature Centre, G.P.O. Bag No 10, Port of Spain. However the Centre can be contacted by phone through the Trinidad Textile Mills, Arima, Tel 667-3211, who will relay messages, such as confirmation on cancellation of bookings, at the earliest opportunity.