

TREASURE FROM TRINIDAD

By Erma J. Fisk

I have stayed several times at Spring Hill Estate, in the Arima Valley of Trinidad, where the daily fare of Mrs. Wright's open gallery offers Toucans, Tinamous and Tityras, Bush-Shrike and Bellbirds, five species of tanagers, honeycreepers and humming birds, trogons, a Pygmy-Owl and a spectacled one - a variety too great to list. You are the daily fare of the small black Congo fly, but I consider the exchange in my favor.

Between birds, people, and citrus orchards I had never lacked there for occupation, but this time I had a special project. I was working with Don R. Eckelberry, whose paintings so many of us treasure in the bird guides we carry, and with Richard Ffrench, the ornithological expert of Trinidad, who are working on a book to have some 55 color plates and a text as up to date as possible. My task and pleasure--it could be both, with 4 a.m. risings, blazing sun, and chiggers to balance the interest of handling dramatically colored avifauna that usually we are lucky to see only 100 feet high in an immortelle tree, or disappearing down the shadowy trails of a rain forest--was to net species for Don to paint live, and to measure, examine, photograph unusual plumage, etc., on everything that came my way in the hope of adding to existing literature, of which there is not too much.

As any netter knows, results are unpredictable. If I arose at 4 a.m. to get by sunrise to the swamps that last year LeRoy Wilcox (see EBBA News 28(1):29) had found so productive of Variegated Bittern and Spintetail Swift, my catch was Ground Dove and Common Elaenia (swamps are being drained, and forests hacked down in a government land settlement program). A site productive on a day when I was only testing, would yield nothing but the common Blue Tanagers and Sucriers when we really needed a bird. The common Hummingbirds were easy to get (and surprisingly easy to untangle), but Don had painted them last year. The uncommon ones are still so to me.

Never mind. I counted 55 Jacana from one sun-baked station, and a Toucan squeaked in the shade tree I sat under, munching mandarin oranges one otherwise fruitless afternoon. If I were bent over a really tangled bird, parrots hollered, passing over the valley. The rare Blue-hooded Euphonia left part of his tail only in my hand, but one day I found I had set my net up David Snow's stream within 50 feet of the dancing ground of the Black-and-white Manakin, who paid no more heed to me than to a Motmot hooting from a bough above them.

The two dry Smooth-billed Ani that encountered my net flew blithely through it, while the wet one I caught crunched my finger to the bone with his vise-like bill. Peppershrike unerringly sank their beaks into the soft flesh by my nails (the only tender area left on my hands). A Great Antshrike tore flesh from me as if I were a gecko.

We came to take for granted that any day I caught a bird on the "Want List," I would get three, so that we must release two, never to have them again. . . .

If I complain, it is only in a mild way. Bites, tears, a wrenched knee, bleary breakfasts were nothing compared to the thrill of sharing with the group on the gallery a tiny scrap of a Golden Manakin, or a hummer no bigger than a dragon fly, glittering in the sun.

With Richard and Margaret Ffrench I netted in the magnificent, rolling, tawny sugar cane country. Against the billowing clouds of a tropical sunset, and the smoke rising from other cane fields over the hills, some 40,000 Dickcissels plummeted in to roost. This figure was a Ffrench estimate, not mine. (The big roost is estimated at a height of 80,000). Dickcissel come in low, in streams or swirls, as fast as a jet plane. If I had not had them in the net, or been lucky enough to glimpse a few as they moved elusively about inside the cane, I could never have identified, much less counted, them. A pair of Merlin hunted with us and in the dying afterglow between us and the tropic stars Barn Owls cruised, dipping into the dry stalks for their prey.

I work with Dr. Wm. B. Robertson, Jr., of Everglades National Park at the Dry Tortugas, on Sooty Tern. So my last weekend the Ffrenchs took me out to sea to their local nesting ground of Sooty and Noddy Terns, where Richard is working on a Chapman grant. Halfway between Venezuela and the southwest tip of Trinidad, Soldado Rock is a wave-pounded cliff 180 feet high, perhaps two acres in toto, with no shade and no spot level enough to take a cot without tipping. Every toehold, as we packed our gear 100 feet straight up to our windswept living quarters, held a Sooty egg. Over us, shifting in the air currents much as the sea shifted and surged onto the rocks below, drifted hundreds of Frigate Birds - all through the moonlit night. We estimated 800 Brown Pelican - they splashed on us from above, too - coming in to roost at the bottom of the cliff. If I had rolled off my cot in my sleep, I should have landed among them. The tern colony is put at probably 5,000 of each species.

Richard's hope had been that working with headlamps we might be able to pick Noddys off their nests at night to check previous bandings and their molt, but the moonlight made us too visible to them. Also, Noddys nest there in crevices on cliffs inaccessible even to Richard's long-legged reach, although, slipping and sliding and slithering and clinging, we did manage to get data on a couple of dozen before we gave up. I was surprised to have large iguanas scuttle ahead of me among the rocks, and escape my curiosity by plunging into the surf that creamed into rocky coves we precariously waded across - or set the nets over! There is a surprising amount of life on the Rock, arriving on rafts of water hyacinth and other vegetation that float down the Orinoco and other rivers in flood season.



Richard Ffrench, Soldado Rock, and the terns

There were times, spread-eagling down those cliffs of conglomerate rock that crumbled under my hands, when the thought of a soft green raft, even full of roaches and iguana, was attractive to me. Soldado is not an easy place for an ageing bird-lady, but it is certainly no place at all for a new pair of trifocal glasses, used in connection with a failing headlamp!

Never mind, I brought back enough guano on my clothes to fertilize my new lemon tree, and as I check the plumages of the plump Indigo and Painted Buntings now stoking up in my Florida garden for their journeys north, I have memories - and paper work - for many months ahead.

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