

**Views from the Ridge:  
Exploring the Natural History of  
Trinidad and Tobago**

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“This book is a compromise”. That is how the author begins his preface, and it had to be that way because the scope is so wide he has had to be selective in his treatment. According to him, it began life as an account of his research projects, became for a time a general report on the state of the environment and later still a commentary on a selection of his favourite photographs. Put that way one might imagine that the result would be rather scrappy and without any discernable theme. However, this is in fact far from the truth. The text is well organized in ten fairly short chapters that proceed in a logical succession from “The origin of the islands”, through samplings of the plants and animals and their distribution and ecology, to the man-made environment and “The outlook for conservation”. The fact is, too, that the photographs complement the text and, at the same time, display the beauty and variety of the plants and animals that inhabit our treasured isles.

The early chapters present much numerical information such as the number of species, their division into families, the number of useful timber species etc., and similar information about the animals. If to some this information may seem somewhat “dry”, persevere; the text brightens and becomes more interesting as the story unfolds. The final chapter, the longest of all, is a history of the conservation movement in Trinidad and Tobago, the development of the legislation that tries to regulate the impact of the human population on its environment and goals for the future. It is a thoughtful and optimistic essay.

So, now to the photographs. Good as they are, I suspect that the originals are even better, and that a few have lost much of their sparkle in the printing, eg. the picture of *Heliconia psitticorum* (p 23), and *Otostylis brachystalix* (p 32), which is prettily grey-blue in the picture but is white in real life. However, some photos are simply superb, such as the dramatic shot of “Mangrove Lagoon at Mayaro” and the

panoramic one of “Guanapo Valley”. Those of the mountain forests are equally evocative and well convey the atmosphere of silence and dampness of these remote forests.

I have done some counts and find that of 135 photos there are 34 scenic ones depicting habitat, 29 of marine animals including 12 corals, 21 of orchids and 8 of reptiles. These add up to 92, leaving just 43 for the rest of the plant and animal kingdoms. There is no doubt where the author’s interest lies, and this observation should not be taken as a complaint but simply as a guide to the potential reader.

In addition to the photos and the text, there are three charts, six maps, a glossary of technical terms, a select bibliography and a more than just-adequate index. The last of the maps on pg. 100 shows the present distribution of the different kinds of forest. From this, one can estimate the extent of forest cover as about 33% of the land area. The author discusses the problem of getting a reliable estimate, mentions optimistic estimates of 40% and 50%, and concludes that “Current unpublished research studies suggest that by 2000 the forest cover had shrunk to about a quarter of its original size, and was severely fragmented. The percentage of undisturbed forest is probably even lower than that.” In this assessment I concur completely. One of the most distressing features of the Trinidadian countryside at present is the prevalence of abandoned, derelict or under-utilized land in what was once forest or productive farm land, and Tobago may be equally afflicted.

Proof-reading is such a devilishly difficult job that errors are hard to eliminate completely. I noticed only one: *shrevel* for *shrevei* in the caption to the map on pg. 10. Both the author and the proof-readers missed a more subtle “misstep” in the sentence, “There are two species of venomous coral snakes and two venomous species of pit vipers found in Trinidad and Tobago.” for it suggests that there are venomous reptiles on Tobago when the reality is that Tobago is free from venomous snakes.

The book is lavishly produced; one photograph extends over all of two pages. This same picture in monotone grey makes stylish inside covers. The binding is good, the covers solid, and very attractive too in dark green with gold lettering. For this you expect to pay some money, and the corollary is that

many people who would love to own a copy will not be able to afford one.

Nevertheless, this is a worthy addition to the books on local natural history, and its author, who up to now has been well-known as a professor of zoology and a photographer, has proved himself a fair botanist as well.

**Victor C. Quesnel**

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