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On Christmas Day of 1900 in northeastern USA and in eastern Canada, on the invitation of the ornithologist, Frank Chapman, twenty-seven avid birders participated in the first Christmas Bird Census. For these participants, this census replaced the annual and traditional holiday event known as the “Side Hunt”, an event in which the team that shot the most birds and small mammals was adjudged the winner. Since that time, the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) has become an annual event in many countries in North, Central, and South America and in the Caribbean. In 2006, the 106th count, there was a record number of 2060 locations with 57,156 participants.

At each bird-count location, an area within a circle 15 miles in diameter (approximately 177 square miles) is designated as the count area. In Trinidad, the designated area is centred on Arouca and includes Las Lapas Trace, Caroni Swamp and San Rafael (ffrench 1986). Participants in the count try to cover as much of the area as possible and record each individual bird seen or heard within one day (24 hours).

The first Trinidad Christmas Bird Count occurred in 1969, and since that time the Christmas Bird Count has become an annual event eagerly anticipated by local birders. The results of the Trinidad bird counts from 1969 to 1996 have been published (ffrench 1986; Lambie and Debie 1998, 2000, 2001).

The Trinidad Christmas Bird Count is the only bird count which regularly records the Oilbird, *Steatornis caripensis* and this occurs at the Dunstan Cave, Asa Wright Nature Centre (AWNC).

The results of the counts illustrate the changes in the Oilbird population at the cave (see Fig. 1).

A decline in the bird population started in 1981 with a single bird being reported during the CBC of 1984. The Management of the AWNC sought the reason or reasons for the decline in the population. The interior of the cave was searched on more than one occasion for a possible predator e.g. a snake or an opossum, and the Zoology Department of the UWI placed traps at various locations near to the cave, but no potential predator was seen or

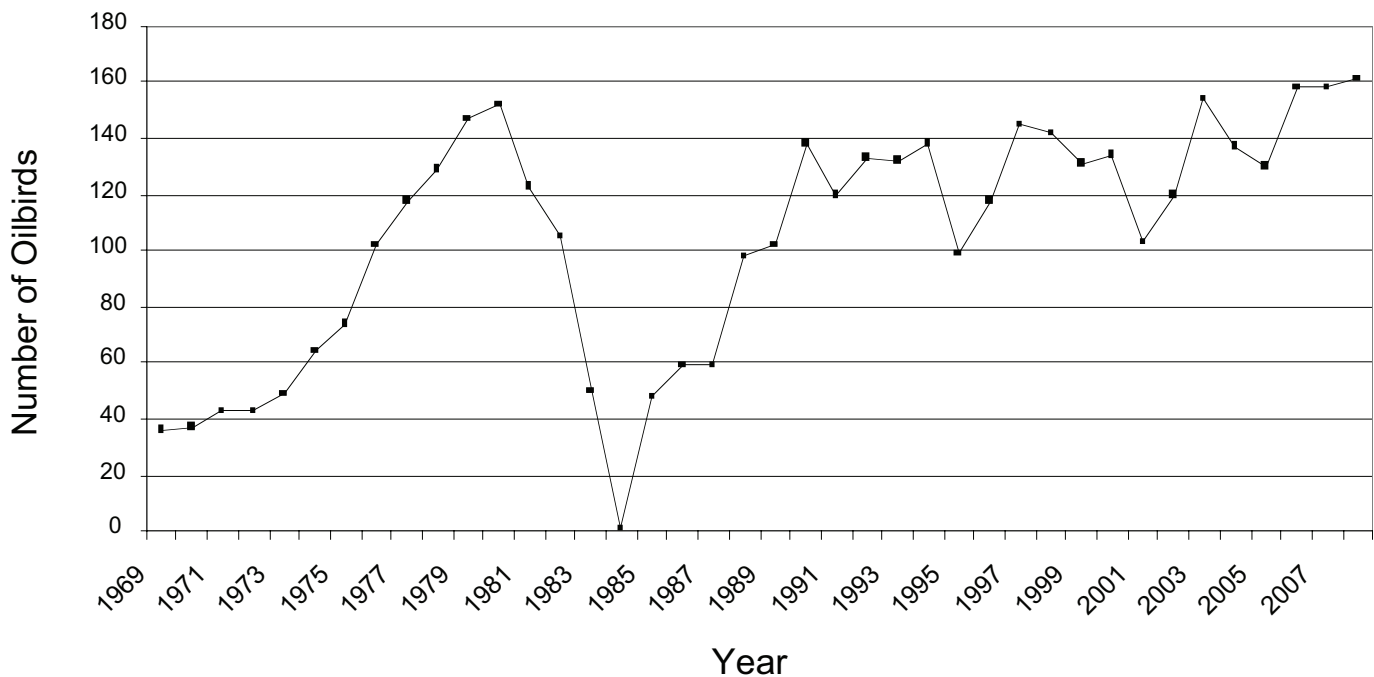


Fig. 1. Oilbird population of the Dunstan Cave, Trinidad, 1969-2008 as recorded at the Christmas Bird Counts.

captured.

The possibility of a reduction in the food supply of the birds was considered, but no supporting evidence could be found. Another possibility considered was human disturbance, as up to that time visitors were permitted to enter the “*inner chamber*” of the cave and to be only five or six feet away from the roosting birds.

In February 1982, no birds were seen in the cave so that visitors were no longer permitted to enter the “*inner chamber*” and there was an almost immediate return of some birds as 105 birds were recorded for the 1982 CBC. However, the population fluctuations continued during the traditional nesting period of the birds and further restrictions were imposed. In 1985, visitors were required to view the birds from outside the cave entrance and had to be accompanied by an AWNC guide. Flash photography was permitted from this distance, but photography requiring continuous lighting was not permitted.

The Oilbird population began to recover in subsequent years and this increase probably reflects adult birds returning to or colonizing the cave as the increase was too rapid

to be due to natality. By 2008, the population increased to 161 birds which was the highest number recorded to date.

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