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Face-to-face with the caracaras

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THE name “chicken hawk” is used in Trinidad and Tobago to describe several species of raptor. Ask anybody you meet and they will tell you they have at least heard of a “chicken hawk”, if not having actually seen one themselves.

This can be a bit of a problem as TT is home to several different species of hawks, falcons, kites and hawk-eagles (about 25 species) – all of which might get branded with the title chicken hawk at some point. Today, we’ll look at one group in the family – the caracaras.

The yellow-headed caracara is a very common resident of Trinidad and, less commonly, Tobago. While similar in appearance to hawks, caracaras are actually members of the Falconidae, (ie the kites and falcons).

Unlike the other members of the Falcon family, caracaras have specialised in feeding on carrion. For this reason, the yellow-headed caracara is able to inhabit a diverse range of habitats but with a preference for open areas including marshes, farmlands, savannah and even coastal areas. They can often be seen along roadways looking for roadkill – eating squashed frogs, snakes, lizards and insects.

Adults have a creamy, yellow-brown head and underparts with dark-brown wings that are crossed by a single pale bar. Immature birds, on the other hand, are heavily streaked with brown. Caracaras are gregarious, meaning that they tend to associate with one another in small groups.

If you are not sure about how to identify these interesting birds by their appearance, then you



The yellow-headed caracara is a common bird of open areas.

can certainly do it by their vocalisations. In fact, their call is often the first indication you may have that some caracaras are nearby as they have a very loud, screeching call. It is especially noticeable if they call when perched atop your roof. And thanks to their gregarious nature, you can often have a couple birds wailing back and forth at each other. It is actually this unusual assortment of grating calls which originally gave rise to the name “caracara” (and is therefore unrelated to the Spanish word for “face”).

While the yellow-headed ca-

racara is now found throughout the country, it was actually first limited to the offshore island of Chacachacare. One of the earliest, if not the first documented sighting there, was in 1942. From there, these birds began slowly colonising new areas and spreading eastwards. It was first found to be breeding in Trinidad in 1984. By 1987 it was detected in Tobago.

The adventurous, yellow-headed caracara is not alone in its quest to colonise new areas. The crested caracara, a close relative, has also been rapidly spreading



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across Trinidad. Although recorded in Trinidad long before the yellow-headed caracara made its appearance, the crested caracara was considered a rare sight in Trinidad as little as 15 years ago. Now, these beautiful birds can be found regularly in open areas such as Manzanilla, La Brea and Aranjuez. We shouldn't be too surprised if they are discovered in Tobago in the coming years. The crested caracara is a noticeably larger bird than its commoner yellow cousin. Crested caracaras are predominantly black with creamy neck and under-tail feathers. The bare, facial skin around its face is often pink or sometimes even orange.

Like its cousin, they feed on carrion and small invertebrates. The crested caracara is the national bird of Mexico and is commonly featured in a triumphant pose with a snake in its talons.

As mentioned, in Trinidad the caracara is sometimes perceived as a type of chicken hawk. However, it would be rare for either of these birds to attack healthy adult chickens as they are relatively slow-moving and do not possess the speed or agility of other



The crested caracara is becoming increasingly common in parts of Trinidad.

raptors. They, after all, usually “hunt” dead animals.

So the next time you see (or hear) a caracara, please show some appreciation for these interesting birds which form a part of the amazing biodiversity of Trinidad and Tobago.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages. The club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: “Searching high and low for TT's anthuriums” by Aidan Farrell, UWI.