

FEATURES

Taking wildlife management forward

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THE draft recommendations of the Hunting Steering Committee were presented recently at a public consultation. It is important to note that these were neither the final recommendations of the steering committee nor recommendation of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. However, it is worthwhile to examine these draft recommendations and important that stakeholders weigh in to help the process move forward.

Several suggestions have been put forward with respect to protecting our cage birds and waterfowl and it is heartening to see this as, far too often, the discussion on wildlife management is limited to just the game mammals while the plight of everything else goes unnoticed.

For our cage birds, it is being proposed that the trapping of wild birds be banned with the exception of the two euphonias (the cravat and the semp) and the common green-rumped parrotlet. Thus, if the proposals are accepted, it will no longer be legal to set traps for any other wild cage bird. The keeping of most captive bred seedeaters on the other hand will be allowed, but only if a special permit is acquired. The twa-twa and robin will be completely off limits.

While the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club (TTFNC) had agitated for the outright banning of the possession of certain species, the draft recommendations still provide an



The recommendations include improved protection for our seedeater and seed finches.

opportunity for the development of a local breeding industry. This is an acceptable outcome but only if there is adequate enforcement to ensure that 'wild' birds (smuggled or otherwise) are not entering the trade.

Another of the recommendations offers some help in this regard. If passed, cage birds can no longer be kept in the familiar trap cages. This would help with enforcement as an offender with a trap cage in the bush would be easily recognised. It telegraphs the right message as well – that uncontrolled exploitation of wild birds has to end. Consideration has also been given to bird welfare with new prescriptions for the proper cage size.

Now, it is important to under-



Managing bird hunting is challenging without education. Will the distinction be made in the field between a non-protected heron and this protected limpki?

wild bullfinch etc. However, by passing these laws we offer a chance for the few remaining seedeaters and seed finches to recover and pave the way for possible recolonisation or re-introduction of the other species that have been wiped out locally.

Other than the cage birds, protection has been recommended for a wider range of ducks. Hunting would only be allowed for black-bellied whistling ducks, fulvous whistling ducks and the muscovy. This would certainly be an improvement over the previous laws. All North American migrant ducks would be off the list, which no doubt helps with meeting some of our international conservation obligations. Still there are some

points to consider here. While the black-bellied whistling duck is our most common native wild duck, the fulvous whistling duck is a scarce visitor from South America (they no longer breed in Trinidad).

The case of the muscovy is more complicated. The domesticated breed of muscovy is the common duck that is raised for meat in pens across the country. However, the wild muscovy is a rare bird of swamp forests. Is the proposed treatment of these species appropriate given their status?

Positively, some protection has also been granted to a few members of the pigeon and dove family.

WILDLIFE continues on Page 7B



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stand the context of these cage bird proposals. Years of exploitation for the pet trade decimated the local populations of most seedeaters and for all intents and purposes, wild populations of the popular species have been extirpated. Thus there is little, if any, chance of catching a truly

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FEATURES

A useful step forward

WILDLIFE from Page 3B

The commoner species (including the "mountain doves" and "ramiers") are still targetable but the rarer ones are now protected.

However, bird hunting as a whole presents some special challenges.

There are no confusing species when it comes to game mammals – it is straightforward for anyone to distinguish between an agouti and a protected ant eater. Each game mammal family is neatly represented by just one species in T.T. However, for the birds there are many similar species

and the possibility for confusion is extremely high. Would a distinction be made between a heron and a protected species, such as the limpkin, at a distance? Would a flying fulvous whistling duck be differentiated from a protected blue-winged teal?

Public education on which birds can be targeted is needed.

Turning away from the laws regarding birds, it has been proposed that the use of air guns and live traps be reviewed and that further consultation is needed for laws governing night hunting. One final area worthy of comment lies

with the extensive proposals for wildlife farming. Wide scale wildlife farming should be encouraged but we need to be very careful about enforcement. Enforcement is not our strong point. However, the proposed system requires a copious amount of it via a series of checks and extensive record keeping. If oversight of the proposed system is not properly implemented, do we risk creating a mechanism for poachers to push wild-caught meat to a wider customer base than would have otherwise existed?

Invariably it will take many more discussions

with stakeholders to get wildlife management to the level that it needs to be, and enforcement is the common factor that will determine whether any of these suggestions make any difference at all. Nonetheless, on the whole the TTFNC welcomes these draft recommendations and believes that they provide a useful step forward for wildlife management.

For more info on our natural environment, 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.

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