

FEATURES

# Our national birds

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ON THE independence of our islands from British rule, the architects of our new republic choose two species of birds and one specie of plant to serve as icons and reminders of our sovereignty. From childhood, we were taught the significance of these but how much do we really know about our national birds and our national flower? In today's feature, we highlight our national birds.

Trinidad's national bird is the scarlet ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*). Cloaked in brilliant scarlet red with just a few black feathers on the wing, it is easy to see where this bird got its name. It is principally a resident of mangroves along the west and the south west coasts, rarely straying to the mangrove swamps of the east coast and even more rarely to those in Tobago. Here in the mangroves, these birds feed on crabs, small fish and aquatic invertebrates. Famously, the crabs are responsible for the red colour of the birds which is derived from the carotene found in the crabs. Birds in captivity deprived of carotene will eventually fade to pink. Immature birds, on the other hand are brown in colour with a white chest and belly.

While the scarlet ibis are most often associated with the mangrove swamps, freshwater marshes are also an important aspect of the ibis' diet as nestlings require freshwater prey items.

In Trinidad, the scarlet ibis nests in large colonies primarily in the Caroni Swamp, which was declared a protected area in 1987 to help preserve the ibis. However, they do occasionally nest



The cocrico - national bird of Tobago.



The scarlet ibis - national bird of Trinidad.



Scarlet ibis flying to their roost in the Caroni Swamp.

On other mangrove swamps on the island. Alarming, during the 1980s, many scarlet ibis had actually abandoned Caroni as a nest site due to what was believed to a combination of disturbance from poachers, disturbance by tourists and the loss of important freshwater feeding sites in the swamp. Since then, ibis breeding colonies have recovered with the national population estimated to stand between 10,000 and 25,000 individuals. Scarlet ibis are also found at other mangrove and mudflat sites along the west coast, the most notable being the Godineau Swamp and the Rousil-

lac Swamp.

The Scarlet ibis is not limited to Trinidad and is found through much of Northern South America in vast numbers. Trinidad's birds freely move between the island and the mangroves on the mainland. Unfortunately, despite being now protected by law, the Scarlet ibis is still sometimes poached in Trinidad, the most recent documented incident occurring in 2013 when a poacher was caught with the carcasses of 18 ibises.

Leaving the murky mangrove swamps of Trinidad, Tobago's national bird can be found pretty much anywhere on the island where

there is some vegetation. The Rufous-winged Chachacalaca (*Ortalis ruficauda*) is more commonly known as the cocrico on account of its noisy calls which are frequently heard in the mornings or late afternoon. The cocrico is a large pheasant-like bird and is indeed a near relative of pheasants of Eurasia. It is principally brown with a grey head and a red wattle under its chin.

Cocricos are gregarious and will usually be found in small flocks both at the roost and while feeding. They feed primarily on plant matter, consuming fruit, seeds, leaves and flower buds.

Despite being Tobago's national bird, they are considered agricultural pests as they will enter gardens to feed on agricultural produce. However, the cocrico is protected by law and it is illegal for landowners to hunt these birds (both on private and state lands). Outside of Tobago, the cocrico is not found on Trinidad (in the wild) but can be found in some parts of northern South America and has been introduced elsewhere in the region including the Grenadines.

Our national birds are proud symbols of our sovereignty and they should be treated with the respect that they deserve. Their preservation and protection must be ensured so that future citizens of our country can experience the spectacle of Trinidad's scarlet ibis in flight or the iconic sound of Tobago's cocrico!

For more info on our natural environment, you can contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at [admin@ttfnc.org](mailto:admin@ttfnc.org) or visit our website at [www.ttfnc.org](http://www.ttfnc.org) and our Facebook or YouTube pages.

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